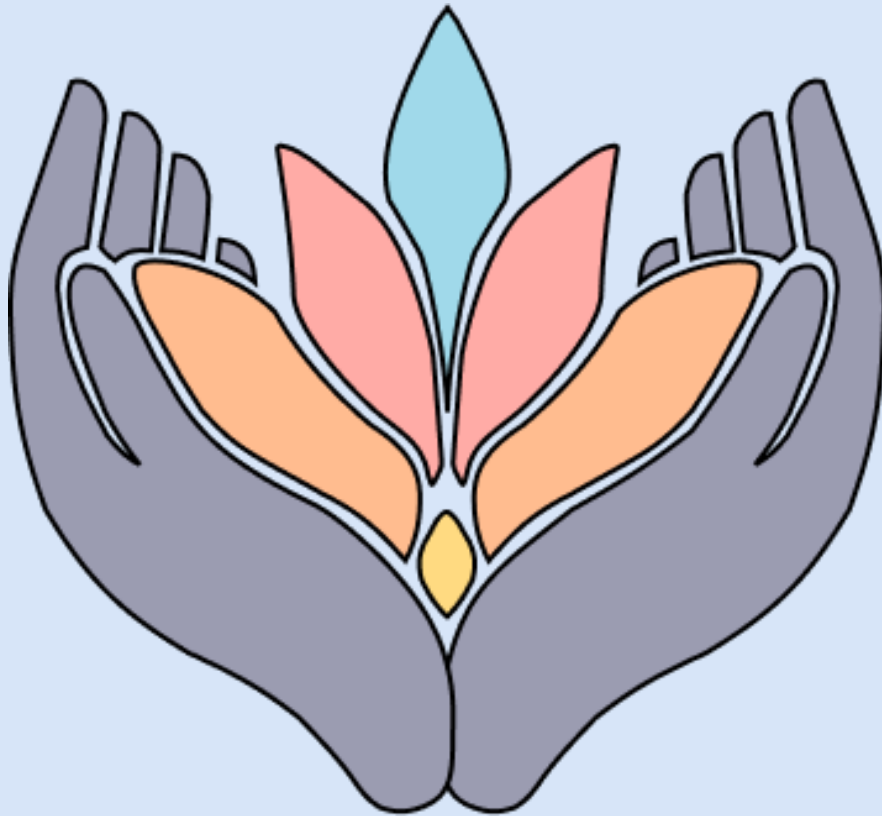
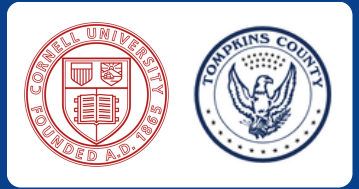


AGE-FRIENDLY BUSINESS CERTIFICATION PROGRAM IN TOMPKINS COUNTY



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This work was produced under the direction and advisement of Professor Mildred Warner in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University. We thank Professor Janet Loebach at Cornell University, as well as Lisa Monroe and Caryn Bullis at the Tompkins County Office of the Aging for their work on this initiative and their continued support.

This report can be found at <https://labs.aap.cornell.edu/node/1143>. The official website for the Age-Friendly Business initiative, managed by TCOFA can be accessed at <https://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/All-Departments/Aging/Age-Friendly-Center-for-Excellence/Age-Friendly-Businesses>

15 DECEMBER
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Executive Summary

The Tompkins County Age-Friendly Business Certification Program helps build an **inclusive local economy for residents of all ages**, especially older adults. Led by the Tompkins County Office for the Aging (TCOFA) in partnership with Cornell University, the program certifies businesses that demonstrate accessibility, respect, and inclusion.

Tompkins County has a unique demographic, while it seems youthful due to its student population, its share of older residents is growing. Being intentional about promoting age-friendly practices are therefore essential to meet the needs of older adults, as well as everyone across the age spectrum. This means improving access and comfort for residents, which aligns with the global Age-Friendly movement, which promotes equity and strengthens local economies.

The county's program is distinctive for its **practical, low-barrier design**. It is free to join, and the certification process focuses on engagement over bureaucracy. Using a self-assessment audit tool, businesses evaluate themselves in key areas like **physical access, communication, and customer service**. TCOFA then validates their results, and certified businesses receive decals and certificates to showcase their commitment. As of October 2025, nine businesses have been certified, with more in the enrollment process.

The program now aims to transition from a pilot to a sustainable, county-wide initiative.

Key objectives include:

- Expanding enrollment to **achieve visibility and critical mass**.
- **Building partnerships** with “Champion” organizations such as the Downtown Ithaca Alliance, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the Finger Lakes Library System to amplify outreach.
- **Diversifying participation** across high-impact sectors—transportation, retail, healthcare, and community services.
- Developing a **sustainability plan** to institutionalize the program.

Comparative analysis of age-friendly programs in eight U.S. cities highlights Tompkins County's **comprehensiveness, accessibility, and county-wide scope** as its distinctive strengths. At the same time, there is a need to **enhance visibility, partnerships, and outreach**. Refining the audit tool for increased ease of use and introducing innovations such as tiered recognition levels can be considered as well. The suggestions span from the short-term to the long-term.

In short, despite certain temporary weaknesses, the Tompkins County program offers a **replicable and equitable model for other regions**.

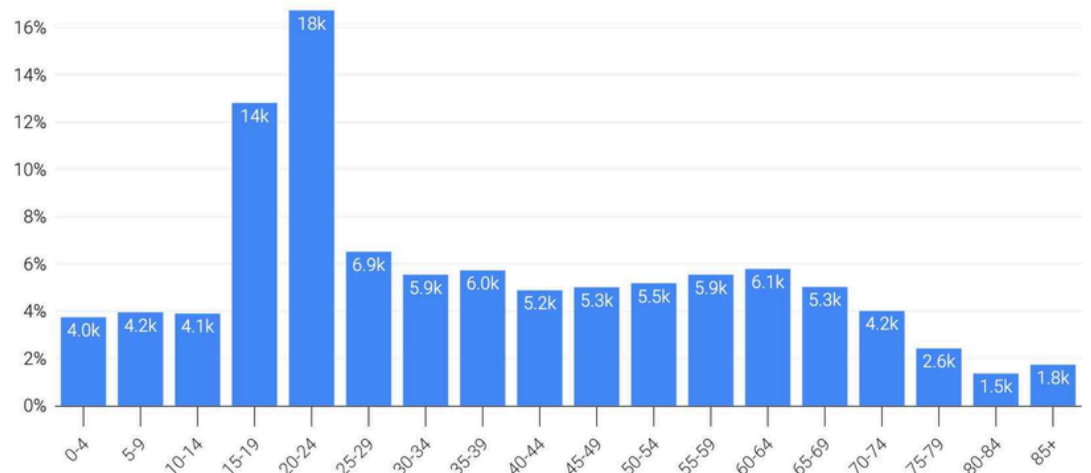
2. Background

2.1 Demography

Tompkins County, New York, is a growing community of approximately 105,000 residents. Its demographics are uniquely shaped by Cornell University and Ithaca College, creating a large population of young adults aged 18-27. However, this youthful profile obscures a significant aging trend. When students are factored out, adults aged 60-64 emerge as the next largest demographic group, signaling a clear shift toward an older population. 23% of the population is over the age of 60. This aging trend presents specific challenges. Despite a median household income of \$73,012, the county has a poverty rate of 15.3%. These economic disparities disproportionately affect older adults on fixed incomes, who often struggle with affordability and accessibility. For these reasons, proactively planning for a growing and diverse older adult population is essential for Tompkins County.

Tompkins County, NY population by age group

The largest age group is 20-24 years with a population of 17,678 (16.73%)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2017-2021 5-Year Estimates

Neilsberg

2.2 About Age-Friendly Programs

The World Health Organization (WHO) launched the global Age-Friendly Cities and Communities movement in 2006 to address the challenges of demographic aging. This initiative promotes environments that support healthy and active aging by removing physical and social barriers. The goal is to enable older adults to stay mobile, maintain social connections, and participate in community life. The WHO also maintains a global database to share successful age-friendly practices. In 2012, AARP established the U.S. affiliate, the Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities.

Age-friendly businesses are a key component of this framework. A business earns this designation by intentionally designing its environment, services, and employment practices to be inclusive for all ages, with special consideration for older adults. In the United States, the concept was first adopted by cities that initially certified public and non-profit institutions.

Boston is a prime example, which launched its program in 2014 and has signed up 100 entities to date. Of them, 23 are libraries, and many others are community centers and banks. This strategy appears to have capitalized on libraries being institutions that serve as foundational pillars for an age-friendly ecosystem. They directly foster civic participation and access to information. Cleveland launched an Age-Friendly Business Certification Program in 2019, developed in direct response to older adults' feedback on issues of concern to them. It represents a more structured approach involving a detailed application, in-person evaluations by AARP volunteers, and a mandatory, interactive aging sensitivity training for staff.

These models, from Boston's community-focused strategy to Cleveland's rigorous business certification, provide a valuable benchmark for the Tompkins County program. They offer key insights into effective partnership structures and strategies for engaging both non-profit and for-profit sectors.



2.3 Key Concepts in Scholarly Literature

The Age-Friendly Business movement is driven by a powerful economic opportunity: the growing purchasing power of older adults. This "silver economy" represents a substantial and loyal customer base. Data shows that senior spending has grown faster than the national average, extending beyond healthcare to include significant expenditure on entertainment, personal care, and other discretionary categories (Li, 2014; Han et al., 2021). This makes a compelling case that age-friendly practices are not just socially responsible, but also commercially beneficial.

However, most certification programs focus primarily on the form of age-friendliness, modifications to the physical environment, accessible information, and staff training (Gonzalez, 2022). While essential, these measures often stop at accommodation. They frequently miss the substance - guiding businesses to actively innovate in products, services, and core strategies to serve the aging market (Li, 2014). Bridging this gap from basic accommodation to strategic innovation is a critical next step for the movement.

Additionally, disparities pose new challenges within the older adult population. For instance, adults who will be seniors soon, spend more on housing, transportation, apparel, and dining out than adults who are already senior citizens. In categories of healthcare, entertainment, and personal care, current seniors outspend the seniors-to-be. Essentially, the business case for becoming age-friendly may vary significantly by sector and local demography (Li, 2014). That being said, the largest expenditure categories for older adults (housing, transportation, and healthcare) are often served by large corporations or public entities, not the small, local businesses that are typically the target of certification programs (Li, 2014). Therefore, motivating a small retail shop or restaurant requires a more nuanced approach than simply appealing to the paying power of older adults.

This leads to the central challenge: crafting a compelling value proposition. The financial return for a small business is often indirect. Achieving widespread buy-in requires moving beyond pure profit motives to emphasize secondary benefits like enhanced customer loyalty, stronger community reputation, and long-term market viability (Han et al., 2021). The future success of Age-Friendly Business initiatives depends on this strategic shift, convincing businesses that becoming age-friendly is a smart investment in their own resilience and future.

2.4 Tompkins County Office for the Aging (TCOFA)

The Tompkins County Office for the Aging (COFA), established in 1975, administers a wide set of programs and services that address aging-related needs in Tompkins County. COFA leads the Age Friendly Center for Excellence, launched in November 2019, in collaboration with several community organizations such as the Finger Lakes Independence Center, Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County, Ithaca College Gerontology Institute, Ithaca College, Cornell University among others.

COFA provides varied services including NY Connects long-term care information and referral, caregiver support programs, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly (EISEP), health insurance counseling, Personal Emergency Response Services (PERS), home delivered and congregate meals, in-home aide services, and transportation coordination with community partners. It also oversees the newly launched Age-Friendly Business Certification program.

2.5 Origins of the Age-Friendly Tompkins County Action Plan

Tompkins County's age-friendly journey began in 2015 when it joined the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities. This commitment led to the first Age-Friendly Action Plan in 2016, which was later updated in 2022. The updated plan specifically called for the development of an age-friendly business model, making the certification program a key step in building the county's broader age-friendly ecosystem.

The [2022 plan](#) advocates for a holistic framework that integrates land use, housing, transportation, health, and community engagement. It emphasizes cross-sector partnerships between government, nonprofits, academia, and businesses, addressing needs identified in a 2019 assessment—such as improving customer experience, physical accessibility, and communication for older adults. In response, the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Business Certification Program was launched to recognize businesses that are inclusive of people of all ages. Its core philosophy is that "age-friendly" benefits everyone, from families with children to older adults.



The program's initial development was led in the Spring of 2025 by Dr. Janet Loebach, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Centered Design, and several teams of Cornell students (Dean, 2025). These teams created a comprehensive Audit Tool for businesses and a specialized version for healthcare organizations. They also developed a marketing packet, program decals, and began directly enrolling local enterprises.

2.6 Where does Tompkins Stand? A Brief Comparison with Other Cities

A cross-country comparative review was conducted to understand the varied processes followed and identify better practices. Programs from Cleveland (OH), Boston (MA), Fort Worth (TX), Evanston (IL), Portland (ME), Colorado Springs (CO), Salem (MA), and San Mateo (CA) were analyzed against Tompkins County's emerging model.

Key findings include:

- **Tompkins County's** audit tool was the most comprehensive, with 68 questions across eight categories.
- Many other cities had **shorter, more visually streamlined** application forms.
- Several programs—such as those in Boston, Fort Worth, and Salem—**integrated dementia-friendly components**.
- **Partnership models** varied, with some cities (e.g., Cleveland and Colorado Springs) working closely with the Better Business Bureau (BBB).
- **Application fees** were generally absent, except in Cleveland.
- **Verification processes** often involved site visits or volunteer reviews.

(Refer to Appendix Table for detailed comparative data.)

2.7 The Tompkins County Self-Audit Tool

The age-friendly business certification promotes a holistic approach, spanning from physical design to the quality of social interactions and customer service. The certification process for a business begins with the business learning about the program, then conducting a self-assessment using the audit tool and submission via mail, email, or an [online portal](#). It requires a commitment to continuous improvement by the business. After submitting the completed audit, it undergoes an external evaluation by TCOFA and is finally awarded the certification. After being certified, businesses are given materials to promote the program and their status, which includes a window decal and a paper certificate. Promotional benefits include being featured as a certified business on the TCOFA website, providing a valuable opportunity for businesses to stand out and attract a wider clientele.

The audit tool breaks down age-friendliness into eight distinct categories:

- The physical environment
- Sound
- Customer service & preparedness
- Verbal communication
- Visibility
- Marketing design & web presence
- Gender
- Older Employees



Each category covers many aspects, totaling 68 items, that seek to promote a comprehensive age-friendly environment. To become certified, a business must meet a minimum of two checks in each category, ultimately satisfying 36.8% of the criteria, and get at least 25 checks cumulatively throughout the tool.

The categories provide a comprehensive framework, covering the physical environment for accessibility and safety, sound levels for comfort, and customer service preparedness that includes assistance for customers and training for staff. Furthermore, the audit evaluates verbal communication, the visibility and clarity of signage, and inclusive practices through a gendered lens. The tool encourages businesses to be age-friendly employers by considering the hiring and support of older employees. Additionally, there is a healthcare audit tool, which has a specific set of healthcare specific criteria that considers lighting and furniture in waiting rooms, age inclusive criteria in screening questionnaires, etc. in addition to the standard sections.

2.8 Current Phase

The program must prioritize a significant expansion of business participation to ensure its viability and impact. Although the official launch occurred in October 2025, only six businesses were certified during the preceding soft launch phase. This limited scale has, in the view of this report, diminished the certification's visibility and limited the network effects necessary for the 'age-friendly' designation to function as a meaningful signal for consumers. Establishing a broader and more diverse base of certified participants is fundamental to transforming the certification into a recognized and sought-after marker within the Tompkins County community.

A concerted public push is also required to address critical gaps identified during the initial rollout. These gaps include a persistent low awareness of the program among the broader business community, misperceptions that the certification process is unduly onerous, and a critical lack of formal engagement with pivotal business advocacy groups like the Downtown Ithaca Alliance and the Tompkins Chamber of Commerce. Consequently, this second phase must be structured as a deliberate shift from a temporary pilot project to a permanent county program. This necessitates a transition from its initial foundation of university-led support toward a sustainable operational model with a clear plan for longevity, ensuring it becomes a lasting fixture within Tompkins County.

The strategic focus for this phase must, therefore, move beyond the ad-hoc recruitment of individual businesses and toward the implementation of a multi-pronged strategy designed to foster organic growth. This includes the proactive cultivation of "Champion" organizations, such as public libraries, housing services, and chambers of commerce and service clubs (e.g. Rotary), whose community credibility and extensive networks can be leveraged to co-lead outreach and lend their endorsement. Simultaneously, this phase involves an enhanced awareness campaign, utilizing the TCOFA website for marketing and initiating targeted one-to-one meetings with business owners. The goal of these direct engagements is to compellingly articulate the program's tangible value proposition and systematically dismantle perceptions of its complexity. Furthermore, Phase 2 will prioritize the strategic diversification of the portfolio of certified businesses by deliberately targeting high-impact sectors that are essential for daily living but were previously under-represented, including grocery stores, pharmacies, banks, and essential public services such as transportation and libraries.



3. Project Objective

The aim of the project was to assist the Tompkins County Age-Friendly Business Certification Program to move into the next phase of growth and sustainability. The objectives focused on increasing enrolment, building new partnerships, and learning from experiences of other US cities. Finally, the project also examined options for long-term sustainability.

3.1 Increase Enrollment

The primary objective was to increase the number of certified businesses across Tompkins County. To move beyond the initial cohort of nine early adopters, this phase involved proactive and targeted outreach to over 70 enterprises in the County. The goal was to build a critical mass of certified locations, thereby enhancing the program's visibility and ensuring that the "age-friendly" designation becomes a meaningful and recognizable asset for both businesses and consumers throughout the community.



3.2 Build Partnerships with Champions

A core pillar was to identify, engage, and recruit key community organizations to act as program "Champions." They include the Finger Lakes Library System, the Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT), and the Downtown Ithaca Alliance, which possess extensive community networks. By leveraging their influence, the program can accelerate adoption, expand outreach, and embed age-friendly values deeper into the fabric of the local business ecosystem.



3.3 Planning for Sustainability

Looking beyond the immediate future, the team aimed to generate a concrete action plan for the program's long-term sustainability. This involves creating a roadmap that reduces dependence on Cornell University and outlines a clear path for continued management under TCOFA's stewardship.



4. Methodology

4.1 Context

We studied the recent history of the County's engagement with the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities. The TCOFA Action Plan, published in 2016 and revised in 2022, has been supported through collaborations with Cornell University and Ithaca College. In Spring 2025, a Cornell team developed the audit tool and enrolled the first cohort of six age-friendly businesses.

4.2 Project Initiation

We commenced in August 2025 as part of the Economic and Community Development Workshop on Age-Friendly Planning, under the guidance of Dr. Mildred Warner, Professor, Dept. of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University. Initially, we consulted with Dr. Janet Loebach, and her staff member Emma Chase, to understand their perspectives on the program, identify successes and gaps, and explore scope for improvement.

Multiple meetings were held with Lisa Monroe, Director, TCOFA and Caryn Bullis, Deputy Director, COFA during the course of the project. These interactions helped to clarify the course of action that was needed at that particular stage. Weekly discussions with Dr. Warner helped refine our approach, address emerging issues, and enhance efficiency throughout the semester.

4.3 Research & Stakeholder Mapping

We researched published literature on comparable Age-Friendly Business Certification programs in the United States. We examined program design, partnership models, and sustainability strategies. A recurring insight from the literature and program reviews was the necessity of planning for long-term sustainability rather than depending on short-term resources (such as Cornell student teams in the Tompkins Co case).

Following this, a stakeholder-mapping exercise was undertaken to identify potential partners in both the public and nonprofit sectors.



4.4 Two-Pronged Engagement Approach

Our outreach targeted two main categories:

1. **Small or Family-Owned For-Profit Businesses** – Larger retail chains were excluded to maintain a community-oriented focus.
2. **Nonprofit and Public Organizations** – Entities involved in community services like libraries, transportation, housing, community organizing, food pantries, and caregiving were identified as potential Champions. Beyond getting themselves certified, these organizations were expected to promote the program at community events, enhancing visibility and credibility among older adults in the county. The nonprofit engagement strategy was informed by models used in cities such as Boston, MA.

4.5 Identified Gaps

A major gap identified during the process was the limited collaboration with the Downtown Ithaca Alliance and the Tompkins Co. Chamber of Commerce—two key entities whose involvement could substantially enhance program visibility and reach. Additional gaps pertained to the absence of a defined strategy for sustaining outreach momentum to businesses and for systematically expanding the program’s reach and depth in the long term.

4.6 Outreach Methods

Outreach was mainly through email communication with organizations whose contact details were publicly available. In cases where email IDs were unavailable, direct cold calls were made by team members to initiate contact and schedule discussions.

Further, in December 2025, TCOFA hosted a Community Presentation session that provided an opportunity to present the study on age-friendly businesses in Tompkins County. The session was attended by representatives from several organizations who expressed interest in the initiative and offered constructive feedback. Participants shared their perspectives on what an age-friendly business means in practice, how the program functions, and the range of elements that should be included. While the work was generally well received, participants emphasized the need to extend the focus beyond the City of Ithaca to include rural businesses across the county. Another key suggestion was that the audit tool should move beyond a primary emphasis on physical accessibility and more explicitly address the content of services (like home modification services) and customer interaction practices. Overall, the discussions were productive and helped the team better understand community priorities and concerns.

5. Findings from Local Business Engagement

Outreach efforts revealed differing levels of engagement across sectors:

- Nonprofit and community organizations demonstrated the highest enthusiasm and responsiveness.
- For-profit businesses were comparatively hesitant, primarily due to limited awareness of the program's purpose. It is also probable that there was some level of uncertainty about potential legal implications.
- Nonprofit and community organizations demonstrated the highest enthusiasm and responsiveness.



Respondents fell into three categories:

1. Those who replied but did not follow up with meetings.
2. Those who granted meetings or sought more information but did not proceed to certification.
3. Those who completed the certification process.

6. Discussion: Business/Organization Interest

6.1 Finger Lakes Library System

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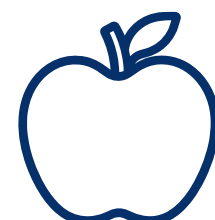
6.2 Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services

Lynn Truame, Director of Real Estate Development, INHS, promptly engaged with the team, reviewed the audit tool in depth, and completed certification. As an organization dedicated to housing for low income families and older adults, INHS is well positioned to support future efforts toward developing age-friendly housing design frameworks or guidelines. This collaboration could serve as a valuable model for integrating housing and aging policy in Tompkins County.



6.3 Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services

Jeff Bessemer, General Manager of GreenStar Food Co-op, expressed support for the age-friendly initiative. However, GreenStar’s multi-location structure revealed a limitation in the current audit tool: one application covered all locations. While this simplified administration, it raised questions about whether different sites with varying accessibility should be assessed separately. This experience suggests that enrolling multi-location businesses may require a coordinated, top-down approach. Securing commitment from leadership first could enable more efficient rollout across all sites. 13 However, as the program grows, it may be worth enabling single-brand businesses with multiple locations to pursue site-specific certification.



6.4 Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County



The meeting with Karen Yearwood, Chief Operating Officer of CCE Tompkins, aimed at exploring opportunities for medium- to long-term collaboration to strengthen outreach. Yearwood suggested that TCOFA could expand awareness by sharing program information through the Human Services Coalition (HSC) listserv, which reaches a broad network of nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies. It is an added advantage that TCOFA is already an active part of the HSC. CCE Tompkins was also open to displaying TCOFA's flyers or promotional materials in its spaces. Our team recommends that working with the CCE offers a valuable channel for increasing visibility and engagement with the program.

6.5 A Popular Cafe in Ithaca



Outreach to a well-known cafe and bakery in Ithaca illustrates the communication challenge with certain business types. When staff at the Collegetown location were contacted, the response was “We’re just a restaurant”. It reflected the assumption that age-friendliness did not apply to their fast-paced, student- focused environment. The manager echoed this view and referred the inquiry to the head office, which did not respond. This interaction highlights a key barrier previously noted by Li (2014). Businesses that do not see themselves as serving older adults often struggle to recognize the relevance or value of certification. For these businesses, the benefits are not immediately obvious. Therefore, outreach and messaging are especially important.

6.6 Other Businesses



Age-friendly businesses offer a wide range of services, making it difficult to fit every single one of them into a strict checklist requiring two checks in every category. For example, TCAT—the county’s transit service—meets the underlying intent of all categories, as a large number of older adults rely on it daily. Similarly, Yoga Farm Ithaca significantly serves the 65+ population through its yoga sessions. Yet they found the checklist inadequate and were concerned that they might not meet the “two checks per section” requirement. This prompts a level of hesitation in their first response. To address such situations, TCOFA could review the comments or explanations provided by these businesses and consider relaxing the two-checks-per-section criterion for certain niche organizations. This flexibility would apply only to those businesses that offer unique or substantial services to older adults, even if their operations do not neatly align with every section of the questionnaire.

7. Recommendations

The success and long-term sustainability of the Age-Friendly Business Certification Program depend on enhancing its visibility, strengthening partnerships, refining the certification process, and maintaining 14 active engagement locally. The team's recommendations are grouped under three broad categories: Program Visibility and Partnerships, Business Engagement, and Process and Audit Tool Refinement.

7.1 Program Visibility & Partnerships

Formal Program Launch

A publicized launch event will increase community awareness and highlight the County's leadership in promoting age-friendly values. The event could feature County leadership, the Director of TCOFA, and representatives from the first cohort of certified businesses. Media coverage, social media campaigns, and collaboration with local radio and news outlets could amplify outreach.



Engagement with Key Industry Bodies

Collaboration with the Downtown Ithaca Alliance and the Tompkins Chamber of Commerce should be prioritized. These organizations are well-positioned to promote the program among their members and co-host recognition events for participating businesses. Such partnerships would also encourage buy-in from the broader business community. Additionally, these key bodies, the Downtown Ithaca Alliance for instance, generally show interest in improving the inclusivity and accessibility of their businesses, making them enthusiastic collaborators or these initiatives.

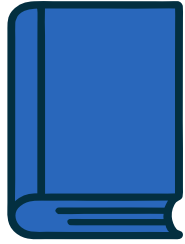


Recognition and Public Acknowledgment

TCOFA could establish a system for acknowledging businesses that complete certification. Recognition could include:

- Quarterly social media highlights on the County and TCOFA platforms.
- Press releases introducing each new certified business. ◦
- Annual recognition at community events or County Board meetings. Public acknowledgment serves not only as an incentive but also as a low-cost marketing benefit for participating organizations.





Strategic Community Partnerships

Partnerships with educational institutions (Cornell University, Ithaca College, Tompkins Cortland Community College) need to be continued. This will ensure that student teams can provide periodic technical assistance, data collection, and evaluation support. Similarly, collaboration with nonprofit champions (such as the Finger Lakes Library System, TCPL, and INHS) can expand outreach to residents, especially older adults and caregivers.



Expand Focus to Support Independent Living Services

Explore collaboration opportunities with service coordination providers like Senior Lifestyle Solutions of Ithaca to incorporate innovative business practices that facilitate older adults' ability to remain safely and comfortably in the community.



Integration with Broader Age-Friendly Initiatives (long-term)

The business certification program could be framed as one component of a broader county-wide Age-Friendly ecosystem, aligned with housing, transportation, and health programs. This can be a long-term objective, with a long runway.

7.2 Business Engagement Tools

Introduction of a Voluntary Pledge

A visually appealing “Age-Friendly Pledge” could be introduced, allowing businesses to publicly advertise their commitment to age inclusivity. The signed pledge can be printed and displayed at storefronts or embedded digitally on websites and social media profiles. While the certificate recognizes formal compliance, the pledge can serve as a daily reminder of values and a symbol of participation.



Program Champions and Peer Advocacy

Certified organizations, particularly those with strong community presence such as TCPL, FLLS, and INHS, should be invited to serve as program champions. Their testimonials and outreach especially through events they host, can incentivize participation among other businesses.



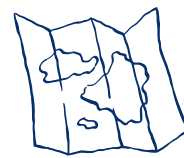
Outreach to the Demand Side (Older Adults)

The program's effectiveness will be strengthened only when older adults are aware of it and actively choose certified businesses. TCOFA and its partners should consider small-scale communication campaigns—through senior centers, newspapers, social media, and radio—to inform older residents about the Age-Friendly Business directory. As older adults begin to prefer certified establishments, the market incentive for businesses to participate will grow organically.



Creating an Online Directory and Map

A searchable online directory or map of age-friendly certified businesses should be added to the County's website. This not only aids business visibility but also helps older residents, caregivers, and visitors identify participating locations easily. Businesses could be listed by category (e.g., retail, services, community, dining).



Tiered Recognition Levels (long-term)

To encourage ongoing improvement, a tiered recognition structure could be introduced in the long-term. For example, Bronze (Certified), Silver (Enhanced Accessibility), and Gold (Exemplary Age-Friendly Leadership). This would motivate businesses to continually improve and remain engaged beyond the initial certification.



Voluntary Discounts and Customer Incentives

Drawing inspiration from Evanston, IL, participating businesses could be encouraged to offer discounts or special benefits for older adults. These can take the form of discounts on certain days, priority service hours, or small complimentary services. These gestures can enhance goodwill, foster stronger relationships with older customers, and demonstrate a business's commitment to age-friendliness. Importantly, the discount component should be voluntary and flexible, allowing varied businesses to participate without financial strain.



7.3 Process & Audit Tool Refinement

Streamlining the Audit Tool



Although the current self-audit tool is comprehensive, its length (68 questions) may be perceived as time-consuming. Merging related categories to compress the form into a two-page format can improve ease of use. Supplementary guidance can be provided by a separate brochure.

Expanding the Scope of the Tool



While the existing self-audit tool includes both physical and service domains, its current form leans heavily on evaluating physical design and accessibility. This focus can inadvertently overshadow the equally important service domain. For instance, insights from concierge and lifestyle coordination models can be used to redesign aspects of the age-friendly audit tool particularly in evaluating how businesses engage with older customers through service offerings (transportation, personal care, meal preparation, financial management, etc.).

Flexibility based on Business Type and Scale



Tailoring the audit tool to reflect different business types and operational models might enhance participation. For instance: ○

- Multi-location businesses (e.g., GreenStar) should be allowed site-specific certification
- Virtual or service-based organizations (e.g., radio stations or online providers) should be exempted from physical accessibility criteria.

Post-Certification Follow-Up



Post-Certification Follow-Up Introducing a non-cumbersome follow-up or self-initiated renewal process (once every two years at the outset) can help ensure sustainability and continued improvement. Businesses could be asked to submit a brief progress update online to maintain active certification.

Marketing and Communication Materials



Design improvements—such as including testimonials and images of certified businesses, FAQs, and success stories—can encourage more businesses to on-board themselves.

Sustainability & Staffing



TCOFA could explore developing an internship program with academic institutions to support outreach, process applications, and perform periodic evaluations. This is a medium-term goal.

8. Strengths of the Tompkins County Model and Lessons for Other Communities

The Tompkins County Age-Friendly Business Certification Program presents several distinctive strengths that make it both accessible and adaptable, offering valuable lessons for other communities seeking to advance similar initiatives.

8.1 A Low-Barrier, Non-Intrusive Model

One of the most commendable features of the Tompkins County approach is its non-intrusive and business-friendly design. The certification process avoids unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles that some cities seem to insist upon—there are no mandatory staff site visits, no volunteer evaluations conducted on premises, and no required one-time or recurring training sessions. Instead, TCOFA relies on a backend evaluation process that validates businesses' self-assessments efficiently. This minimizes disruptions to business operations and encourages participation from smaller, resource-constrained establishments.

8.2 No-Fee Participation Model

Tompkins County has maintained a no-fee model, removing financial barriers that might deter local businesses from participating. This approach allows small businesses and nonprofits to engage fully.

8.3 Academic Collaboration Instead of Commercial Partnerships

In contrast with other cities, such as Cleveland and Colorado Springs, that partnered with for-profit entities like the Better Business Bureau, TCOFA chose to collaborate with academic partners, viz., Cornell University and Ithaca College. This model brings evidence-based research and sustained technical support, while aligning the program with broader community and educational goals. It also ensures that the program remains mission-driven rather than commercially motivated.

8.4 Efficient and Accelerated Enrollment

Despite the program's soft launch and the absence of a visible public campaign, nine businesses have already been certified, with at least four more in the pipeline. While some of these are "low-hanging fruit," their quick engagement validates the effectiveness and appeal of the current model.

8.5 County-Wide Scope and Rural Inclusion

Unlike other similar initiatives, the Tompkins County program is structured at the county level and not at the city level. This inclusive framework expands participation beyond the city, to rural towns and villages. The County's approach could become a trailblazer, providing a replicable template for inclusive age-friendly policy implementation across other counties in the US.

8.6 Key Lessons for Other Communities

Other municipalities and counties can draw several lessons from the Tompkins County experience:

- Simplify certification processes to reduce administrative burden on businesses.
- Remove participation fees to ensure broad-based enrollment.
- Build partnerships with academic or nonprofit institutions.
- Prioritize county-wide or regional implementation to extend reach to rural populations.
- Leverage early success stories to build organic momentum before launching large-scale publicity campaigns.

Overall, the Tompkins County model demonstrates how an age-friendly business certification program can be both accessible, without imposing onerous requirements on local enterprises.



9. Program Ownership and Alternative Administrative Models

TCOFA's core responsibilities already span a wide range of essential services, including caregiver support, nutrition programs, and housing assistance. Moreover, TCOFA has not functioned as a business outreach agency, nor has it historically managed programs that require sustained marketing. Therefore, it could be overwhelmed by the long-term demands of the Age-Friendly Business Certification Program.

During the pilot phase and early implementation phases this year, most of the operations were carried out by Cornell University student teams. They developed the audit tool, built initial marketing materials, and directly engaged with local businesses. That is, COFA has so far relied on temporary human resources. However, to sustainably execute major responsibilities - outreach, follow-up with uncertified businesses, periodic re-evaluations, maintaining the online directory, managing partnerships, and overseeing public communications - COFA might need additional staff and institutional support.

Therefore, it is reasonable to explore whether the Age-Friendly Business Certification program needs to be housed under another agency. However, it is equally important that the program remains aligned with TCOFA's mission. So, a full-scale decoupling may not be advisable. The team is of the opinion that, at this stage, there is no single agency that perfectly fits the role of a long-term steward of the Age-Friendly Business Certification Program. Though there are several probable candidates, limitations hamper such possibilities. This report analyzes each of these.

Firstly, the City of Ithaca's Department of Economic Development aligns logically with the goals of the program. However, its jurisdiction is limited to the City of Ithaca. This geographic mismatch makes it a partial—not comprehensive—solution.

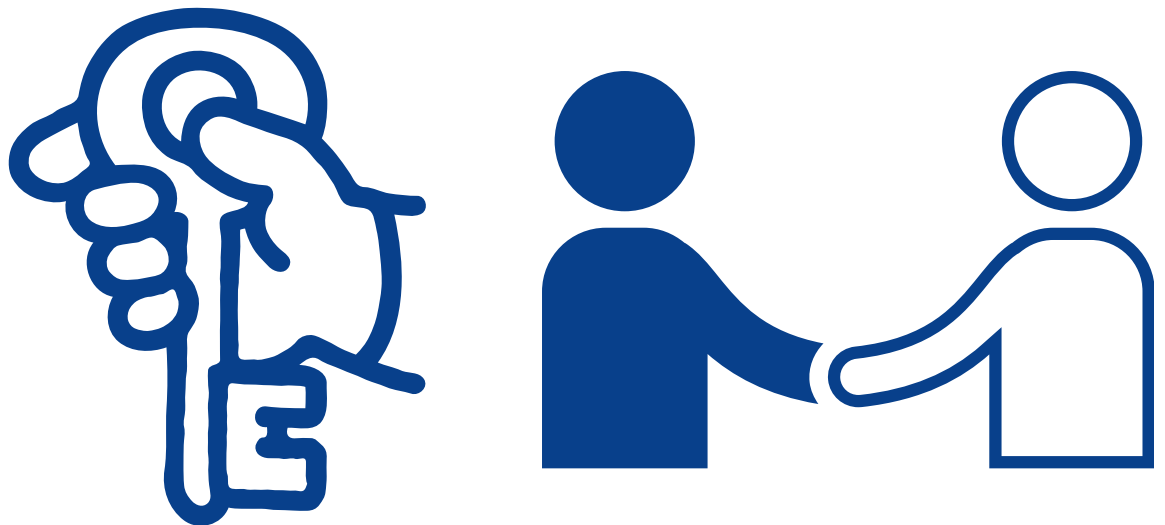
The Downtown Ithaca Alliance falls under a similar category, that is limited by its geographic boundary. It could be an important partner, particularly for outreach and implementation in downtown Ithaca, but it is not positioned to lead a countywide initiative.

Ithaca Area Economic Development (IAED) also appears to be a strong institutional candidate. It engages with economic growth, investment, and business climate issues at the county scale. Yet, IAED primarily supports industrial development. It does not typically work with small businesses, nonprofit organizations, or public-facing service providers. However, the latter are central to age-friendly certification. As a result, the alignment is not functional.

The Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce is the most natural long-term home for the program because it understands both consumer and business needs. The County could create a meaningful public-private partnership with the Chamber to this end. However, this will require strong relationship-building, shared vision development, and commitment at the highest level, before any formal transition is possible.

In short, for now, TCOFA remains the most appropriate steward. As the program matures, a phased transition to another agency—likely the Chamber or a new hybrid structure—could ensure broader reach, stronger business engagement, and long-term sustainability. In this model COFA could retain program standards, evaluation, and policy oversight, while the partner organization takes on business engagement, recognition, and promotion.

A shift toward such a governance model is also consistent with recognized best practices. The AARP aging-policy framework and New York State’s “Health Across All Policies” emphasize that aging issues call for multi-sector, cross-agency stewardship. This broader governance philosophy reinforces the idea that the Age-Friendly Business Program should not rest solely on TCOFA’s shoulders.



10. Conclusion

The Tompkins County Age-Friendly Business Certification Program represents a timely response to the County's changing demographics. The program's low-barrier, no-fee design, county-wide scope, and strong collaboration with academic partners have enabled an effective pilot phase and early enrollment success. Findings from business outreach and community engagement indicate clear interest in the initiative, particularly among nonprofit and public-facing organizations, while also highlighting gaps in awareness and shortfall in outreach. Overall, the program has established a solid foundation as part of the broader Age-Friendly Tompkins County Action Plan, but much more needs to be done.

Looking ahead, the program's impact will depend on stronger partnerships and operational refinement. Priority next steps include increasing visibility, deepening engagement with business associations and service coordination organizations, refining the audit tool to better capture service quality alongside physical accessibility, and planning for long-term administrative sustainability. With these actions, the Age-Friendly Business Certification Program can move beyond its pilot phase to become a durable initiative that supports older adults, strengthens community well-being, and offers a replicable model for other counties.



Appendix

City	Year of joining the Global Network of Age Friendly Cities	Year of Age-friendly business certification program launch	Partner organization? (Y/N)	If yes, then details	Mode of application	Application fee	No. of items in the audit tool checklist?	What is the vetting process?	Any pre-onboarding training required?	No. of enrolled businesses	Remarks	Sources
Tompkins County, NY State	Not part of the GNAFC. Member of AARP Age Friendly Communities Network since 2014	2025	No	NA	Apply online/ mail	No fee	68 questions spread across 8 categories	TCOFA will conduct an external evaluation to validate the self assessment results, ensuring compliance with age-friendly business standards.	No	9 as on 11/01/2025 (this number is bound to increase in the short term, as the process of enrolling more businesses is underway)	Informative and detailed audit tool booklet Most number of questions in self audit among all cities	https://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/All-Departments/Aging/Age-Friendly-Center-for-Excellence/Age-Friendly-Businesses
Cleveland, Ohio	2014	2019	Yes	With the Better Business Bureau (BBB), a non-profit organization that helps consumers find trustworthy businesses	Apply with BBB	\$75 annual certification fee (recurring annually)	21 questions under 4 categories	Businesses are vetted by BBB Greater Cleveland staff and AARP volunteers	Site evaluation by AARP volunteers, followed by training by staff from the Cleveland Department of Aging	Only 2 businesses are listed in the BBB's online directory	Only businesses that have a BBB grade rating of B or higher can apply	Better Business Bureau and City of Cleveland Launch New Age-Friendly Certification for Local Businesses BBB Cleveland's Age Friendly Business Certification Age-Friendly Business Examples

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Boston, MA	2014	2014	No	NA	Apply online/ mail/in person	No fee	32 questions	The application can be completed only through a volunteer business ambassador	Need to complete a training on communicating with older adults and adults with dementia	100 businesses have enrolled so far, of which 23 are libraries, 9 restaurants and 8 banks	Combines Age-Friendly & Dementia-Friendly into one application Businesses must check off any combination of seven no/low- and higher-cost items. Three must also be dementia friendly. A lower threshold, relative to other cities. Application form is aesthetically designed and packed into 3 pages	Age-friendly businesses in Boston https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1my2GJKLg062Jud1bJfnb8DmUY0ulBi5UOxhXAVnCo8/edit?gid=842561460#gid=842561460
Fort Worth, Texas	2014	2018	No	NA	Apply online or by mail	No fee	29 questions	By the City staff	Incorporated a Business Pledge that commits them to continue to make age-related improvements	28 business on-board. The list is dominated by healthcare, nonprofits and community services (libraries, community centers, police departments)	Combines Age-Friendly & Dementia-Friendly into one application Lists the benefits of obtaining Age-Friendly and Dementia-Friendly Business designations for various stakeholders in an attractive flyer	2019 YEAR-END PROGRESS REPORT https://www.fortworthtexas.gov/files/assets/public/v/4/government/documents/aarp/factsheet2023.pdf https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/e/2PACX-1vTXzBeMQL74g2fdvg2oMhad5cYg4lgGtwPBvM3fiEYAB0kLaYp9QBSu_1ZW_8xjQBcJmTaGIRzZ5sf9/pubhtml?gid=1629072714&single=true

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City of Evanston, IL	2014	NA	No	NA	Apply online	No fee	22 questions across 3 categories	The business is reviewed by secret shoppers and/or administrative staffers	A representative of the Age-Friendly Evanston Task Force schedules a free collaborative consultation	15 businesses on-board	Age-friendly designated businesses offer some kind of discount or special benefit to older adults Offers businesses resources for organizations serving older adults and individuals with disabilities, as well as free in-service opportunities for their staff	Age-Friendly Business Initiative City of Evanston https://cityofevanston.wufoo.com/forms/z52yp5n1i7629a/
Portland, Maine	2014	2017	No	NA	Online form	No fee	42 items - all on one page Need to meet a different minimum threshold under each category. Overall, need a minimum 18 ticks	The business will be contacted by a representative of the Age Friendly Portland Steering Committee. They schedule a visit to the business to see some of the Age Friendly qualities in action. A panel then reviews the application and information gathered at the visit, before approval	None	23 businesses on-board	-	Age-Friendly Portland, Maine Age Friendly Businesses in Portland Age Friendly Portland Business & Organization Application

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Colorado Springs, CO	2016	2016	Yes	With the Better Business Bureau (BBB), in alliance with Innovations in Aging Collaborative.	Through BBB	Information not available online	The BBB has 5 broad criteria on their website - Accreditation, Physical Environment, Staff and Personnel, Marketing, Customer Experience. The entire checklist is not visible.	Information not available online	Not available online	100 businesses on-board (as of 2018)	-	Print - Colorado - Colorado Springs Seniors Blue Book Age Friendly Pikes Peak Action Plan.pdf City of Colorado Springs Age Friendly Colorado Springs Midway Progress Report BBB serving Southern Colorado: Age-friendly business criteria
Salem, MA	2015	2016	No	NA	Apply online	No fee	<p>33 questions under two categories</p> <p>In order to receive an Age-Friendly Business designation, the business must meet at least seven of the criteria. No more than four of those may be in the "basic level" category.</p>	<p>Staff from the Salem for All Ages Task Force will meet with the business and go through the checklist on the site</p>	Proprietor / employee must participate in a 45-minute training on working with older adults customers. These trainings take place twice per year at City Hall	4 businesses on-board	-	Age-Friendly Business https://salemforallages.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Age-Friendly-Business-application-form.pdf https://salemforallages.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Age-Friendly-Business-checklist.pdf

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San Mateo, CA	Yet to join the GNAFC. Member of AARP Age Friendly Communities Network	2020	No	NA	Complete the application online and send it by mail or email	No fee	34 items Need to meet a different minimum threshold under each category	A trained Age-Friendly Coalition volunteer will visit the businesses to verify that it has met all the conditions in the application	None	20 businesses on-board	If the business does not have a fixed location where it serves clients or customers, 'Exterior and Interior Categories' and their respective criteria do not apply and are not considered for certification.	Age-Friendly Business Certification San Mateo, CA - Official Website https://www.cityofsanmateo.org/DocumentCenter/View/95777/Age-Friendly-Certification-Bifold-Brochure?bidId=

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