

Maricopa Association of Governments
Municipal Aging Services Project
Focus Group Results

Municipal Aging Services Model Background

The framework for the development of a Municipal Aging Services Model is in response to the evolving needs of older adults and the role local governments should consider when funding is restrained and the need for services is escalating. In particular, this region is at a crossroads in determining the most appropriate role of the cities and towns in creating vibrant communities for people of all ages. The recession and changing demographics of older adults make this a complex, but important task.

According to the American Community Survey, currently in this region, there are more than 630,000 adults age 60 plus. In some ways, older adults in this region enjoy a number of benefits. Many are living longer, healthier lives. This is also the most educated generation of older adults this country has seen. Instead of retiring to the golf course, many are re-careering and looking for renewed purpose in their later years. Despite these advantages, an increasing number of older adults are delaying retirement because the recession has depleted their savings and investments, and physical abilities are beginning to become restricted. In a mobile community like Maricopa County, it is common for family and friends to live in other parts of the country, leaving those in need without an adequate support system.

The traditional role of government may no longer be adequate or appropriate to address the needs of older adults. In a recent MAG study, senior services and centers were among the services to receive the most funding reductions. In total, more than \$2 million was reduced from the region's municipal funding from FY 2009 to FY 2010 for these services. Ancillary services such as transportation services, critical to older adults, were reduced by more than \$1.3 million.

People's expectations of local government are changing as well. A more educated population means people will be more civically engaged. They may no longer be satisfied with the current approach to local government in which they pay taxes and select from a pre-determined array of services. MAG, being uniquely positioned to partner with local governments, nonprofit agencies, and older adult communities, is working to develop a new model based on current demographics, dynamics, and resources of the region.

Phase One

In working toward developing a model, MAG began Phase One of the project by inventorying and mapping the current role and services supported by local government. In total, 134 interviews were completed by older adults and agencies serving older adults. The interview results identified two important needs of seniors relating to transportation and socialization. Building on these findings, MAG staff moved into Phase Two of the project.

Phase Two

Phase Two sought to engage the community by conducting focus groups throughout the region. In the end, nineteen different focus groups were held with a total of 206 participants. The focus group discussions began in July and ended in late September. The findings of the focus group supported the original findings of the interviews, but offered additional detail to issues affecting seniors.

Focus Group Discussions

The structure of the focus groups was to evaluate the ideal in comparison to the current structure of services to seniors, holistically encompassing all aspects of an individual's community. Overall, focus group participants were very receptive to the opportunity of sharing their needs and wishes.

Topic: Transportation

One of the primary topics of discussion was the issue of transportation, which was discussed at every meeting. The quality of life of individuals lies in great part within their ability to access transportation. From doctor appointments to grocery shopping, individuals' vitality depends on their ability to freely move from one activity to the next. Given the large geographic area of the valley, individuals have longer distances to travel for their necessities. Meeting individual transportation needs is becoming increasingly difficult, as health issues prevail and independence is restricted. Participants noted that the top of their wish list in this category included: safe vehicles, dependable and unrestricted transportation, and cost-contained options to ensure access to all.

Topic: Socialization

Another issue of much discussion was that of social participation. Individuals felt strongly about the need to provide options for socialization. In particular, participants expressed the need of having more senior centers throughout the valley. Currently, seniors have to travel long distances to get to senior centers. In some cases, assisted transportation to senior centers was eliminated in recent years due to budgetary constraints. Additionally, participants acknowledged the existence of a wide spectrum of ability within the aging community. It was suggested that senior centers be cognizant of the ability range and interest among patrons, and offer options that meet different senior needs. The adage of one size fits all is no longer valid. To highlight this point, a few focus group participants acknowledged that they feel lost in the larger centers where activities are centered on the active adult. Therefore, increasing the number of centers and offering a variety of options will help reduce alienation among this demographic when the nearest senior center doesn't cater to their activity level or interest.

It is important to highlight one commonality among comments from focus group participants. Of particular interest was the interest in having senior centers open longer than the customary two o'clock in the afternoon closing time. For many seniors, the senior centers are their only method of socialization and distraction. When senior centers close at 2:00 p.m., so do the lives of the senior center patrons. Seniors are eager to have more culturally enriching opportunities. Some of the solutions discussed by the participants detailed their wish to have excursion opportunities to nearby art galleries, the theater, or a musical experience. Many of these venues offer enriching experiences that occur in the evening hours when seniors are less likely to venture out, particularly alone. However, when organized by the senior center individuals are more apt to participate in group gatherings, principally because transportation is arranged.

Conclusion

Conclusively, seniors yearn to be heard and to be active participants of the communities they live in. The notion of isolation is not foreign to a senior whose lifestyle tends to be constrained due to limited government services. However, seniors are eager to seek solutions and offer ideas to enrich their quality of life. As one focus group participant so poignantly phrased her situation, "You can't give me more time, but you can help improve the quality of time I still have."