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FOCUS AREA 1

Creating Livable and Connected Communities

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Age-friendly environments enable people to stay active, connected, and able to contribute to the economic, social, and cultural life of their communities. Where we live has a great deal to do with how well we age. High-quality and affordable housing, accessible transportation, welcoming public settings, activities where we can connect with others of all ages, and an equitable technological infrastructure linking all of us to information and resources – are all pillars of these kinds of life-affirming communities. Together, they represent a set of necessary, integrated benefits not only for older people but also for people of all ages and abilities.

Of course, one size does not fit all, and there are significant disparities among Illinois counties, cities, townships, villages, and communities. Life expectancy varies widely, more to do with our ZIP code than our genetic code. As *Illinois Aging Together* reported, there are 21 Illinois counties where life expectancy in some communities is less than 70 years while in other counties, often just miles away, life expectancy exceeds 90. Supportive, inclusive, and equitable community development can begin to redress these complex, multifaceted challenges.

Strategies

For a full description of these strategies, associated actions, outcomes, and metrics, please see Appendix A.1.

- Enable aging in place across all community contexts by integrating local and statewide efforts to ensure Illinois communities are physically, socially, and institutionally age- and dementia-friendly.

- Work to ensure older adults can age safely and comfortably in their communities through a coordinated approach that expands affordable and accessible (including wheelchair accessible) housing (including independent, temporary, and supportive), integrates services, and builds local capacity for age-friendly planning and design.

- Seek to expand equitable rural, suburban, urban, and regional transit access for older adults and individuals with disabilities; establish a State Interagency Transportation Coordination Commission; and enhance and sustain a skilled, inclusive public transportation workforce to improve mobility and service equity for people of all ages.

- Educate older adults, people with disabilities, care partners, and providers on the benefits of social engagement and increase their awareness of and access to social connection opportunities (in person and virtual), particularly in underserved communities.

- Close the digital divide, expand access to broadband for older adults and people with disabilities, and increase digital literacy.

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FOCUS AREA 1

Illinois scores 52 out of 100 on the AARP Livability Index™ and has significant disparities in housing, transportation, social connection, and technology access, particularly for older adults and people with disabilities.

What We'll Measure

- AARP Livability Index Score for Illinois
- Percentage of older adults experiencing housing cost burden and homelessness
- Percentage of older adults who report a lack of reliable transportation
- Percentage of older adults who report feeling lonely
- Percentage of older adults living in households with broadband internet

Illinois by the Numbers
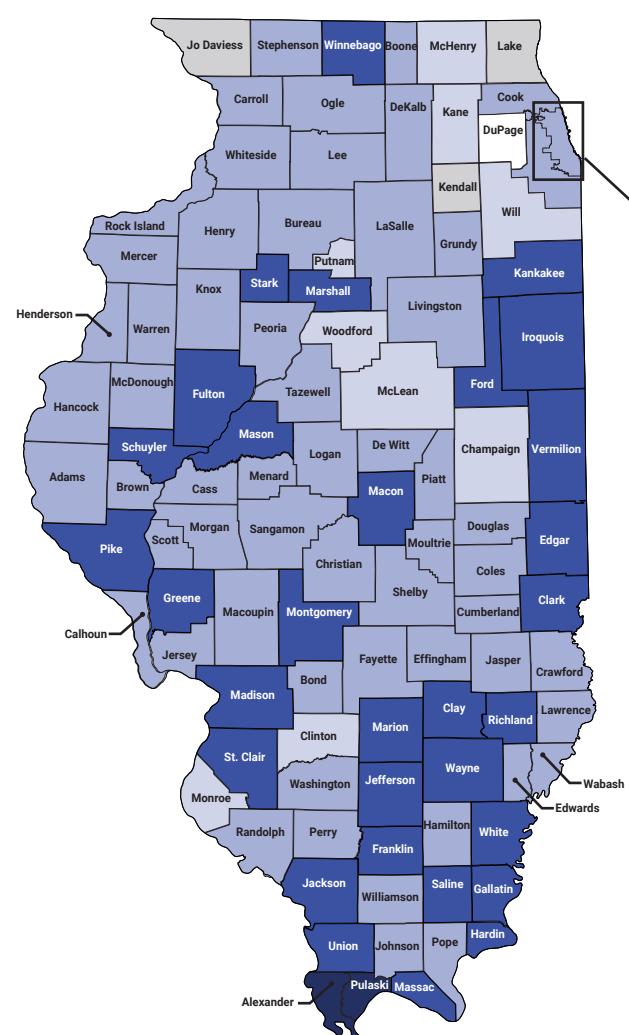
Life Expectancy by County (2025) and by Community Area in Chicago (2023)

Chicago
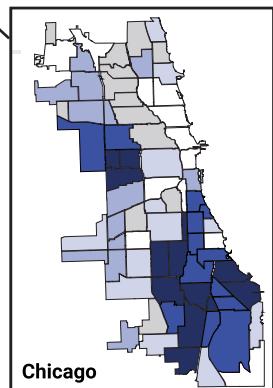
Life Expectancy in Years

- 81.6 - 87.3
- 80.4 - 81.6
- 78.7 - 80.4
- 75.5 - 78.7
- 71.7 - 75.5
- 66.6 - 71.7

Appendix A.1

Focus Area: Creating Livable and Connected Communities

Where Illinois Stands

The AARP Livability Index™ rates the livability of communities based on the services and amenities available to residents. Scores range from 1 to 100, with 100 representing the highest levels of livability. The livability score for Illinois is 52, which is among the top half of states in the U.S. and comparable to neighboring midwestern states like Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The livability scores for Chicago and Springfield are 54 and 60, respectively.

Regarding housing, more than one-third of older adults experience housing cost burden (i.e., spend more than 30% of their monthly income on housing costs). Transportation challenges exist particularly in rural areas with respect to crossing geographic boundaries. Further, nearly 18% of Black homeowners with a mortgage spend more than 50% of their income on housing compared to 9% of White homeowners and 12% of Latine homeowners. In 2024, Illinois had more homeless households than Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin combined (this is true when looking at all ages), and more than twice as many homeless older adults than Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, or Wisconsin.

Creating connected communities requires access to reliable transportation and broadband infrastructure to support online engagement. Transportation challenges exist particularly in rural areas with respect to crossing geographic boundaries. Further, more than 110,000 Latine older adults (20%) report having difficulties accessing reliable transportation for appointments, meetings, and getting to places. Access to reliable transportation is an issue that came up repeatedly in our focus groups and engagement sessions and is a point of focus of the MPA, including ensuring that the work of the Blue-Ribbon Commission on Transportation Infrastructure addresses the unique transportation needs of older adults.

Recent estimates from the U.S. Census suggest that approximately one-third of Illinois' older adults live alone. A similar percentage reports feeling lonely. The prevalence of loneliness is highest among older Asian/Asian Americans (50.1%), individuals with household incomes less than $25,000 (53.9%), and individuals with less than a high school education (51.6%).

In today's digital age, online social engagement has become an important means of addressing loneliness and social isolation. The internet is also an important tool for sharing health information and accessing care (e.g., through telehealth). Most households in Illinois with at least one older adult have broadband internet (80%) at rates comparable to other Midwestern states. However, only 68% of older adults with household incomes less than $25,000 have broadband internet compared to 86% of older adults with household incomes of $100,000 or more.

What We'll Measure

- AARP Livability Index Score for Illinois
- Percentage of older adults experiencing housing cost burden and homelessness

- Percentage of older adults who report a lack of reliable transportation
- Percentage of older adults who report feeling lonely
- Percentage of older adults living in households with broadband internet

Strategy 1: Aging in Community

Enable aging in place across all community contexts by integrating local and statewide efforts to ensure Illinois communities are physically, socially, and institutionally age- and dementia-friendly.

Actions

- Embed an aging focus into the state's ongoing efforts to promote equity and inclusion in all aspects of life ensuring accumulated disparities that compound over a lifetime are acknowledged and addressed. **(Short-term)**

- Conduct statewide baseline assessment (e.g., AARP's Livability Index) of Illinois communities across key dimensions such as housing, neighborhood, transportation, environment, health, engagement, and opportunity, including data points for geography (urban/suburban/rural) and demographic groups, attending to inequities across groups (race, LGBTQIA+, disability) to promote investment in built environment and public infrastructure improvements for aging in place. **(Short-term)**

- Promote local government participation in grant programs such as DCEO's Rebuild Downtowns & Main Streets, which helps fund the modernization of public infrastructure, and align and coordinate funding across state agencies to support equitable community development including exploring a coordinated funding application that combines housing, transportation, and other age-friendly infrastructure into combined community grants. **(Short-term)**

- Facilitate greater access to assistive and/or smart technology and services for Illinoisans of all ages with disabilities and health conditions, especially Deaf, Blind, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing and Late-Deafened (DDBHHLD) individuals, individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, or those who speak languages other than English. **(Short-term)**

- Support investment in technologies that can bridge communication barriers, such as Instant Language Assistant (ILA) Pros for state agencies, local agencies, and nonprofits to facilitate a standardized communication needs assessment and improved care planning. **(Mid-term)**

- Explore statewide infrastructure improvement opportunities focused on age-friendly, climate-resilient design of public spaces: for example, sidewalk accessibility, curb cuts, adequate lighting and seating in parks, green infrastructure for stormwater management and cooling, accessible bathrooms, and water fountains. Prioritize investment in communities scoring low on the baseline assessment in coordination with disability- and public health-focused agencies and advocates. **(Mid-term)**

- Work to ensure that individuals who are under guardianship, but receive multiple services or resources from public agencies, receive the support needed as they age. **(Mid-term)**

- Support Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) development to strengthen community hubs as centers for connection and services. Identify and support NORCs by layering services, infrastructure improvements, and community programming into existing neighborhoods. Promote the expansion and modernization of senior centers, libraries, parks, and community facilities, with particular attention to communities lacking services and infrastructure. **(Long-term)**

- Support individuals who are aging in prison by 1) collaboratively informing development of residential units that are specific to individuals with dementia or in need of palliative care and long-term care and other aging-related high needs, and by 2) training security and nonmedical staff on how to work with individuals with dementia. **(Long-term)**

- Establish Illinois as an Age-Friendly state by creating a statewide age-friendly designation and providing implementation support, including guidance on equity and inclusion, toolkits and design guides for accessible public spaces (including sidewalks, parks, benches with backs, sensory-friendly spaces), community audit checklists, and case studies to increase the number of local cities, townships, communities, health systems, and universities to become livable, age-friendly, and/or dementia friendly. **(Long-term)**

Strategy 2: Housing Stability and Security

Seek to ensure older adults can age safely and comfortably in their communities through a coordinated approach that expands affordable and accessible (including wheelchair accessible) housing (including independent, temporary, and supportive), integrates services, and builds local capacity for age-friendly planning and design.

Actions

- Survey state agencies on their program investments for housing and housing services for older adults, across demographic groupings, the income spectrum, and geographic zones (urban/suburban/rural) to develop an inventory of state and local housing programs, policies, and investments affecting older adults to identify gaps, inequities across groups (race/LGBTQIA+/disability/justice-involvement), and regional priorities. **(Short-term)**

- Build upon ILHousingSearch.org to include housing resources for older adults that provides choice, affordability, and community. Promote expansion of inclusive housing options – including affordable, accessible, and intergenerational developments – across all regions and with particular attention to addressing systemic inequities in housing. **(Short-term)**

- Leverage participation in the Housing Task Force (mandated by the Comprehensive Housing Planning Act), to advocate for prioritization of and focus on affordable housing that is targeted to the unique needs of older residents and addresses systemic inequity in home ownership. **(Short-term)**

- Leverage membership on the Interagency Task Force on Homelessness and coordinate with the Illinois Office to Prevent and End Homelessness to prioritize strategies that address the rising number of unhoused older adults. **(Short-term)**

- Initiate collaboration with the Illinois Municipal League to create toolkits for units of local government and private developers while exploring creative opportunities to incentivize affordable and accessible housing developments (e.g., zoning reform, low-interest loans, tax credits, streamlined approvals, and seed funding for innovative developments). **(Short-term)**

- Engage and partner with units of local government, private developers, and mission-driven organizations to pilot new housing models and expand affordable and accessible housing, prioritizing middle housing models (e.g., duplexes, fourplexes, cottage clusters, intergenerational) that are affordable, naturally age-friendly, and accessible. **(Mid-term)**

- Promote investment to expand home modification programs (such as installation of grab bars, stair lifts, walk-in showers, and ramp installations), assistive technology, and remote supports (e.g., through deferred loans) to support aging in place, reduce fall risk, and increase independence within the home environment. **(Mid-term)**

Strategy 3: Transportation that Meets the Needs of Individuals in their Communities

Seek to expand equitable rural, suburban, urban, and regional transit access for older adults and individuals with disabilities; establish a State Interagency Transportation Coordination Commission; and enhance and sustain a skilled, inclusive public transportation workforce to improve mobility and service equity for people of all ages.

Actions

- Ensure the work of the Blue-Ribbon Commission on Transportation Infrastructure encompasses the unique transportation needs of older adults and utilize the final report (scheduled to be released to the Illinois General Assembly in January 2026) as a resource for shaping transportation and workforce needs to ensure that mobility and access are addressed for the state's aging population. **(Short-term)**

- Identify service gaps and barriers by drawing on existing assessments of transportation access barriers for older adults and people with disabilities, attending to inequities across groups (race/LGBTQIA+/immigration status), and work to expand rural, suburban, urban, and regional transit access for older adults and individuals with disabilities and their caregivers. **(Short-term)**

- Encourage participation in the Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) program to improve knowledge-sharing, identify service gaps and deserts, and strengthen communication across human and public service sectors. This includes engagement from IDOT, IDHS, HFS, the Secretary of State, Area Agencies on Aging, regional transit authorities, regional planning organizations, managed care organizations (MCOs), and human service providers to build a unified voice and advance shared goals. **(Short-term)**

- Work with the Secretary of State's office to support older persons in driving, safe driving, and resources that could support older people's travel. **(Short-term)**

- Explore, research, and consider Medicaid coverage of ride-sharing options for non-emergency medical appointments. **(Mid-term)**

- Explore opportunities for cross-training and cross-agency driving to fill gaps, such as school bus drivers who might take a shift driving a transit bus between morning and afternoon bus routes. **(Mid-term)**

- Work to establish metrics to track improvements in service coverage, reliability, and user satisfaction among older adults and people with disabilities. **(Mid-term)**

- Streamline the certification process required for public transportation providers to deliver rides for Medicaid and MCOs. **(Long-term)**

Strategy 4: Social Connection and Community Engagement

Educate older adults, people with disabilities, care partners, and providers on the benefits of social engagement and increase awareness and access to social connection opportunities (in person and virtual), particularly in underserved communities.

Actions

- Conduct an environmental scan of available community programs that foster social connection opportunities to identify gaps in services, with particular attention to inequities in services for underserved populations and geographic zones. **(Short-term)**

- Increase awareness and access to community programs at the municipal and nonprofit level that offer social connection opportunities such as community college classes, wellness classes, or engagement with the arts. **(Short-term)**

- Explore integrating social connection screening and prescriptions for social connection during Medicare and Medicaid wellness visits (e.g., a social referral to connect aging adults and people with disabilities to community engagement opportunities and social programs such as art or wellness classes tailored to each Illinois region.) **(Short-term)**

- Engage Illinois teaching artists to lead ongoing arts learning opportunities in a variety of settings (e.g., senior centers, libraries, community centers, churches) for older adults and help create opportunities for older adults to teach the arts to others of all ages. **(Short-term)**

- Identify and help replicate and scale initiatives that foster intergenerational relationships, connecting younger adults with older adults to combat ageism and promote social engagement. **(Mid-term)**

- Work across state and local agencies, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and libraries to help people remain connected with their communities, continue learning, and maximize volunteer opportunities for older persons. **(Mid-term)**

Strategy 5: Digital Inclusion & Technology
Close the digital divide, expand access to broadband for older adults and people with disabilities, and increase digital literacy.

Actions

- Conduct a statewide environmental scan and develop an inventory of resources on digital literacy and broadband access at the state/county levels, including public/private resources available to older adults and people with disabilities, and advance Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) broadband initiatives to expand access for all older adults. **(Short-term)**

- Expand education materials focused on older persons identifying and protecting themselves from digital fraud and scams. **(Mid-term)**

- Collaborate with libraries and educational partners to deliver accessible digital literacy training to older adults and people with disabilities, including those who are incarcerated, taking into account technical support and training needs. **(Mid-term)**

- Explore piloting statewide intergenerational and peer digital literacy opportunities for older adults. **(Mid-term)**