

# Creating Communities for Healthy Aging: The Local Public Health Role

## Protecting and Promoting Health

Minnesota's city and county public health departments are responsible for protecting and promoting the health of *all* residents. The issues of aging are not new for public health. With rapidly increasing numbers of seniors, many local public health departments are facing more challenges in meeting their needs.



The local public health approach to supporting healthy communities for seniors has three key elements:

- Preventing problems before they occur, and preventing existing conditions from getting worse;
- Connecting seniors to a wide array of services that are available in their communities; and
- Partnering with the community to address service gaps, leverage additional resources and create an environment that supports healthy aging.

## Focus on Prevention

Local health departments help prevent health problems. Prevention occurs at several levels:

- Health education and wellness clinics provide people with the information they need to make healthy choices and keep chronic diseases, like diabetes, at bay.

- Screenings, such as for elevated blood pressure or blood sugar levels, help to identify problems early and prevent complications or more serious illness.
- Services - such as providing injections, monitoring medications, and changing dressings for those with chronic illnesses - help keep seniors independent.

## Linking Seniors to Available Services

A healthy life is not just about individuals making healthy choices. Social, economic and physical environments play significant roles in supporting good health.

Local public health departments address individual needs in a community context. They work to ensure that services are available in the community; they link seniors to services they need.



Community services that can have a positive influence on health include:

- Transportation to medical appointments, grocery shopping and community events;
- Chore services to help seniors stay in their homes;

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- Affordable housing in safe neighborhoods;
- Exercise classes and indoor walking clubs; and
- Respite care and support groups.

### Building Community Partnerships

Bringing people together to increase understanding, generate ideas and leverage community resources is fundamental to public health. Collaboration is critical in extending limited resources, encouraging community ownership of a health problem and its solutions, and building a broad base of support.

Local public health departments find many ways to help the community understand how everyone can have a positive influence on health: for seniors, for themselves, for their families and for their futures.



One of the tools supporting partnerships is the creation of local public health goals. The goals guide the selection of strategies and help to highlight the roles that everyone can play in health.

Local public health departments also draw attention to the issues of health for seniors by convening and participating on a wide variety of committees, task forces and advisory groups. Many community issues have a public health component and have the potential to affect seniors: for example, community development that includes decisions about where grocery stores are to be located.

Local public health departments are essential to improving and protecting the health of seniors across Minnesota. They offer health services to seniors through wellness clinics, link seniors to area home care and other services, and work with community partners, like the local Area Agencies on Aging, and other community partners.

They are on the frontlines of change as the state adjusts to increasing numbers of seniors who will require community-based services.

### Community-based Examples

Many Minnesota cities and counties are finding innovative ways to support seniors in their communities. For example:

- Sherburne County offers frequent clinics at senior housing units. In addition to conducting screenings, they refer people to medical or other services as needed.
- The Chisago County public health nurse service created “Planning and Preparing to Stay Home,” a menu of options that introduce home and community-based services to people before their needs become critical.
- The “Quality of Life for Seniors” group in Winona is made up of providers and citizens working to close service gaps in areas like affordable housing, respite care, transportation, public education and more.
- Carlton County formed an “Elder Collaborative” with other community members and the Fond du Lac Reservation to address seniors’ needs and services.