Optimal Living: Getting Around

Making Mobility a Priority

Ease of getting around is one of the defining characteristics of a lifelong community. Mobility, being able to “get up and go, where and when we choose,” is vital to our independence, our health, and our connections to each other and the larger community. As we age, changes in physical or cognitive health, finances, social support, and living environments can affect our mobility, as can concerns about falling, safety, and security. But mobility concerns are not limited to older adults. Each of us, young and old alike, face the potential of limited mobility at some point in our lifetime.

The “8/80” rule encourages cities and communities to become more friendly across the lifespan by considering the needs of both an eight-year-old child and an eighty-year-old adult. All of us benefit from safe and accessible places to walk and accessible, interconnected transportation options for those who do not drive.

By working more closely together, professionals from the fields of public health, aging, architecture, engineering, urban planning, housing, health care, and transportation can more effectively plan and implement strategies to promote healthy aging and mobility. We can achieve a common vision, overcome jurisdictional barriers, and coordinate action plans in order to use limited resources wisely.

Mobility Is a Key Health Issue in Aging

A projected one-fifth of U.S. households will have at least one resident with a physical limitation by 2050.

More than 27 million Americans have osteoarthritis, one of the leading causes of activity limitations.

One in three adults aged 65 and older falls each year. Of those who fall, 20–30% suffer moderate to severe injuries that make it hard for them to get around or live independently and increase their risk of early death.

By the year 2030, 20% of licensed drivers in the U.S. will be 65 years old.

Community Features to Consider

- Well-maintained sidewalks without cracks, pits, pavement discontinuities, and obstacles
- Well-marked crosswalks with smooth surfaces and curb cuts
- Count-down signals on traffic lights long enough for slow walkers
- Traffic lights with audible features that can assist people whose vision is limited
- Benches and sheltered places to rest
- Access to public restrooms
- Public transit vehicles that are easy to enter and exit
- Transit routes and schedules that make sense for retired people as well as workers
- Safe driving education programs for older adults
Policy Changes to Promote Older Adult Mobility

America’s cities, suburbs, and rural communities require more comprehensive, integrated policies to improve the mobility of older adults. Essential are policies that connect active modes of transportation, such as walking and bicycling, to passive modes, such as driving and using public transit.

Policy change at any level — national, state, regional, local, organizational — can be effective, but consistent and complementary policies across levels are necessary if we are to address gaps, such as those in rural areas. Older adults should have mobility and transportation choices regardless of functional ability, income level, or place of residence.

Promising Policy Actions

- **Require Health Impact Assessment** (www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm) in new development or redevelopment to take into account the existing and projected older adult population and their mobility needs.
- **Provide tax incentives** for architects, developers, and builders to incorporate universal design into public and commercial spaces.
- **Change zoning laws** to facilitate transit-oriented development.
- **Apply Complete Streets policies** at the local level to ensure that all road projects meet the needs of bicyclists, public transit users, and pedestrians.
- **Implement policies** requiring larger letters on street signs, advance street name signs placed before intersections, and improved intersection layouts and signaling.
- **Require that human service agencies** coordinate mobility and transportation resources.
- **Expand paratransit** and other programs for older adults and persons with disabilities who do not drive.

Practice Changes to Support Older Adult Mobility

Our communities all too often fail to meet the needs of people who are very young or very old or who have conditions that limit their mobility. Change is needed to better integrate all transportation planning and the design and facilities of neighborhoods, communities, and regions. Planning, action, and evaluation by a broad set of professionals, with input from older adults, must become the standard.
Promising Practice Actions

- **Work collaboratively.** Architects, urban planners, developers, aging leaders, bike advocates, people with disabilities and their advocates, and other stakeholders must break out of professional comfort zones, attend each other’s meetings, and interact more frequently.

- **Adopt environmental design principles** that encourage and support mobility for all people regardless of functional ability.

- **Focus on assets,** using the strengths and resources of communities and their residents rather than focusing only on deficits. For example, tap into the energies of older adults to advocate for environmental change.

- **Create innovations in mobility** that incorporate technology such as geographic information systems and global positioning satellites. For example, “smart” canes use radio frequency identification to detect obstacles and alert the user about where and how to navigate while walking.

- **Promote car-sharing initiatives,** especially in retirement communities and among patrons of senior centers, to provide automobile access without the costs of ownership and maintenance.

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Meadowmont, a town square of mixed use development in Chapel Hill, NC, brings retail, residential, recreation, school, fitness, medical, dining, and office uses into close proximity. This proximity and the provision of sidewalks provides mobility choices that include walking, rolling, biking, strolling, and driving. The project was planned with public transit provision as well.
A Vision of Mobility in the Next Ten Years

- Age-friendly policies and practices reflect our interdependence and respect for young and old.
- Roadway standards take into account older drivers’ needs.
- Designs that integrate housing, services, and transportation are the norm.
- Mobility is achieved regardless of older adults’ functional abilities.
- Transportation planning is fully integrated so that walking, wheeling (bicycle, wheelchair, etc.), driving, and taking the bus or train are all recognized as key links.
- Public spaces, pathways, and bicycle facilities are built to high standards and well-maintained.
- Transitioning from driver to passenger status has no stigma, and transportation alternatives offer choice, convenience, safety, and affordability.
- Walkers, bicyclists, drivers, and transit users benefit from cross-generational partnerships.
- Academic curricula promote cross-discipline analytical skills, research, and action.

Resources

8-80 Cities
www.8-80cities.org

AARP Public Policy Institute
www.aarp.org/research/ppi/

Complete Streets
www.completestreets.org

EPC Clearinghouse of Resources for Environmental and Policy Change for Healthy Aging
www.epc-clearinghouse.org

National Center on Senior Transportation
seniortransportation.easterseals.com

National Resource Center for Human Service Transportation Coordination
web1.ctaa.org

Promising Approaches for Promoting Lifelong Community Mobility

Transportation for America
t4america.org/about/

World Health Organization Checklist of Essential Features of Age-friendly Cities
www.who.int/ageing/publications/Age_friendly_cities_checklist.pdf

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- Optimal Living: Promising Strategies
- Optimal Living: Frameworks to Guide Change
- Optimal Living: Getting Around
- Optimal Living: Home Environments

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