

The Atlanta Regional Commission

Local Solutions to Meet Local Needs

The work of the Atlanta Regional Commission's (ARC) *Aging Atlanta* initiative has focused community leaders on an approach of local solutions to meet the complex needs of the more than 400,000 older adults in Georgia's 10-county metropolitan Atlanta region. *Aging Atlanta*, a partnership of 50 local organizations launched by ARC in 2002, works with government agencies and community leaders throughout the greater metropolitan area, to create housing and transportation options that enable older adults to remain active and to age in place.

ARC's *Aging Atlanta* efforts have been recognized with the 2007 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) *Achievement Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging*. The EPA achievement award recognizes ARC's programs and policies that have improved the health and well-being of elders in the greater Atlanta region.

Atlanta is one of the fastest growing population centers in the U.S., and this growth includes an expanding population of older adults. Between 2000 and 2015 the older adult population in the Atlanta region is projected to double. By 2030, one out of every five residents in the region will be over the age of 60.

Cathie Berger, director of the Area Agency on Aging at ARC explains, "We have been working with representatives from all of our counties and 66 regional cities to bring together stakeholders who represent a wide range of professionals who are concerned about aging issues. These stakeholders include professionals from government agencies, aging services, public health, transportation, hospitals, and technology."

As they began to address active aging needs in the region, data related to older populations in distinct communities was used to help in the planning process. In addition to national and state-based data, the representatives in the *Aging Atlanta* initiative worked with the Carol Vinson Institute at the University of Georgia to survey the aged 50 and older population in the metropolitan area. Berger explains, "The local information from the University of Georgia became a powerful tool to help engage local communities."

Getting the region to embrace active aging and smart growth principles has been guided by a planning framework that includes creating local housing policies to address the needs of the older population, assuring communities are walkable, promoting accessible green space and recreation opportunities for older adults, and meeting transportation needs.

A key to success of ARC's *Aging Atlanta* program has been the full engagement of local communities and stakeholders. "We let them set the process," Berger explained. "We have a framework, but the stakeholders from the communities tell us who to involve and how to go about moving concepts into action. They know who their community influencers are. By engaging people the community trusts, the community comes to understand that local needs are driving the decisions and the use of resources."

Berger cited an example of how this approach has worked. One county in the region was having difficulty reaching consensus on housing solutions for its older adults. She explained that while all stakeholders involved in the issue agreed there was a need, there was a 'not in my backyard' mentality in terms of where elder housing would be located. Eventually, by bringing together community and

government leaders and professionals from that county and its five municipal entities, the group was able to develop a plan to meet the housing needs of local older adults, and address transportation and recreation needs for those seniors. “Now there is a multi-prong strategy in place aimed at making necessary policy changes at the county and municipal levels and adopting community plans that will incorporate the needs of older adults,” said Berger.

Other successes of ARC include facilitating zoning policy changes that locate housing close to services and within existing neighborhoods. With more than 90 percent of Atlanta's older adults relying on automobiles for transportation, ARC has taken steps to decrease auto dependency by promoting ride-sharing through its voucher programs and working to improve bus stops and routes. These efforts increase quality of life and offer environmental benefits. To encourage healthy lifestyles, ARC partners expanded traditional senior centers to include a wellness focus, emphasizing physical activity, preventive care, and social interaction. Currently, 44 of these centers offer programs for the older adults in the Atlanta metro area, and approximately 1,000 individuals have joined walking clubs.

“We have seen momentum grow as our regional counties begin to alter built environments in order to create more healthy communities. As one county makes changes, others follow. No one wants to be left behind,” she notes.

Berger outlined several success factors that have come out of the *ARC Aging Atlanta* initiative:

- One size does not fit all. Solutions have to be localized.
- People from the community have to be invited into the process and relationships have to be built. Those involved need to come from a myriad of disciplines, and in some cases they might be non-traditional community-based stakeholders.
- Professionals involved in active aging and healthy communities need to think outside traditional frameworks.
- Start where there is existing momentum or interest in active aging and healthy community programs.

What has been extremely exciting about the initiative, Berger explained, is the tremendous momentum that has developed as community leaders have approached the massive demographic challenges of a growing aging population and began to see it as a local issue with local solutions. More specifically, she commented that those who have become involved in the *Aging Atlanta* project now understand and articulate some of the challenges with aging in place.

For information about Aging Atlanta:
Contact: [Cathie Berger](mailto:Cathie.Berger@atlantaregional.com)
Director, Area Agency on Aging
cberger@atlantaregional.com
Atlanta Regional Commission
(404) 463-3235

About the Award

2007 Achievement Award for Excellence in Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging

The award honors the achievements of communities that have successfully combined concepts of smart growth and active aging. Active aging strives to promote strategies that engage older adults through structured and unstructured opportunities for physical activity. Active aging is supported by safe, walkable environments. Smart growth strives to minimize the impact of the built environment on both human health and the natural environment by integrating environmental considerations into development patterns. Using smart growth, communities create attractive, walkable neighborhoods that give people of all ages, income levels, and physical abilities a range of safe, affordable and convenient choices in where to live and how to get around.

For additional information, please visit the EPA's Aging Initiative Web site at <http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/index.htm>.