

Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging: the Role of County Government

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Preprint

Final official version can be found at

Zhang, X. and Warner, M.E. (2023). Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging: the Role of County Government, *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*. Forthcoming.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2230088>

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Acknowledgements

This research was partially supported by the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative Competitive Program of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), grant number 2019-68006-29674 and by a grant from Engaged Cornell. We would like to thank all the members of the Tompkins County Age Friendly Center for Excellence task force, especially Teri Reinemann, Lisa Monroe and Esther Greenhouse for their leadership. We would also like to thank all the community planners, agency representatives and town planning board members who participated in this research. We especially acknowledge the work of the student interns - Lin Khant Oo, Grace McCartney, Robyn Wardell, Jeremy Xu, Jake Scherer, Katrina Cassell and Savana Lim – who helped conduct some of the field research on which this article is based.

Cross-Agency Collaboration to Address Rural Aging: the Role of County Government

Abstract

Age-friendly community planning and design mainly focus on urban aging, and may be less applicable in rural communities. We collaborated with the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence in New York State to assess strategies for rural aging. This commentary argues that density and mixed-use development, as age-friendly development strategies, leave rural communities underserved. County governments, by supporting cross-agency collaboration and encouraging civic engagement, can link the age-friendly domains regarding built environment, service delivery, and community together to help address age-friendly issues and support rural aging.

Keywords: age-friendly, local government, built environment, services, civic engagement, cross-agency collaboration

Key Points

- A primary focus on the built environment is not enough to build an age-friendly community.
- Local governments must pay attention to service provision and civic engagement.
- Cross-agency collaboration helps fill the service gap in rural communities.
- Local government leadership and civic engagement are key to collaborative networks.
- Collaborative partnerships promote age-friendly communities and address rural aging.

Introduction

Rural America is aging. US rural communities have a higher share of older adults than urban and suburban areas (Parker et al., 2018). This increases the need to build an age-friendly community that supports people's healthy living and permits aging in place. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) articulates three aspects of an age-friendly community - physical environment, services, and social engagement - to keep people healthy and promote active aging. In the US, AARP's (2021) livable community initiative promotes similar age-friendly domains, including: built environment (neighborhood, housing, open space), services (health services, transportation, communication, and information), and social engagement (civic engagement, inclusion, opportunity).

However, many rural communities lack walkable neighborhoods with a mix of retail, services, and housing, public transportation, and health care services (WHO, 2020; Zhang, Warner, & Wethington, 2020). Many rural communities also lack financial resources and depend on volunteerism (Menec & Novek, 2020). Attention to building an age-friendly rural community is advanced in Canada, Australia, and Ireland (McCrillis, Skinner, & Colibaba, 2021). Studies on rural communities in Canada show that active aging in place requires that community services and environmental characteristics "best-fit" various needs and capacities of older adults (Keating, Eales, & Phillips, 2013). A strong sense of community and partnership development contributes to implementing age-friendly programs in rural communities (McCrillis et al., 2021; Menec et al., 2015). Among the three major categories of WHO's age-friendly domains, services and social engagement are especially important for rural aging, because the built environment is much harder to change in the rural setting, and most age-friendly built environment recommendations are urban biased (Zhang et al., 2020).

Meeting the needs of an aging population in rural communities is a challenge for local government in the US. One of the challenges is how to link planning, the built environment, services, and the aging population to address the urban bias in most community planning and design recommendations. Many local government planning and design guidelines encourage building density and accessibility to services, through smart growth or nodal development, which focus community growth on nodes in walkable and dense neighborhoods (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2001; Filion, 2009); but these built environment recommendations are less applicable in rural communities (Spivak, 2020).

Support from regional or national government can help promote age-friendly practices (Lehning, 2014; McCrillis et al., 2021). For example, a guide for age-friendly rural and remote communities in Canada, developed by Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors (2007) provides a checklist of age-friendly features for rural local governments. In the US, aging services are coordinated by Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) at the county or regional level (Warner, Homsy & Morken, 2017). These regional agencies help coordinate transportation services, supportive and health services, and community engagement opportunities, and rely on planners and community development directors to focus on age-friendly community design and housing (National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, 2011; Lehning, 2014). This regional approach can help local governments move beyond urban-biased community design to support age-friendly rural communities as well. However, most age-friendly studies focus on cities, and studies of how regional initiatives can help address rural aging are limited. In the US, regional Area Agencies on Aging, are typically supported by

federal, state and county government funds.

We collaborated with the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence (TCAFCE), an initiative of the County Office for Aging (COFA – the AAA for Tompkins County) to examine the role of county government in promoting an age-friendly built environment, service provision, and community engagement. Based on our experience with TCAFCE, this commentary illustrates the role county level government can play in promoting age-friendly approaches that address the special constraints and resources in rural communities. We begin by discussing our community-engaged research approach for collaborating with TCAFCE. Then, we present background on the challenges of rural aging, and the role of government in linking the built environment, services and community to help address rural aging. Our collaboration with the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence provided key information supporting this discussion.

Collaboration with the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence

Tompkins County is located in the central part of New York State with one principal city, and one suburban and eight rural townships. The City of Ithaca is located at the center of Tompkins County, and has the most population and the highest population density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The population distribution shows a rural-urban divide, as almost half of the population is concentrated in the City of Ithaca and Town of Ithaca. The eight surrounding rural towns have a higher percentage of families with children (age under 18), and a higher percentage of older adults (age over 65).

Tompkins County is a well-resourced community, with two universities, a supportive county government, and a strong cadre of local social service agencies. Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA) developed the county’s strategic plans for aging, and led the effort to join the AARP’s Network of Age-Friendly Communities in 2015 (Tompkins County, 2022). In 2019, COFA was awarded a grant (\$100,000) from the Health Foundation of Western and Central New York to develop an Age-Friendly Center for Excellence (Tompkins County, 2022). COFA partnered with other county agencies, local governments, social services agencies, non-profit organizations, university researchers, and residents to form the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence (TCAFCE), which is one of five regional centers in NYS to support the State’s Health Across All Policies Initiative by promoting age-friendly communities. The goal of TCAFCE is to help communities and local government develop policies and programs that incorporate healthy and age-friendly principles across the life course (with attention to children, families and older adults) (Tompkins County, 2022). The TCAFCE also provides workshops, resources, and best practices on the implementation of age-friendly practices throughout the county and across the state (Tompkins County, 2022).

We collaborated with COFA to provide research support on both the short-term and long-term vision of the TCAFCE. We used a “community consultation” approach (Key et al., 2019, p. 413), and COFA and the TCAFCE provided advice and gave feedback during the community-engaged research process. In January 2020, we began our partnership with the leaders of TCAFCE. Together with TCAFCE, we designed three research projects. The first, GIS mapping of service access in Tompkins County - collected spatial data from QGIS on the built environment in Tompkins County, including the locations of grocery stores, pharmacies, schools, libraries, subsidized senior housing, market rate senior housing, and bus routes to help identify challenges in rural aging. The second project, analyzing local government plans and actions on

age-friendly practices - reviewed comprehensive plans for Tompkins County and the 14 municipalities within the county to examine the role of planning in addressing the needs of older adults and families with children. We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with 30 community stakeholders from Tompkins County, the City of Ithaca, nine towns, and one village to explore age-friendly assets, practices, and challenges. We also sent an online survey to town supervisors, town clerks, mayors, and planning board members from all municipalities to assess local government actions on planning and zoning, cross-agency collaboration, service provision and civic engagement. The third research project was a case study of cross-agency collaboration to ensure food security during COVID-19. We interviewed nine representatives from county government and non-profit organizations to explore how the collaborative network between county government, community agencies, and residents addressed the needs of families with children and older adults during the COVID-19 public health crisis.

Across the three projects, we worked closely with COFA and the TCAFCE task force. TCAFCE helped us identify the key informants and schedule interviews. We combined the quantitative survey results and GIS mapping with the qualitative plan reviews, interviews and the case study to explore how county government can promote a livable community for all residents. This community-engaged research allowed us to explore the role of community plans, the built environment, civic engagement, services and cross-agency collaboration in building an age-friendly rural community. We engaged in the collaborative network led by TCAFCE and attended task force meetings throughout 2020-21. During the meetings, we provided the task force with regular updates on research progress, and got feedback from our community partners.

This community-engaged research was designed to promote an age-friendly community, so it is not neutral, but responsive to community priorities. Community engaged research depends on conducting systematic research (Warren et al., 2018), and that was our contribution to the TCAFCE process. During the three research projects, we communicated with Tompkins County about challenges in rural aging, and provided recommendations for future action. To promote co-learning across the collaboration, we wrote a best practices report on Tompkins County's food security response during the early weeks of COVID shut down in March-April 2020 (Xu, 2021), presented in the statewide age-friendly training workshops organized by COFA and TCAFCE in April 2021, and our research and recommendations were integrated into the draft of the new five-year Tompkins County Age-friendly action plan in March 2022 (Tompkins County, 2022; McCarthy, Oo & Wardell, 2022).

This community-engaged research dimension of our collaboration with TCAFCE has some limitations. Although we used an online survey to complement the qualitative interviews, this study may face generalizability concerns, as qualitative studies can have limited applicability. Our study draws lessons from a well-resourced rural/urban county with a history of collaboration. Our findings may not apply to low resourced rural communities which face more challenges. Future research could include comparative case studies to explore the different challenges and opportunities faced by communities with different resource capacity.

Challenges in rural aging

An aging population requires a supportive built environment and more accessible services, as older adults may lose functional mobility over time (Li, 2020; WHO, 2020). However, rural communities normally lack healthcare services, street walkability, mixed-use neighborhoods, and public transportation services (Warner & Zhang, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020;

Spivak, 2020), These challenges in rural aging can be seen in Tompkins County. We used open street map to acquire the locations of grocery stores, pharmacies, market rate senior housing, subsidized senior housing, libraries, schools and public transportation routes in Tompkins County. We used a one mile buffer for grocery stores and pharmacies to represent the location of essential services (dashed circles shown in Figure 1).

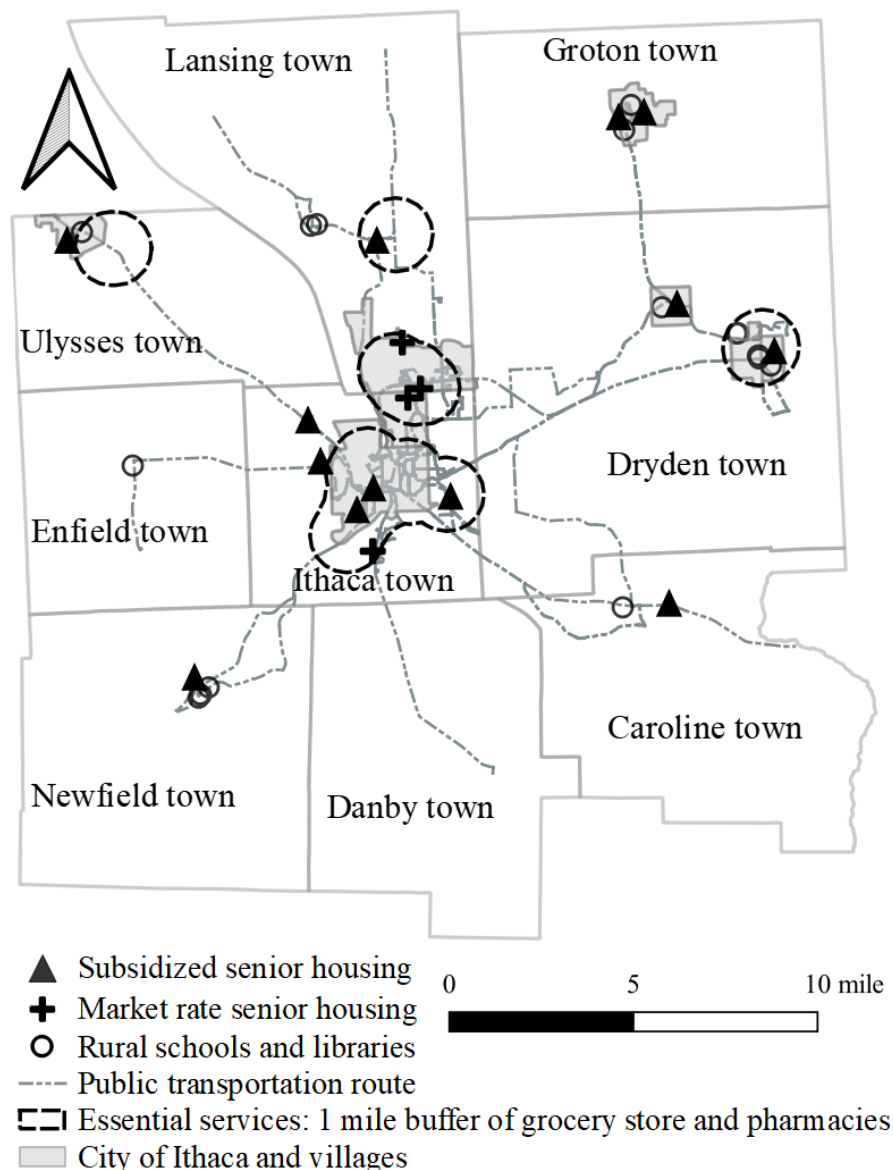


Figure 1 Senior Housing and Access to Services

Data Source: author analysis

The essential service buffer in Figure 1 shows the services for pharmacies and grocery stores are concentrated in the urban centers and in two villages at public transit hubs. Market rate senior housing is also concentrated in the main urban centers, where services are located. However, more services are needed in the surrounding rural towns, as those towns have a higher percentage of older adults and more subsidized senior housing. Also, among the eight subsidized

senior housing facilities in rural towns, only two of them are close to these essential services. Interviews with rural town planners confirmed that rural hamlets,¹ which once served as a center for services when subsidized senior housing was built there, no longer have these essential services. The lack of essential services in rural communities creates challenges for older adults who lack mobility.

Although most senior housing is located near a bus route, using public transportation is challenging in rural communities due to less frequent schedules (focused on commuters only in the morning and evening), limited proximity to the nearest bus stop, and lack of infrastructure to support walking and biking. This drew the TCAFCE task force's attention and raised concerns about accessibility in rural communities. The TCAFCE task force studied bus stops at senior housing and found lack of sidewalks and bus shelters with places to sit. In denser urban centers, residents are more likely to be able to walk, bike, or have access to reliable and consistent public transportation to get to doctors' offices or buy groceries. At the municipal level, towns have added bike racks at bus stops, and built park-and-ride lots to make public transit more accessible. However, this does not address accessibility issues for rural older adults.

By drawing attention to the needs of aging, government planning agencies can simulate a market response (Warner, Homsy & Morken, 2017). However, the County Planning Department had no initiatives to address the lack of essential services in rural towns. Figure 1 shows the gaps between subsidized senior housing and essential service locations, and the inadequacy of public transportation routes in rural towns. We conducted an interview with the County Planning Department about this concern, and they indicated their age-friendly strategy was focused on density development, affordable housing, water, energy and natural environment, but not the lack of services near rural senior housing. However, as a result of this community engaged research, the county planner joined the TCAFCE and began regularly attending the meetings.

To explore strategies to address the specific challenges in rural aging, we examined the age-friendly features in the county and the role of the county government in promoting a better built environment, service delivery, and civic engagement.

Age-friendly features and the role of county government

Built environment: building density in rural centers

Building an age-friendly rural community requires attention to the fit between environment, services and community (Keating et al., 2013). Age-friendly community design primarily focuses on neighborhood built environment features that support people's healthy living and aging in place (AARP, 2021; UNICEF, 2018; WHO, 2020). Walkability and a mixed-used built environment are recommended by the American Planning Association (APA) as part of its Aging in Community Policy Guide (APA, 2014). Walkability and mixed-use built environments make services more accessible at the neighborhood scale. This is especially important given that more than 20% of older adults do not drive, and there is increasing demand for accessible services (National Aging and Disability Transportation Center, 2018). Studies show that easy access to services and street walkability encourage pedestrian travel and physical activity (Hunter et al., 2011; Qiu & Zhu, 2021).

The latest Tompkins County comprehensive plan emphasizes the important role of the physical built environment in healthy living, including street walkability, parks and recreation, and mixed land use (Tompkins County Planning Department, 2015). Tompkins County's comprehensive plan uses a nodal development approach to build a healthy community. The

nodal development strategy promotes dense and mixed-use development in community “nodes” that have a variety of housing types, high population density, walkability, and water and sewer infrastructure (Tompkins County Planning Department, 2015). These development focus areas (nodes) are located in the center of Tompkins County (City of Ithaca and parts of Ithaca town), rural centers (villages and hamlets), and near bus routes.

Our review of all municipal comprehensive plans found that rural municipalities apply nodal development concepts to bring the age-friendly benefits of denser urban spaces into a rural context. The rural town comprehensive plans commonly focus on building density in rural centers, promoting senior housing and affordable housing, and preserving natural amenities to help people age in place and attract older in-migrants. For example, the Town of Ulysses locates high-density housing, such as apartments and senior housing complexes in the rural center where residents will have access to services, employment, and public transportation. Rural centers are the focal nodes in rural communities with the most age-friendly features because they are places where land use and services can be more closely integrated.

In New York State, land use planning authority is vested at the City, Town and Village level, but not at the county or regional level. Community planning board members are volunteers. Paid planners are only found in the county and the more urbanized towns – Ithaca and Lansing. Tompkins County does not have zoning authority, but the County Planning Department provides training and technical support to the volunteer planning departments in the surrounding towns. Survey results show most municipalities have adopted some zoning codes which pay attention to the needs of older adults. For example, all municipalities responding to our survey allow accessory dwelling units and multi-family housing in some portion of the community. Mixed-use is also common in most municipalities’ zoning codes (Figure 2). A higher percentage of rural towns allow mixed-use than urban communities, as rural communities often have mixed agriculture, small business and residences. However, the survey showed that zoning codes do not give much attention to street walkability. Only twenty percent of the rural towns mandate sidewalk systems, or require complete streets to increase physical access for people with limited mobility (Figure 2). This may be due to a limited street grid and the existence of major thoroughfares cutting through the villages. Such highways are controlled by the State, not the local government.

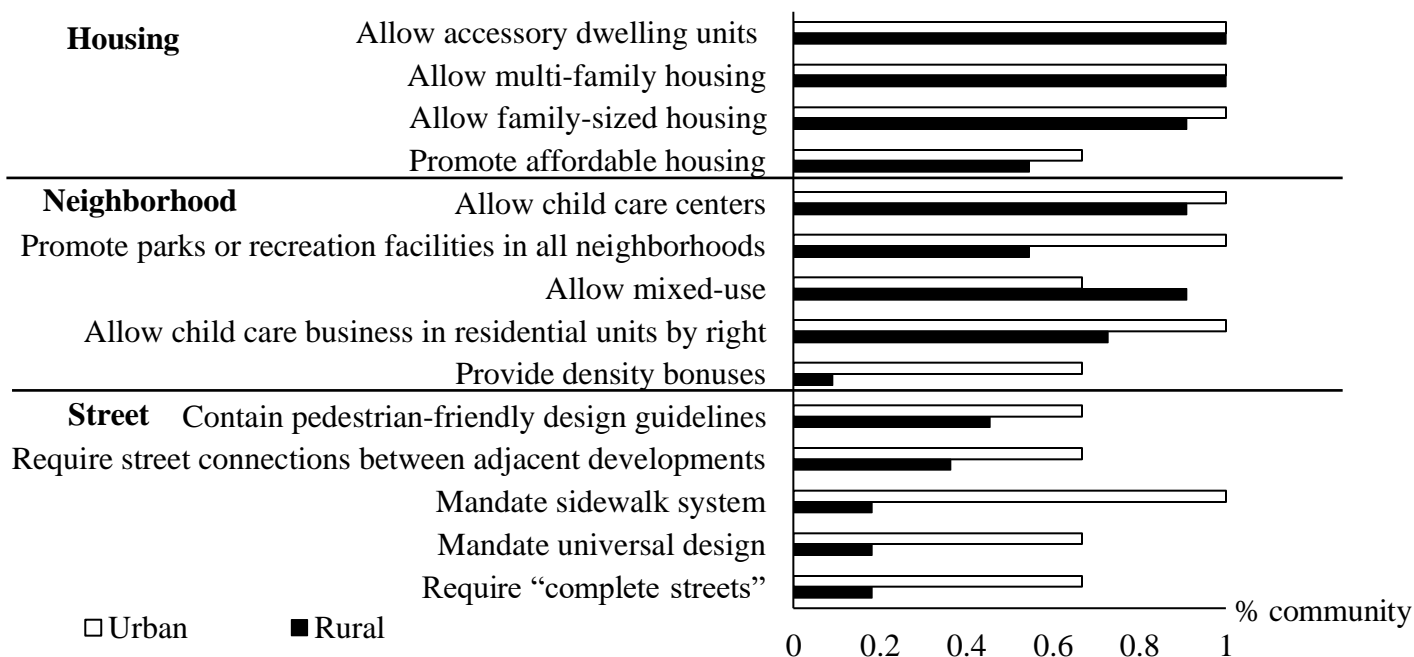


Figure 2 Percent of municipalities reporting zoning codes covering some of community²
 Data source: Tompkins County Planning for all Ages survey, 2020, 3 urban and 11 rural municipalities responding

We find that density-focused planning and zoning guidelines are not sufficient to help rural communities become age-friendly. Mixed-use neighborhoods are harder to develop in rural communities due to low population density and lack of water and sewer infrastructure. In addition, rural communities may be more likely to push back against zoning. In Tompkins County, a group of rural residents in the Town of Caroline criticized zoning, as they were concerned that zoning would increase the cost of business development and restrict owners’ rights to have businesses on their land (The Ithaca Voice, 2022). Our interviews with rural planning board members also found that people who move to rural communities are looking for rural features such as large open spaces, rather than dense development. Our study of Tompkins County shows the limits of applying dense, mixed-use planning in a rural setting.

Services: accessibility is key

One way to address the service gaps between housing and essential services shown in Figure 1 is through the transportation system. Tompkins County has a volunteer-run paratransit service (Gadabout) for older and disabled residents to access medical offices and shopping centers. The county-wide public transit system contracts with Gadabout to provide paratransit service. One medical service provider stated that: “One of the downsides is that they [older adults] will stop driving after a certain time, but I am grateful to Gadabout... that they can get most of my clients where they need to be with very little disruption and really great efficiency. Overall, it’s a great program. Gadabout is very, very important.”

All communities have access to home-delivered meals for older adults, provided by a county-wide nonprofit, FoodNet Meals on Wheels. During COVID-19 use of delivery services like Instacart and Ithaca-To-Go expanded, and some pharmacies instituted delivery, but these services do not reach most rural areas. Our research helped the TCAFCE task force identify the

need for a service delivery system to fill the service gaps. Delivery services in Tompkins County could help fill the gaps between built environment and service needs of the aging population.

Our research identified the important role played by school districts, libraries and fire departments in delivering information and services, especially in rural communities. In contrast to the concentration of essential services such as grocery stores and pharmacies in urban centers, almost every rural town has a school, library and fire department. Tompkins County has six separate school districts and six libraries (one county run, and five run by rural towns) (Figure 1).

Our survey results show that schools are the most trusted institutions for families with children in Tompkins County, and all municipalities have after-school programs, and most have summer programs. One interviewee stated, “I would say probably 50% or more of the activities that happen in this town are related to the school district. School is kind of the hub of what’s happening in this town. People are very proud of the school.” An interviewee also noted that schools are the centers of many rural communities and bring a sense of community, and communities use school facilities for different things, such as summer camps and adult basketball leagues. Schools also provide transportation services. Interviews in rural communities confirm that the school bus is the only form of transit linking outlying residents to village centers. As one interviewee noted, “If you don’t live in the village, if you live in the town, there’s nothing available. Just the school bus system is all there is, if you don’t have access to a car.” Rural school districts cooperate closely with rural towns and share facilities (gyms, auditoriums) with the broader community. Survey results also show that the school district is the top agency engaged in cross-agency partnership to serve children and older adults. More than half of the public schools in rural communities provide childcare services and child nutrition for evenings/weekends or summer, and some provide services for older adults, such as nutrition programs or meals, and education services.

Libraries are one of the most active institutions in rural communities. They view their mandate broadly – beyond books and summer reading programs, to afterschool programs, nutrition access, internet services, job training and providing meeting spaces for the community. An interviewee stated, “There is a yoga program, that makes it sort of more accessible for an older population to be able to stay active and socially connected, that runs out of the library.” Staff from the Figure Lakes Library System, which helps coordinate resource sharing across all the libraries, described libraries as ‘yes’ organizations which build partnerships to address a wide range of community needs, especially for children and older adults.

Fire departments were often described as a key social network for rural communities – providing information and events to build community cohesion, in addition to fire and rescue services. One interviewee from a rural town noted, “We are not talking so much about the absence of the community center, because the Fire Department, the fire building has renovated each room and expanded so that there’s more opportunity for community events there.”

Community: encouraging civic engagement

The active engagement of older adults and families with children in the planning process can help ensure community planning and services are more responsive to their needs (Keating et al., 2013; Lehning, 2014; Severcan, 2015; Warner & Rukus, 2013; Warner & Zhang, 2019), and this can result in better community health for all ages (Corburn, 2004; Warner, Xu, & Morken, 2017; Warner & Zhang, 2020). Civic engagement can enhance social cohesion and social capital to promote physical activity and community health, even when the built environment is not supportive (Adkins, Makarewicz, Scanze, Ingram, & Luhr, 2017; Yang, Jensen, & Haran, 2011;

Zhang et al., 2020). For example, research shows that US rural areas with more social connections between people have a lower mortality rate, even in communities with economic and infrastructure disadvantages (Yang et al., 2011). A national study of AARP's livability indicators for all US counties found that although urban communities rank higher on built environment and transportation, rural communities with better health outcomes are distinguished by higher levels of civic engagement (Zhang et al., 2020). The APA (2017) guide for community health emphasizes a 'health in all areas' approach and the importance of civic engagement.

Opportunities for civic participation and engagement are domains in both the UNICEF (2018) and WHO (2020) frameworks and an important part of the Tompkins age-friendly action plan (Tompkins County Office for the Aging, 2016). Through interviews, our research found that older adults are actively engaged in community services, especially in rural communities. For example, one interviewee mentioned that "quite a few older adults are involved in the food pantry program, and the good neighbor fund, which is a small fund available for emergency needs". We also see engagement of older adults in the planning process. One of the interviewees, who is an older adult, said, "I met with one of the town board members who understands the concept of social infrastructure supporting volunteer aspects of rural towns. I asked him how I might go about getting a town-supported request for help with incorporating age-friendly provisions in the zoning."

Volunteerism plays an important role in building a healthy community, not only for community planning, but also for other services (Menec, et al., 2015). For example, in Tompkins county, the City of Ithaca has a professional fire department, while most villages and rural towns rely on volunteer fire departments to provide fire protection, emergency medical assistance, and rescue services. Interviewees described how volunteers help run emergency food distribution programs and emergency medical services in rural communities

The County Office for the Aging (COFA) encourages community engagement on age-friendly issues in Tompkins County. The TCAFCE task force, led by COFA, held monthly meetings throughout 2020 to engage residents, scholars, and directors of human services agencies to address age-friendly issues. During the monthly meetings, TCAFCE task force members discussed their community needs, age-friendly best practices, age-friendly businesses, concerns with racial equity and emergency preparedness, and ways to address social isolation and service access, especially during COVID-19.

The TCAFCE task force also engaged residents by providing educational opportunities for community members and agency representatives to understand age-friendly principles. TCAFCE offered a series of community training workshops online in spring 2021 on planning, zoning, housing development, service delivery, and frameworks for community health and wellness. Each workshop attracted 60-80 local residents and agency representatives. As part of our community engaged research, we participated in these workshops. We challenged the urban bias of smart growth as the primary age-friendly strategy, and emphasized the importance of connecting planning, service delivery, social engagement and public health.

County government role in promoting cross-agency collaboration

Rural age-friendly approaches require partnerships (McCrillis, et al., 2021). Collaboration across traditional service silos can increase service delivery for the aging population (Warner & Zhang, 2021) and provide comprehensive strategies to promote public health (Daley, 2009). WHO's (2020) age-friendly policy action handbook calls for multi-sector

collaboration in many aspects, such as collaboration with the private sector to support age-friendly businesses, and collaboration with schools, libraries and fire departments to support government-based services. Cross-agency approaches are key to addressing the needs of both older adults and youth (Keyes et al., 2014; Reece, 2021; Warner & Zhang, 2021). Cross-agency collaboration is emphasized in delivering community services and addressing health disparities (Keating et al., 2013). Collective impact studies note the importance of cross-agency collaboration and civic engagement to bring community stakeholders together to address social issues (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Cross-agency collaboration plays an important role in Tompkins County to provide health and recreation services, and link children and older adults with other age-friendly programs. The Tompkins County comprehensive plan (2015) emphasizes cross-agency collaboration among county agencies. County government agencies like COFA and the Youth Bureau are tasked with ensuring that more programs for families with children and older adults are available across all jurisdictions in the county. COFA leads the TCAFCE to spearhead the county's age-friendly initiatives. COFA maintains a collaborative network between social service agencies and local governments to facilitate services, information exchange and resource sharing across jurisdictional boundaries. We examined the role of county leadership in cross-agency collaboration, and found it is aligned with the requirements of effective collaboration, including encouraging civic engagement, open communication, and building a common vision (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Vangen, 2017). We helped TCAFCE articulate the framework for their age-friendly work, and they put cross agency collaboration at the center (Tompkins County, 2022; McCartney, Oo & Wardell, 2022) (Figure 3). Our community engaged research explored how this collaboration works and the specific role that county agencies play.



Figure 3 Framework for Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence (Tompkins County, 2022)

The TCAFCE takes an all ages approach to its age friendly initiatives. Another important example of cross-agency collaboration is the Tompkins County Youth Bureau. The County

Youth Bureau is a partnership that helps coordinate youth recreation programs with all outlying towns. The coordinated, but decentralized program model of the County Youth Bureau offers a network approach to coordinate services but keeps decision-making control at the local level. Youth recreation programming in rural municipalities is given funding support from the Tompkins County Youth Bureau, but budget and program administration are handled at the town level. Our survey results show that all the rural towns have recreation programs, and this is due in part to funding and support from the County Youth Bureau recreation partnership. Interviews show that recreation programs play an important role in bringing children and older adults together, and building an inclusive community. One interviewee stated that “the only thing that we really have in terms of connecting youth with older adults and people of all ages are parks and trails and recreational areas.” One interviewee from a rural town also stated that, “The Youth Commission really wanted there to be a more vibrant recreation program that could be not just limited to young people... Recreation programming will go forward in our community in a way that will be much more inclusive.”

Multi-level collaboration to ensure food security during COVID-19

Cross-agency collaboration has been identified as the key factor to address large-scale community problems (Dankwa-Mullan & Perez-Stable, 2016; Kania & Kramer, 2011), such as social and health service provision (Glendinning, Abbott, & Coleman, 2001). Collaboration can be a complex and slow process to generate outcomes (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Vangen, 2017). Research shows that effective cross-agency collaboration requires leadership, shared goals, and trust (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Vangen, 2017), and transparency and accountability in public sector governance (Sanderson, Allen, Gill, & Garnett, 2018). However, cross-agency collaboration faces challenges of coordination among agencies in the network. Milward and Provan’s (2000) research shows that collaborative networks require a coordinating agency to support funding resources, and build norms of reciprocity. The case study of Tompkins County shows the importance of county government agencies as the coordinating nodes and the effectiveness of these collaborative networks to address community-wide health and planning concerns.

The collaborative networks in Tompkins County helped position the community to respond quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic. To address food insecurity across the county, COFA helped lead a local network between school districts, FoodNet Meals on Wheels, the United Way, Gadabout-Paratransit, and the Child Development Council to come together at the beginning of the pandemic (March and April 2020) to deliver meals to older adults and baby formula, and supplies to families with children. Figure 4 shows the multi-level collaborative network among agencies.

The central agencies, COFA and the United Way, funded and contracted with other agencies, and coordinated with volunteers. COFA was a critical lead organizer of the cross-agency partnership; it contracted with FoodNet Meals on Wheels to provide meals to homebound older adults (Figure 4). COFA also used internet technology to help overcome the isolation of older adults and developed a list of volunteers for grocery shopping. United Way provided funding to the Child Development Council, Gadabout paratransit, and FoodNet Meals on Wheels.

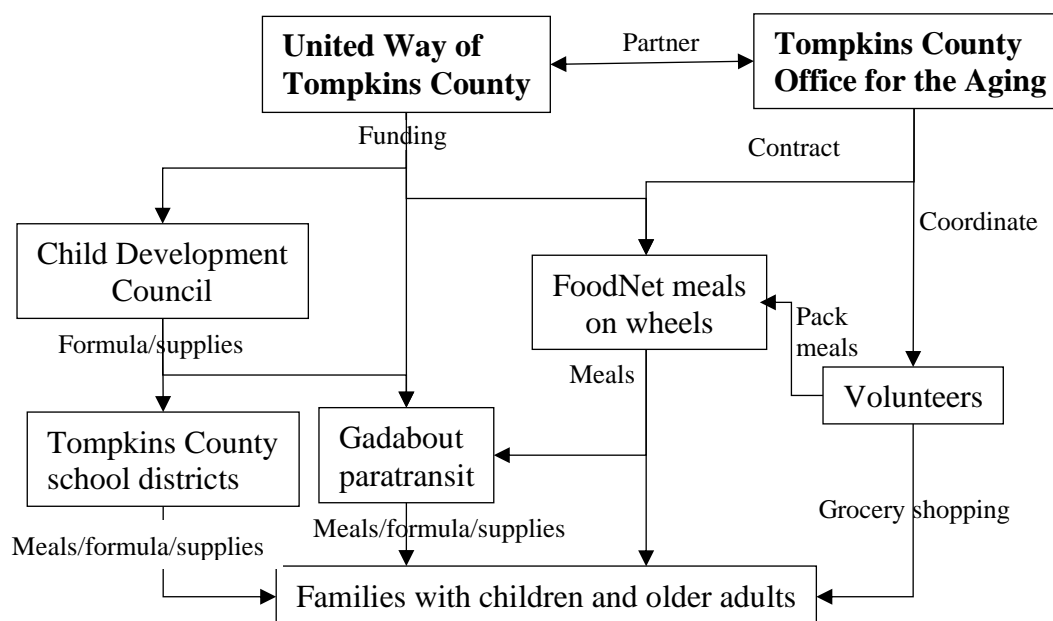


Figure 4 Cross-agency collaboration in response to food insecurity during COVID-19 (adapted from Xu, 2020)

The middle level agencies, Child Development Council and FoodNet Meals on Wheels, provided supplies and meals to other agencies. The Child Development Council partnered with the school districts and Gadabout to deliver meals, baby formula and supplies to families with children. FoodNet Meals on Wheels, with the help from volunteers, delivered meals and groceries to older adults (Figure 4).

All the area food pantries collaborated, and Gadabout and the school districts helped with food delivery. Gadabout is a para-transit agency that provides transportation services to older adults and disabled people. It collaborated with the Child Development Council and FoodNet Meals on Wheels to provide food delivery service during COVID-19. School districts partnered with the Child Development Council and used school buses to deliver meals, formulas, and supplies to families with children. The strong prior cross-agency collaboration built by COFA and the additional funding provided by United Way, enabled this broader network to come together to increase community resilience during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-agency partnership pushed through functional silos, and used new approaches of finance, technology, volunteerism, and transportation to meet the health needs of vulnerable children and older adults in the county. These community organizations modified service design (e.g., using paratransit vans and school buses to deliver food and supplies to families, in addition to transporting older adults and children to services), and broadened collaboration to a wider array of agencies. One of the challenges during the lockdown in the early weeks of COVID-19 in spring 2020 was that many volunteers were older adults and at greater risk of illness from COVID-19 infection. By collaborating across agencies, the county was able to ensure food access for older adults and families with children. The delivery system built during COVID created new opportunities for future service delivery. “As long as we can coordinate those food deliveries with rider pickups, I foresee us continuing to provide food service delivery,” noted the paratransit provider.

Collaborative networks more effective than consolidation in serving rural populations

A collaborative network between local government, community agencies, and residents could be more effective in addressing community issues than a consolidated system, as it helps build social interactions, mutual trust and relationships. In rural communities, collaboration is especially important, as there are fewer local agencies to provide services (McCrillis et al., 2021).

In Tompkins County, cross-agency collaboration helps improve services in rural areas and makes up for the lack of built environment features conducive to health. Among all the agencies, fire departments, libraries, schools, recreation departments were reported as collaborators by most towns. In the absence of other social service agencies, these institutions play an outsized role. However, consolidated services can create coordination and access challenges in rural communities. Consolidated services tend to concentrate services in the center and do a poorer job of reaching outlying communities. For example, three rural towns (Caroline, Danby and Endfield) in Tompkins County are served by the consolidated Ithaca City School District, and in our interviews they reported more challenges in accessing information and school facilities for community programs. By contrast, the rural independent school districts work very closely with their rural towns. For example, in the rural town of Ulysses, the Town board collaborates with the recreation board, the Village of Trumansburg, and the school district to coordinate across policies – for health, youth recreation, and town planning. The collaboration encourages intergenerational programming in the rural town and has articulated a town/village plan to extend walking and bike paths to increase access to the grocery store, especially for those in senior housing.

Conclusion

It is challenging for rural communities to support healthy living and aging in place. Through collaboration with the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Center for Excellence (TCAFCE), this commentary assesses factors related to a healthy community. We found that county government plays a lead role in making communities more age-friendly. While county planning and municipal zoning help promote density and mixed-use development, we find that a primary focus on mixed-use development and walkability is not enough, and leaves rural communities underserved. Service delivery is needed to fill the gaps in the built environment, especially for rural communities. Civic engagement helps community leaders hear local needs, and cross-agency collaboration holds the age-friendly domains together. County governments can build collaborative service networks to address rural aging and promote civic engagement, but they also need to encourage planning agencies to reach beyond their traditional domains of housing, transportation and land use, to engage with these broader collaborative service networks.

The health policy frameworks from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2021) and the National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities (2017) both point to the need to link program and policy design with community participation to build a culture of health and address social disparities, but they do not clearly articulate the role of county government. Using our analysis of Tompkins County, we articulate an age-friendly community action framework where county government links built environment, services and community engagement (Figure 5). This commentary illustrates how county government plays a central coordinating role. In Tompkins County, the county planning department encourages local planning and zoning to build density in rural centers. County agencies promote collaboration across agencies and

municipalities to increase service access, and they promote public engagement in age-friendly practices (Figure 5). While planning departments mainly focus on building density and mixed-use, they need to strengthen their links with services to address community health (APA, 2017). This study shows the important role of cross-agency collaboration and civic engagement as complements to the physical planning process to build an age-friendly community.

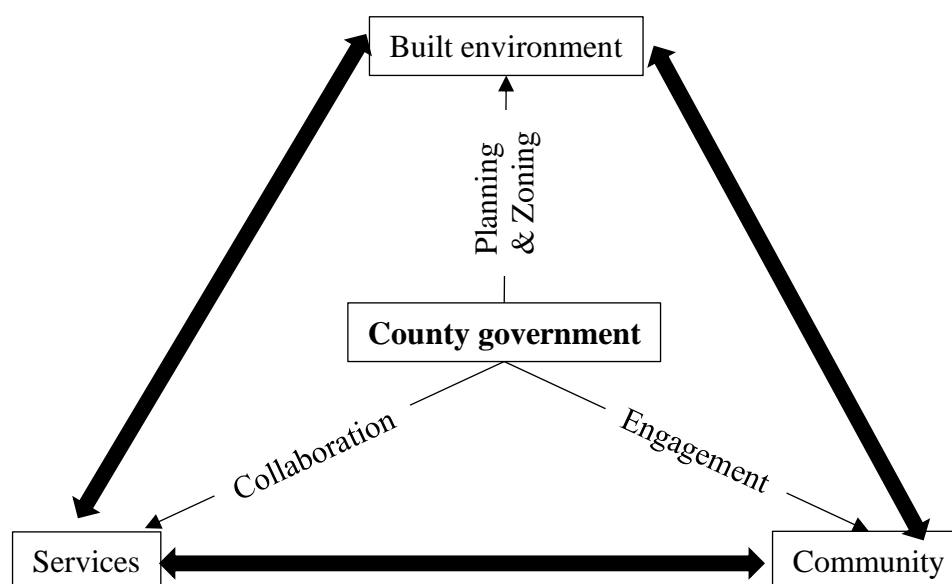


Figure 5 Age-friendly community action framework: The Role of County Government

Prior research has emphasized the role of local government in planning and social engagement (Keyes et al., 2014; Lehning, 2014; Warner et al., 2017), and the importance of multi-sector collaboration to create age-friendly communities (Greenfield & Buffel, 2022; Keyes, Collins, Tao, & Tiwari, 2022; Pestine-Stevens & Greenfield, 2022; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2021; McCrillis et al., 2021). This commentary emphasizes the role of county government, through cross-agency collaboration, in building an age-friendly community. We find that collaboration is key to serve both children and older adults in rural communities. A culture of cross-agency collaboration helped Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA) mobilize a flexible and rapid emergency response at the beginning of the COVID-19 public health crisis. The inter-municipal collaboration on recreation services, sponsored by the County Youth Bureau, helps each municipality bring together families with children and older adults. By providing leadership, a process to articulate shared goals, and build trust (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Vangen, 2017), the collaborative networks supported by county government can help facilitate collaborative leadership (Bryson et al., 2015) and collective impact for community health (Greenfield, Black, Oh, & Pestine-Stevens, 2022).

This commentary illustrates how county government plays a central coordinating role to build a collaborative network, provide funding resources, and promote civic engagement for a successful age-friendly initiative. The County Office for the Aging has built a culture of collaboration to dynamically link the needs of older adults and families, with institutions and service providers to build a healthy place. What can communities do when inclusive age-friendly physical design is beyond reach? Our research finds cross-agency collaboration and civic engagement can help build a more enabling environment. This is especially important in rural communities.

Endnotes

1. Rural hamlets are small rural settlements with a concentration of housing, but no local government. Villages are small rural settlements with an official local government.

2. In Tompkins County, urban communities include the City of Ithaca, Town of Ithaca, and Village of Cayuga Heights. Rural communities include all the other towns, and the Village of Trumansburg in Town of Ulysses, the Village of Groton in Town of Groton, and the Village of Freeville in Town of Dryden.

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