

**Vital Aging Network, September 2002 Meeting Summary**  
**10 a.m. to noon, Tuesday, Sept 10, Olson Center Board Room, Luther Seminary**

**Present**

Carrie Bassett, Karen Bowen, Amy Carlson, Thor Carlson, Leland Coxe, Carol Daly, Cathy Fah, Meridel Fahsl, Renee Fredericksen, Martha Gisselquist, Tom Gossett, Dick Graham, Chuck Gribble, Susan Hamerski, LaRhae Knatterud, Barbara LaPorte, Brian McCaffrey, Lindsey McDivitt, Dee Meyer, Sue Meyers, Kris Orluck, Sara Prosen, Janet Ramsey, Barbara Satin, Audrey Saxton, Caryl Sharp, Gretchen Scheffel, Connie Thompson, David Thompson, Will Thorp, Mary Claire Wahlberg, Lenore Weir, John Yoakam, Jan Hively (convenor and recorder)

**Introductions**

Those present introduced themselves. Because of a mixup about meeting rooms, VAN members and signs had created a trail across campus from the room referred to in the agenda to the room where the meeting was held. The final destination was the Seminary's beautiful Board Room on the second floor of Olson Center where the cafeteria is located. The same room will be used for the October 8 meeting, which will involve small group discussion on the topic of "Wisdom," led by Carrie Bassett, director of the Wisdom Institute.

**Age Friendly Communities**

Tom Gossett, Community Outreach Coordinator for the Elderberry Institute, led the discussion about "What makes an 'elder friendly' or 'age friendly' community?" "What kinds of communities support vital aging?" "What can we do to make our communities more age friendly?"

Jan Hively, the meeting convenor, gave an overview of the topic. Until now, public policies related to aging have focused on services for the frail elderly. Public funding has come from the federal and state governments for services provided through the regional agencies on aging, counties, and non-profit service organizations. Now, we need an infrastructure where people live to support the self-sufficiency, community participation, and quality of life of older adults. That means going to cities and neighborhoods and citizen advocates as well as to counties and service providers.

There have been efforts in a number of places to plan for age friendly communities:

- Alberta, Canada, has a Senior Friendly Program, with resources and ideas at <http://acaging.interbaun.com/seniorfriendly.htm>
- Florida's former Commissioner on Aging, Geena Hernandez, worked with city councils and planning departments throughout the state to take account of all of the details relevant to "communities for life" -- also called, "life cycle communities"
- Seattle provides certificates to "Elder Friendly" businesses
- In Mid-Minnesota, the Elder Advocacy Network and Meeker County SAIL developed checklists for senior ready communities.

One of the VAN meeting participants, Sara Prosen, worked with Maureen Melgaard Schneider, director of Meeker County SAIL, and Betty Undes, from the St. Paul Red Cross, and groups of seniors around the state, to develop the checklist called, "Is Our Community Senior Ready?" that is now copyrighted by the MN Board on Aging. The checklist is designed as a tool to assess whether a community has the basics to help seniors remain in their communities. On a 1 to 5 scale from poor to excellent, people can rank items for: Navigating the Community, Transportation, Housing for Seniors, Services for Seniors, and Support Families Who are Caregivers. Now, the Board on Aging is encouraging communities to fill out the checklist and qualify for certification as a "Minnesota Living Well Community." Tom handed out copies of both the checklist and the application for certification. Both can be found on the <[www.elderberry.org](http://www.elderberry.org)> Web site.

Tom Gossett described the general characteristics of Elder Friendly Communities, which match up with the values of the Vital Aging Network. They see seniors as assets rather than liabilities, and support their vital, continued involvement in the community. They don't decide for elders but encourage their self-determination. Tom handed out material from a power point presentation that listed some of the "Elder Friendly Community Characteristics" that have been mentioned by seniors:

- Opportunities for vital involvement
- Seniors are welcome/respected
- Places to eat and socialize
- Health care facilities/services
- Active churches/faith communities (and other communities for those who are not involved with churches)
- Housing -- appropriate and affordable
- Access to needed services and supports
- Places, programs and groups to volunteer
- Opportunity for lifelong learning
- Friends of all ages
- Transportation
- Grocery store
- Places to sit down
- Accessibility
- Places to exercise
- Respite services
- Chore services
- Respect for history
- Just plain friendly
- "Can do" community attitude
- Plenty of elders
- Businesses that value elders
- Maintenance and repair services
- Residential stability
- Visible local leadership
- Aware and active citizenry

Tom asked the VAN meeting participants to contribute other characteristics for the list. They suggested:

- Public utilities that see seniors as resources
- Places to work (including hiring seniors to help seniors -- a lot of seniors need more income)
- Places to share talents and gifts and to become replenished -- through the arts (these are more plentiful in the city)
- Recreation that appeals to older adults
- Changes in suburbs where there are a lot of things missing, leading to isolation
- Transportation to social and elective appointments, not just to medical appointments
- Churches that walk the talk. Now, most churches contribute at the macro level but don't change their procedures on the micro level. As Tom said, "Your walk talks louder than than your talk talks."
- Education that encourages age sensitivity for all community institutions -- police, schools, shops, etc.
- Timing of activities so that seniors can attend such as daytime seminars
- Accommodating night-time driving with the color of the stripes at the side of the road, brightness of lights, etc.
- Safe places to walk and places to walk to and through
- Sidewalks that are cleared\*\*\*
- Computer/Internet access and education to bridge the digital divide
- Neighborhoods that really are communities -- bridging the neighborhood/community divide
- Process for inquiring what people really need, specifically, rather than making judgements based on age categories. There are several generations of "old", and people whose characteristics vary across the map
- Places to be outdoors -- with benches. Access should be seen as seamless and not generational. The same bench is needed by pregnant women and disabled people as well as seniors
- Access that covers opening packages and using remotes. Industrial designs make life difficult.

The mindset of a program should be that we are working with and services are being planned and provided by seniors -- not that we are providing services to and for seniors. The Living at Home/Block Nurse Programs (LAH/BNP) that Elderberry Institute organizes in and with communities are directed by boards of residents, with activities based on local needs and requests. There are 37 programs around the state. LAH/BNP programs started in St. Paul and Minneapolis neighborhoods and are prospering in rural areas around the state. They are getting started in first ring suburbs. But second and third ring suburbs are still focused on young families and youth -- and it's there that seniors may feel most isolated. LAH/BNP programs organize neighbor to neighbor assistance, build a sense of community, promote intergenerational interaction, and provide outreach to isolated elders as they focus and mobilize community commitment to elders. Tom and the Elderberry director, Malcolm Mitchell, and the others affiliated with

the institute want to work closely with the state and area agencies in encouraging senior friendly communities. The Elderberry Institute has published a handbook called, "Forming a Community-based Network" of support to keep people living in their own homes. Tom handed out copies of the handbook and Jan will bring leftovers to the next VAN meeting, or people can print out the handbook from the institute's Web site: [www.elderberry.org](http://www.elderberry.org).

Further discussion:

..I prefer the title "Communities for Life" or "Life Cycle Communities" because we should be talking about an intergenerational mix that appreciates and supports all of the community residents.

..It is frustrating to hear elected officials scold the seniors who came to lobby, with good reasons, against a proposed action. The assumption was that seniors look out only for themselves, that there is an entitlement mentality.

..Unfortunately, that is true of too many who say, "I've put in my time. Don't expect anything more from me." VAN and other groups need to emphasize the Give rather than the Take. Unfortunately, this society is geared to entitlements.

..I don't buy into the big emphasis on productivity, however. Don't elevate employment as an ideal of vital aging.

..But many older adults need money and should be supported in their efforts to obtain employment.

LaRhae Knatterud, planning director for the MN Board on Aging, lead author of Project 2030 and the Long Term Care Facilities Report, commented that the theme for the 2003 Age Odyssey conference (held August 2003) will be "Developing Age Friendly Communities." A Planning Group is being formed. VAN will be involved with the planning and implementation of this effort.

**October 8 Meeting -- Board Room, Olson Center, Luther Seminary --  
"How can we encourage, acknowledge, and share the wisdom of older adults? with  
Carrie Bassett, director of the Wisdom Institute**

Carol Daly suggested that people attending the meeting bring quotes with them to reflect wisdom that is meaningful to them.

### **VAN Question of the Month**

The Question of the Month is on the VAN Web site home page, <[www.van.umn.edu](http://www.van.umn.edu)>. Do you have any ideas for questions?

- "What piece of wisdom do you think is especially meaningful?"
- "What is the resource that everyone else should know about?"
- "What are key characteristics of communities that support Vital Aging?"

It might be a good idea to have the question of the month related to the meeting topic of the month.

