Engaging Community:
Strategies for Involving the Right Players in Developing Livable Communities

How Community Engagement Workshops do more than identify and address needs and resources for your community – they help find “sparkplugs” and “champions.”

Around the country there is growing evidence that the success of Livable Community strategies and tactics often depends on having the right people engaged in the right way. While there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to finding and engaging the right people, several state offices of AARP have learned that a good place to start is with some type of Community Engagement Workshop. This case study will share the experiences of several communities that were able to use Community Engagement Workshops to find, inspire, and equip citizens and local officials who made a difference.
Community Engagement Workshops

Many communities across the United States have recently begun implementing Livable Communities programs in an effort to improve the built-environment for citizens of all ages. These initiatives range from large scale to community-specific activities like:

- Reconfiguring local streets so they are “complete” – that is, usable by everyone at all ages, and by any means: driving, riding public transit, biking, and walking.
- Converting an empty lot into a playground accessible by people of all ages and abilities.
- Improving access and use of multi-use paths and trails.
- Changing a bus route to support a local community where people with disabilities reside.

All of these specific initiatives began when the local state office of AARP engaged local government and elected officials, community leaders, and citizens in an organized workshop event. Through that process, these efforts found “sparkplugs” and “champions” – the people who became committed to making a difference for their own community.

There are a variety of good resources from around the country on how to conduct such a workshop at aarp.org/livable. Simply search “workshops” to access best practices and step-by-step instructions from organizations that have already conducted community workshops.

This case study will share the stories of how several communities used such workshops.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

-- Margaret Mead

National AARP and State Offices

For over 50 years the national AARP organization has advocated on behalf of citizens age 50 and older. The AARP offices in the States and Territories have focused most often on local legislation and issues. In recent years, these local offices have begun taking a more active role in the communities they serve, often convening a wide range of government, nonprofit, corporate and citizen groups to impact life for older adults. It is in this role that state offices of AARP began conducting Community Engagement Workshops.

AARP believes it is important that other organizations and local community leaders also come together to make communities more “livable” for all ages. To facilitate that, AARP is now actively supporting Livable Community efforts with a new online resource at aarp.org/livable.

The website is designed so local government officials and community leaders can learn, plan and take action on Livable Community initiatives.
Many successful Livable Community initiatives began with Community Engagement Workshops that share three common elements:

1. **Engage the Right Players:** It goes without saying that the success of any Community Engagement Workshop begins with having the right people in the room. While every community will have its own list of key constituents, in most instances the invitee list includes elected officials; key government sector leaders from various departments, like planning, transportation, parks and recreation, and health; leaders in aging-related services; nonprofits focused on community development, sustainability and “smart growth;” biking and pedestrian groups; and citizens who are active in community issues or lead neighborhood associations.

   Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur, Senior Advisor States for AARP’s Education and Outreach group, says “It is important to think beyond the obvious participants and include any organization or group interested in making a community more livable for citizens of all ages.” That means it is not necessary to pre-determine who will take the lead as a result of the workshop. Time after time, community planners are surprised by who emerges as the “champion” for a particular initiative.

   Many of the state offices of AARP that have organized Community Engagement Workshops start the process by identifying a key “connector” in the community. That person could be a local government official, or a leader in a nonprofit organization, or simply a community supporter. Starting with this “connector” can help you identify other key players, and gain insight on the relationships between and across various groups.

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2. **Focus on a Topic or Specific Area:**
   Making a community more “livable” can be accomplished in a wide range of ways. The best workshops focus on a particular topic like transportation, pedestrian safety, obesity prevention, or Complete Streets. Another strong approach is to focus on a specific geographic area or neighborhood in need of help. In all instances, it is better to be inclusive over exclusive.

   The AARP state office in Kansas learned, for example, not to make their workshop topic “obesity in children,” but to make it about the overall obesity issue, attracting more supporters. Others found success by going even broader at first, focusing on “healthier communities,” for example. Such an approach can help the effort gain support from a wider range of interested parties.

3. **Target a Quick “Win”:**
   Dan Burden of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute conducts Active Living Workshops, frequently in conjunction with AARP state offices. He advises participants to set an initial goal that can be accomplished within the next 100 days. This advice applies to any Community Engagement Workshop, because the ultimate goal is to identify, create and empower citizens to take steps to improve the livability of their own communities.

   Once a workshop has been conducted and outcomes determined, it is important for those who spearheaded the initial workshop to embrace any and all support from those now engaged. The resources that need to be marshaled to make progress on most Livable Community initiatives typically include a wide range of constituents. While elected officials often embrace such opportunities, it is not unusual for key leaders in different government agencies, nonprofit leaders, or even citizen activists, to become the catalyst for accomplishing the desired tasks.

   In Vermont, for example, the mayor of Burlington served as a key initial driver for Livable Communities and the state office of AARP has fueled local efforts with guidance and funding. In Wichita, Kansas, three neighborhood civic associations joined together to drive a project to completion. In Arkansas, a recently formed coalition took the lead.

   Each began with a Community Engagement Workshop and each learned lessons along the way.

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In Wichita, Kansas, three neighborhood civic associations joined together to drive a project to completion.
Case in Point: Kansas

The state office of AARP, in an effort to spur community engagement in creating Livable Communities across Kansas, decided to invite Dan Burden of the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute to conduct an Active Living Workshop in Wichita in 2012. AARP Kansas director Maren Turner recalls, “Before determining exactly when, where and how such an event would happen, we interviewed key constituents in the community to better understand the needs and opportunities. That included interviews with the mayor, the local Area Agency on Aging, the Older Adults Alliance and various civic leaders and community volunteers.”

Those interviews helped the state office develop a long list of interested organizations and individuals to the scheduled workshop. In addition, it helped them find a partner in the Older Adults Alliance, a nonprofit operating in the Wichita region. The list included elected officials, city planners, traffic director, police leadership, parks and recreation, health agencies, Older Adults Alliance, Area Agency on Aging, various neighborhood association presidents and other community organizations.

The Active Living Workshop session itself included a “walkability audit” across 30 different areas and intersections in Wichita. Turner says the audits were “surprisingly well-attended and certainly eye-opening for the everyone.”

The workshop attendees determined that the first outcome of the session would be converting an existing street intersection into a roundabout with crosswalks and other features to improve access, safety and usage – for every mode of transportation. However, it became clear shortly after the session that such a modification would require many months, if not years, to get planned, approved and built.

Rather than become discouraged, members of the Wichita Independent Neighborhoods association who attended the workshop, met to discuss what other projects could be done in a timely manner. At that point, three independent neighborhood associations (Schweiter, Schweiter East and Sunnyside, known as Tri S), joined forces to find a project they could support together. They decided they wanted to create a “grandparent’s park” that older adults and young children could both enjoy.

Thanks to AARP having included the Wichita Parks and Rec department in the initial workshop, Tri S presented them with the idea.

Andé Bozarth, the assistant state director for Community Outreach, reports, “The Parks and Rec people didn’t have an existing park that could be converted to become a “grandparent’s park,” but realized they did have some unused land owned by the city that could easily become a new public park for grandparents and their grandchildren.”

In July, 2013, “Grandparent Park,” opened in Wichita and has fast become a popular place for older adults, younger adults, and, of course, children. The park includes stretching station, swings, sandbox, and a walking trail usable by all ages, but especially grandparents and grandkids.

Lessons Learned:
AARP Kansas offers several key lessons learned from conducting the Community Engagement Workshop.

- It is very important to do the necessary homework and legwork up-front to make sure you can attract the right players in the first place.

Even more, establish, form and leverage relationships with potential players in advance of the session. Not only can those partnerships help make the session a success; they can help make subsequent initiatives succeed. Sending out workshop invitations out of the blue is not as effective as conversations in advance.

- Success comes quicker when you find existing connections and leverage those first, instead of trying to create new connections exclusively. That’s why AARP Kansas conducted interviews with key “connectors” in advance as a way to learn about important relationships already in place.

- For organizations not based in the particular community, be sure to invest time and place resources in that community to demonstrate your long-term commitment. For example, AARP Kansas is based in the state capital, Topeka, and worked diligently to make sure local leaders knew and saw their people in Wichita.

- Look for shorter-term projects first as they can help you build momentum quickly. Plus, a “win” immediately after the session encourages those tackling longer-term efforts, which can be difficult and time-consuming to accomplish. Even with funding in place when a workshop occurs, flexibility on which initiatives to start is important.

“The ‘walkability audit’ was surprisingly well-attended and certainly eye-opening for the participants.”

AARP Livable Communities

CASE STUDY
Case in Point: Vermont

The Burlington (Vermont) Livable Communities Project (BLCP) began in 2005 with AARP Vermont and Burlington Mayor Peter Clavelle. The goal was to establish a community-driven process for identifying and addressing resource needs as residents grow older and the entire community ages. Jennifer Wallace-Brodeur recalls, “Both the mayor and AARP Vermont wanted to build leadership capacity among citizens and encourage action. It was about finding and equipping citizens and groups to take charge, not wait for the local government to do it.”

AARP Vermont convened over 30 stakeholder organizations and hundreds of residents to articulate a vision for how Burlington could become more livable for everyone at every age. After several meetings, resident research and “walkability studies,” the Mayor and AARP published a report to the city: “A Great City for Older Adults: An Action Plan for Burlington.”

A direct outcome of that work was the need to encourage and support local efforts to advance the recommendations of that report. Wallace-Brodeur says, “Initially we focused on making people and organizations aware of the Action Plan and advocating for specific initiatives. Turns out, that wasn’t enough.”

So AARP Vermont established a Community Action Sponsorship program to provide modest funding for specific neighborhood projects. Through a formal RFP process, existing or even ad hoc nonprofits could apply each year for up to $2,000 to implement a Livable Communities initiative. Providing financial resources, even modest amounts, spurred local citizens and groups to action. To date, seven projects or groups have been funded and $14,000 has been disbursed.

The projects include:

- The Burlington Kinship Information & Navigation (KIN), a support and resource group providing help to grandparents and other relatives raising children of their kin, used funds to support outreach efforts to identify and link grandparents and kinship care providers to available programs and assistance.
- The Champlain Senior Center used its funds to hold three multicultural dinners at the center. Members of Burlington’s New American community -- Nepalese, Vietnamese, Bosnian and Somali Bantus -- shared a meal and cultural entertainment while sampling traditional cooking and the hospitality of area seniors.
- The Bike Path Entrance Improvement Group made enduring improvements to a long neglected area of Burlington’s Old North End by constructing an interpretive kiosk and signage for city destinations at the entrance to the Route 127 multi-use path off of Manhattan Drive.

Lessons Learned:

AARP Vermont identified a few key lessons learned from this approach to involve citizen groups in bringing Livable Community projects to life:

- Making a big difference in the livability of a community doesn’t necessarily require big projects. Small projects like the ones above, have impact.
- AARP Vermont discovered that it was easy to find those who needed the money the first year, but more difficult since then. They have determined that, longer term, it is necessary to encourage and promote the program proactively in order to attract projects or groups. Wallace-Brodeur says, “Good places for guidance in finding worthy groups and projects are the local chapter of United Way, the local city or county development office or community-based economic development organizations.”
- Establishing a broad coalition within a community creates an environment that encourages and supports participation in the work. AARP Vermont has intentionally reached across many elements of the community to facilitate cooperation and communication.
Case in Point: Arkansas

From the start, AARP Arkansas sought a partner to help bring Livable Communities planning to the state of Arkansas. It found what appears at first glance to be a strange one in the recently formed Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention (ArCOP). But ArCOP, along with the Arkansas Department of Health, had secured a grant from the Centers for Disease Control to conduct local workshops. ArCOP and the Department of Health were interested in helping develop programs in communities to promote healthier lifestyles.

Lou Tobian, of AARP Arkansas, says, “Our interest in making communities more livable across the lifetime actually matched up perfectly with their goal of promoting healthier lifestyles – that’s because communities that are walkable and bike-friendly are also healthier.”

As a first step, ArCOP brought in Dan Burden as a speaker at an event to generate interest and demand for Livable Communities programs and events. AARP Arkansas and others invited key stakeholders to the session. As a result, Burden was then invited back to conduct Community Engagement Workshops in six different communities across Arkansas. AARP Arkansas invited the relevant decision-makers, local officials and community leaders to the workshops, which had a lead sponsoring organization in each community. One older resident at a particular workshop spoke about his personal desire to improve his community, not for himself, but “for my grandkids – I want them to want to live here and not move away.”

The results of the workshops range from community to community, in small and bigger ways. In North Little Rock, a planned rail-to-trail route was modified to better reduce conflicts with motor vehicles. In another community, a specific street was modified via a “road diet” before construction of another rail-to-trail to make it safer.

In Little Rock, another workshop-inspired group in a small community in the western suburbs decided they would conduct their own walk audit. This community has two facilities for people with mental and mobility disabilities within an easy walk of a Walmart, but the street is extremely unsafe for pedestrians and the bus takes 90 minutes to get to the store because it goes downtown to connect with a different bus. The residents of the community, including at least 20 people using wheelchairs, conducted a walk audit with the technical assistance of members of the ArCOP Built Environment Team. The physical conditions were so unsafe, the audit was brought to a halt halfway through. Afterwards, the community met with the local councilman and the Mayor to share their findings.

As a result of the meeting, an immediate short-term solution was put into effect, and several long-term solutions were put into motion. Immediately, the bus route was changed so now the ride takes 10 minutes. Long-term, official plans were put in place for a roundabout, new sidewalks and crosswalks, an apartment complex for the elderly, a community garden, and walking trails.

Lou Tobian says, “What is especially encouraging about this is that it was inspired by the official Community Engagement Workshop, but happened afterwards, when engaged residents, with the help of ArCOP, took action.”

Lessons Learned:

AARP Arkansas can offer three points of learning from their efforts that could help local government officials or community leaders in other communities.

- Livable Community initiatives require commitment and stamina but success can and does occur. Understanding that real outcomes and progress will take longer to accomplish and require more hours of time than originally estimated will help to keep folks engaged and prevent them from becoming discouraged. There are always bumps in the road.
- While elected officials are important, they operate on an election cycle time frame and can become distracted by other, more topical events or priorities. That means having grass roots citizen engagement is critical to the continued success of any Livable Community initiative.
- Perhaps most importantly, when citizens feel empowered to make a real difference in their communities, they do so.
More information is available at aarp.org/livable.

Summary

Many AARP State offices have learned that there is tremendous value in using Community Engagement Workshops to inform, motivate and coalesce a community around Livable Community initiatives and projects. The outcomes achieved from the examples shared here are but a few success stories found across the country. The lessons learned are universal and can most likely help any local official or community leader organize a Community Engagement Workshop and make Livable Communities a priority in their community.