

# The AdvantAge Initiative: Helping Communities Develop Strategies for Aging in Place

## Introduction

Throughout the United States, demographic shifts are compelling a growing number of communities to address an important issue: older adults want to remain in their homes and communities as they age. Regardless of the nature of the community – urban, suburban or rural, homogeneous or ethnically mixed, high- moderate- or low-income – the goal of aging in place is the same: to allow residents to grow old in their own homes and communities with the help of community-based, integrated systems of support. How communities define their needs, maximize resources, engage residents of all ages, and serve older adults and their families depends on each particular community’s constellation of opportunities and challenges. And success depends on many factors, including: the quality of the community’s self-assessment; the degree to which it can engage key constituents and involve them in visioning and planning; its capacity to identify, access, and coordinate resources; and its ability to achieve sustainability.

As the AdvantAge Initiative team, we have worked with many communities around the country and have learned that community efforts are most successful when communities have access to: Useful resources and tools and experts from whom they can receive customized guidance and advice to meet the challenges of supporting older residents in the community.

## **A Paradigm Shift**

With the aging of the baby boomers and the increasing population of older people in the U.S. and throughout the world, we need new ways of thinking about aging and new ways of doing business. We need systems, institutions, and policies to change to facilitate successful aging in place and improve quality of life. This means evaluating virtually everything that allows us to function in our communities, including transportation systems and road building plans; housing design, codes, and construction; business practices and employment policies; access to and delivery of services; public health practices and goals; environmental laws, and so on. As resources shrink and needs grow, community based organizations involved with aging are going to have to become more strategic and targeted in their decision making and resource allocation to maintain or improve quality of life, and government at all levels and the philanthropic sector need to become supportive of innovation at the community level. The challenges are too great to continue along the same old paths.

## **Interest in Aging in Place Grows**

A growing number of communities are showing strong interest in and demand for advice and assistance in developing strategies to increase their aging-friendliness and support their older residents' desire to age in place. Long-standing programs such as the AdvantAge Initiative as well as the new Administration on Aging-funded initiative, Community Innovations for Aging in

Place, are working with communities throughout the country to plan and build capacity for a growing older population that overwhelmingly wants to stay put in their communities. We believe that citizen engagement, comprehensive community planning, cross-sector participation and collaboration, and best practices tools can help communities work toward becoming more livable and aging friendly.

### **The AdvantAge Initiative: A Data-Driven Model**

Planning and action need to be driven by data, otherwise communities get involved in random activities that add up to very little and change nothing.

Collecting data is a requisite first step toward understanding the community and how it operates, and a deeper understanding of the community can help stakeholders identify issues, select priorities, and make strategic plans that are in sync with community circumstances. A concrete plan is essential if communities are to address aging in place issues successfully. Without workable plans, communities cannot move forward beyond the initial excitement that a new community effort often generates. Community efforts stagnate and even disappear when there isn't periodic measurement of progress; people lose interest when they don't get enough feedback that their efforts are making a difference.

The AdvantAge Initiative was originally conceived as a way to provide communities with data that they could use to understand their communities from the point of view of older adults, and use that information to identify and prioritize

aging-related issues and develop targeted responses to these issues. We have worked with many communities (see attached list) and the state of Indiana ([www.agingindiana.org](http://www.agingindiana.org)) to use the AdvantAge Initiative model to determine what needs to be done to improve community elder-friendliness and facilitate aging in place. The AdvantAge Initiative centerpieces—our framework of an elder-friendly community, 33 indicators of elder-friendliness, and our consumer survey—are the main tools that communities use to discover what aspects of the community—ranging from housing and transportation to health and social services—work for older residents and what needs improvement. Our technical assistance materials and customized, one-on-one guidance help stakeholders translate data into information to plan and guide action. After implementing the action steps, stakeholders can conduct follow-up surveys to measure change—and success.

### **AdvantAge Initiative Online: The Next Phase**

With ten years' worth of lessons learned supporting us, the AdvantAge Initiative team is embarking on a new phase that will make it possible for many more communities to avail themselves of our tools and methods. We are in the process of converting our exclusive AdvantAge Initiative survey into an online tool that will not only make collecting data easier and less expensive but will also provide a platform on which we can build to support key elements of community planning and action.

- The implementation of the online survey in a community is more than simply a survey. It provides an opportunity to actually “build community” by letting older residents know that the community cares about them and what they think; facilitates older people’s civic engagement by providing a means for their involvement in community affairs; and identifies the positive roles that older people play as consumers, caregivers, philanthropists, volunteers, and voters.
- An accompanying, enhanced technical assistance plan will allow us to support communities adopting the AdvantAge Initiative model with online materials, in-person consultations, and assistance with each phase of the initiative, from survey preparation through action planning and implementation.
- The AdvantAge Initiative Online platform has the potential of becoming a specially designed social media platform that will support key elements of community planning and implementation of strategies to help older adults age in place. It can serve as a hub for future surveying and data gathering; community organizing and visioning; ongoing conversations among community residents; recruitment of volunteers; bartering or “time-banking;” neighborhood storytelling and history-keeping; and community planning, whenever citizen input is required. Links to city/state agencies, medical information, social services, discounts for seniors, and other information will make it easy for people to find what they need. Computer use by older people has been growing steadily over the last 5 years, and as the younger

cohort of baby boomers, and those who came after them, age, computer use among older people and adoption of new technologies, like PDA's, will be routine. This trend is not only desirable, it is crucial because in the not-too-distant future virtually *everything* will be online. While it is not the primary focus of AdvantAge Initiative Online, we believe that our online tools, with proper training, will not only help many older people feel more comfortable with using computers and the internet, but will also see the benefits of staying connected online.

### **Where are we now?**

With a modest grant from the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, we are in the process of transforming our AdvantAge Initiative telephone survey into the online version. We have contracted with an online survey company to build the online platform and program automatic reports so that communities will now be able to see their survey findings in a timely manner. We are in the process of recruiting several communities in New York City and elsewhere to pilot test the online survey and will provide them with a great deal of assistance to get the community ready for the survey, to field the survey, and to interpret the findings and use them for planning purposes. Our goal is to make these tools widely available and to begin building our expanded platform.

## **The AdvantAge Initiative Survey Was Conducted in:**

- **National Survey**
- **States**
  - Indiana
- **Counties**
  - Contra Costa & Santa Clarita Counties, CA
  - El Paso County, TX
  - Elkhart, Kosciusko, LaPorte, Marshall, & St. Joseph Counties, IN
  - Maricopa County, AZ
  - Newaygo County, MI
  - Orange County, FL
- **Cities, towns, & neighborhoods**
  - Six neighborhoods of Chicago, IL
  - Grand Rapids, MI
  - Indianapolis, IN
  - Jacksonville, FL
  - Parsippany, NJ
  - Puyallup, WA
  - Upper West Side & Yonkers, NY
- **NORCs**
  - Gary Midtown, Huntington, Martindale/Brightwood (Indianapolis), Linton, & LaSalle Park (South Bend), IN
  - Brownsville, Chinatown, Harlem, & Lincoln Square, NY