

# **HENNEPIN COUNTY AGING INITIATIVE**

## **Community Focus Group Project: Resources, Services and Hennepin County**

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**Hennepin County**

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Research, Planning & Development Department

## RESOURCES AND SERVICES

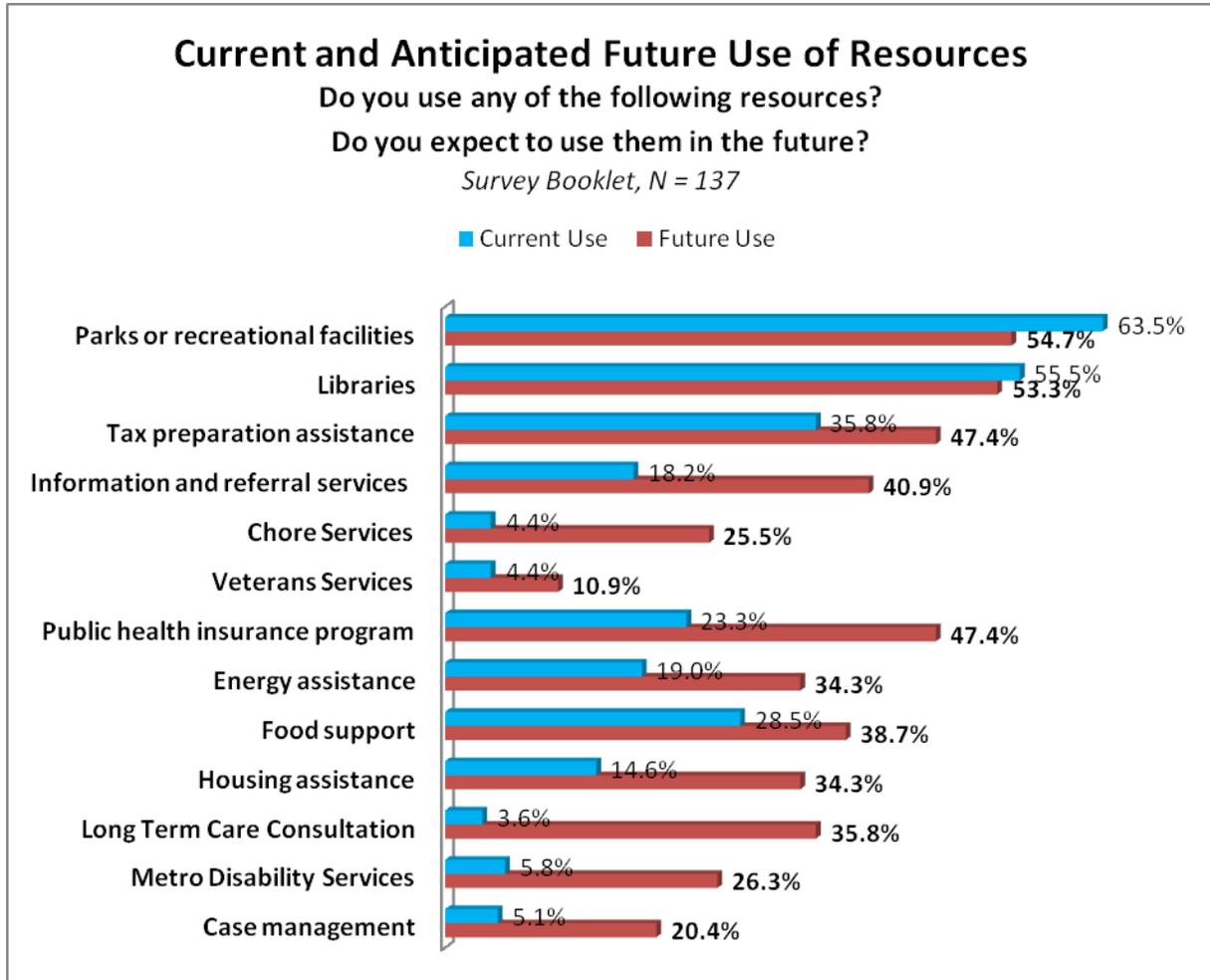
**Preview of Resources and Services.** We learned, from both written and focus group discussions, about participants' current and projected future use of public services. Currently the services most used are parks and recreational facilities and libraries. Responses suggest a slight decrease in future use of those services and an increase in use of health-related and information and referral services.

Barriers to service were reported to be information, cultural and linguistic barriers and specific eligibility issues. Significant time was spent across the various focus groups addressing ways in which senior information and referral services and centers might be provided, cost effectively, in partnership with existing institutions and resources within the County. We also heard a significant number of comments about the importance of services to assist healthy aging, and how the services are delivered, with an emphasis on respect and dignity.

Throughout the focus groups discussions, we heard various references to services and resources from participants, particularly in low income and immigrant communities. From higher income participants and communities, the resources were most often County libraries and recreational facilities. Among those respondents there was relatively little contact with or use of social services unless they were caring for aging parents or children with chronic health problems or disabilities. For these upper income persons, the greatest challenge is knowing what services are potentially available.

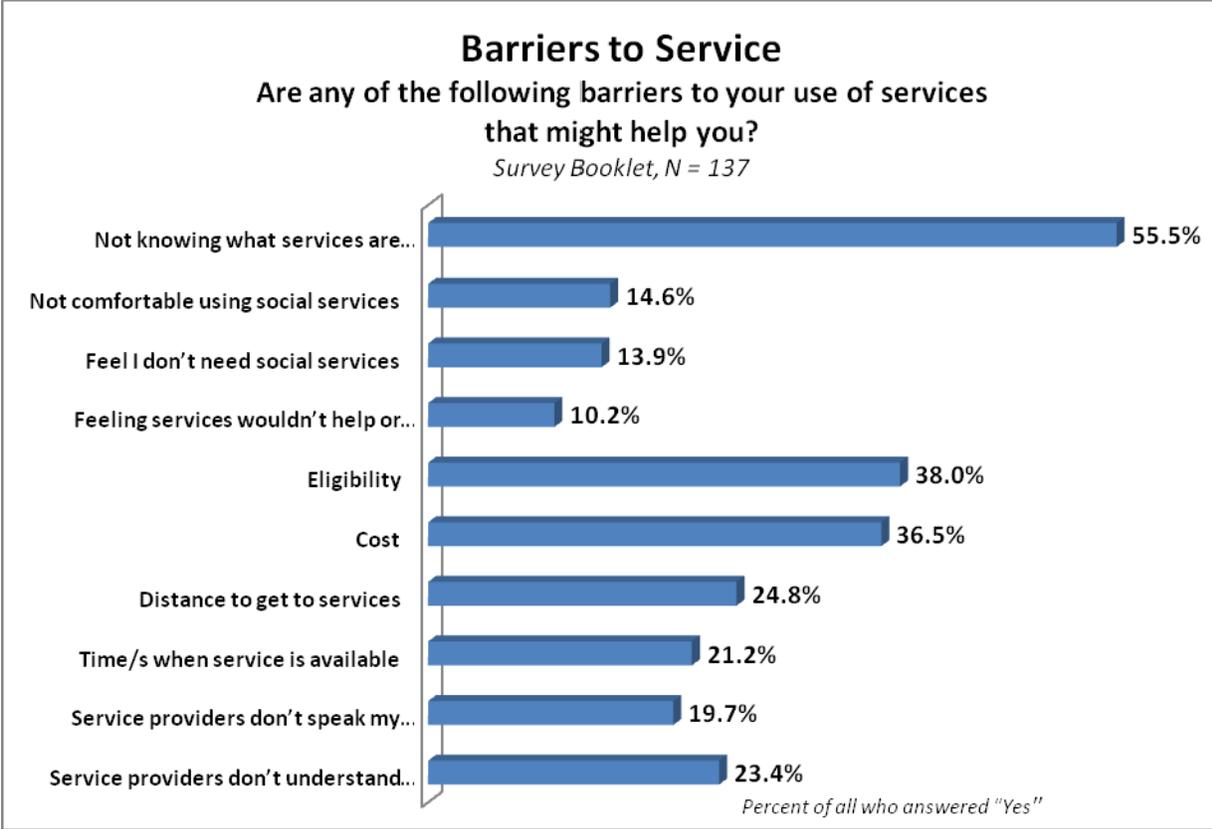
For lower income focus group participants, there was greater, but still comparatively little, use of County resources and services. Respondents' current and future use of services, and observations about those services and service needs are described below.

**Current and future use of services.** In the survey booklet, we asked about both current and future use of County resources and services.



The most used services, both currently and predicted for the future, were parks or recreational facilities (64 percent now, 55 percent for the future) and libraries (56 percent now and 53 percent for the future). Responses to these written questions indicate expanded use of various County services in the future. In rank order of anticipated increase in use of services, these are: long term care consultation, public health insurance, information and referral services, chore services, metro mobility services, housing assistance, case management, energy assistance, tax preparation assistance, food support and veteran’s services.

We also asked written questions about barriers to the use of services. The following graph summarizes those responses.



Finally, we asked “If you need resources such as services to help you in the next 10 to 15 years, do you know where to get information about what’s available to you?” Slightly over half, 52 percent, of participants, indicated they knew where to get information on available services.

In the focus groups, most respondents said that it was difficult to get information about available services. This was true even among persons with chronic health conditions who have considerable experience navigating health and social service systems. Many suggested that, as the baby boomers continue to age, this need for more information and more services will become more acute. A “one stop shop” for coordinated information about available services, more personal attention, neighborhood-based centers for information and services, more culturally appropriate help and assistance all were suggested as remedies for these information issues and barriers.

**Coordinated information:** Focus group participants recommended a “really good” accessible website or other one-stop sources for coordinated information.

“We need a clearing house for all these services rather than having to go to spend half the day figuring out how to get through all this jungle of agencies. I think information needs to be readily accessible, easily obtainable. And I think it's a more local level where people can find out easily in one day what they need, and where to get the services they need.”

“To have one central spot where you can go either online, in person, or call to get information when you need it. One spot, not 29 spots, you know. Not just Internet, because everybody’s not going to be tech savvy, unfortunately, but where you can go or you can call.”

**Personalized information and guidance.** Some suggested that it would be helpful in various ways to have personalized, even face to face sources of information about services and supports.

“I wanted to say that not only have people available, but have people available in person so that you don't have to dial 211 or you don't have to call your Senior Linkage line, but you have somebody who's right there face to face with you who can see whether or not your teeth are falling out, and whether you're, you need a hearing aid or are your front steps falling apart, and do you need a new roof on your house. But somebody who's there that can help you physically, and not just somebody over the phone.”

“But I was just thinking about what would happen if every person at a certain age became eligible for a social worker or a case manager? Eligible but not necessarily required to accept? But let's say you turn 65, you retired and automatically as a benefit of your social security, you're eligible for a case manager who can help you get through the system. That can be an advocate for you, that can make a recommendation that you no longer drive and have your license taken away from you, to make sure that you are living in a home that has heat and that has water and that you have enough food, and somebody looking in on a person. Every person over 65 whether -- and be helping them make decisions about what you're talking about the life care directives and I think a social worker for everybody.”

“So it sounds almost like we need some sort of social workers that are more accessible to seniors that are not linked to your income. It seems like it should be available to everybody not just people that are on public assistance that can direct people to programs and be a clearing house of information whether it be private services or public services. I would like to see that.”

**Neighborhood based service centers.** Again in multiple groups, there were suggestions about how information and referral services for seniors might be cost effectively developed and made available in convenient neighborhood locations, namely libraries, parks or existing community centers.

“How about more senior drop in centers in like neighborhoods? Every neighborhood have a senior drop in center. There would be a place that you could have a social worker available to people and there you could also improve your network of people in your neighborhood that are checking in on you, making sure you have your meals. They've got the mental health drop in centers and there they've got people to kind of follow you through but I don't see too many senior drop in centers and maybe neighborhood wise that would be a good idea just to keep things small and in the community. You could have a meal site, you could have visiting nurses stepping in there instead of having a little bit here and a little bit there. Bring them all together into a center and accessible so that people can get there without having to go 20 miles.”

“I think one of the things that you can do too is when you think of the county and the city, is partnership with the Park Board. Because those things are geographically located. There's empty and for lease buildings all over the city. Why not take one of them, staff it, which would create some new jobs, part time or full time, and let the seniors gather there?”

**Culturally appropriate information and services.** Slightly more than 20 percent of participants indicated it is a barrier to use of services when providers do not speak their language or understand their culture. In the focus group discussions, many of the immigrant groups reported challenges working with social services and systems that don't speak their language or understand their culture. Currently, immigrant groups in our focus groups report that they rely on culturally appropriate providers

and hope they will continue to be available to help them navigate the systems for benefits and services as they age.

“Someone from our community that can assist in administering these services and work with seniors and the disabled, whatever their needs, gray areas, whatever, somebody that can do it and can do it efficiently. That's so important.”

“It is a concern to have services provided by someone of your like culture. Because they will listen and you don't have to jump the great divide. They know what you're saying and why you're saying it.”

“You know I think that if I didn't speak English as my primary language and I was trying to navigate the system I'd be totally lost. And I think there's going to be a great need for people that can reach out to those that are less able to access the services because of language barriers.”

Participants also discussed the need and importance of providing spaces and opportunities for gathering elders of a specific racial or ethnic community.

“It's important that whether it's a center or that they get a space that seniors could socialize and maybe have activities where some training there could lead them in a little exercise or they also need to find some kind of vocation or work sometimes. If elders can find work somehow it's really important work. It could be community work it could be other. They have a lot of wisdom so if we are to involve elders in the cycle of things, let that make them active, more active than they are now.”

“Also they need to get senior center to practice our culture and to help them produce their ideas, their experience, contribute to the kids or youth in order to take that or remember or learn about the history of Somalia, the history of our culture, the history of how do people respect each other. So this is very important things.”

“For me, we need a place together, how to talk together for Lao people, like what to do, like retire association.”

“A place to hang around, where we can talk together....spend days together. Like to continue support services, should be adjustable, understanding, not just one group or another.”

**Eligibility criteria.** Thirty-eight percent of participants indicated that eligibility criteria are a barrier for their use of services which they might need. This is particularly acute for immigrants, given their immigration status or for others who are working poor.

“It's not only that, it's because we don't meet the criteria for poverty level and you have---if you meet criteria for poverty level you will get medical assistance, which covers everything. You probably will need it. We will need it.”

“I think that probably would be the most difficult thing to discuss because we might not meet the guidelines for poverty level because we will have social security; however, we probably wouldn't have enough money to support ourselves, to live not comfortable just to pay for our bills.”

"You know, what's the point of trying to get ahead if you're falling behind? You know, I saved \$25, you know. Well, now you can't get food stamps because you've got a checking account. It's like you've got to be completely broke in order to get food stamps. You know, they go, "You've got \$100 on you."

**Other barriers.** For persons at or near the poverty level, there are additional barriers to service, mostly encompassing actual or perceived rude or indifferent workers.

"It's ridiculous. I mean, even to sign up for benefits, to request benefits that are for everybody —It's the way you're treated. They act like you're coming to rob the system. They act like it's their money."

"The games. The games, the hoops that you have to jump through as a person of color, as someone that's aging gracefully, as someone that's in poverty, you know, the hoops that you jump through, it's like you wake up every morning having to constantly prove yourself every time."

"When you're administering these services, I want to be treated fairly, like a human being, with dignity and respect. You can't strip away my dignity. I won't allow it. It takes its toll on you."

Finally, there was also discussion about the importance of additional services specific to an aging population.

"And I think depression and dementia are facts of aging more than anything else and if we can do something to help those people who don't have supportive families or other friends or neighbors who would look in on them and take care of them or notice, even, that they're slipping, that would be great."

"One of the best services I think we have going right now is hospice care. And it's a shame to me that we get such good quality of care as we're almost ready to die that you've got people working there that are giving you massages and music therapy. You've got a ten minute call away from a doctor 24-hours a day. You've got nurses coming to your home. You've got people giving you a bath and bed. You've got people coming to cut your hair in bed but we can't get those same quality of services while we're up and around and still ticking and I just think there ought to be a better level of care provided for people that aren't ready to drop dead."

"One of the things that I would really like is how to grow old. In America we only talk about being young, young at heart, I mean, it's — and I love — and, actually, I think children do lead us forward. But how to grow old, like community ed courses about growing old, because we're living a long time. And it's like the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about is how to grow old, you know, with vitality but with reality."

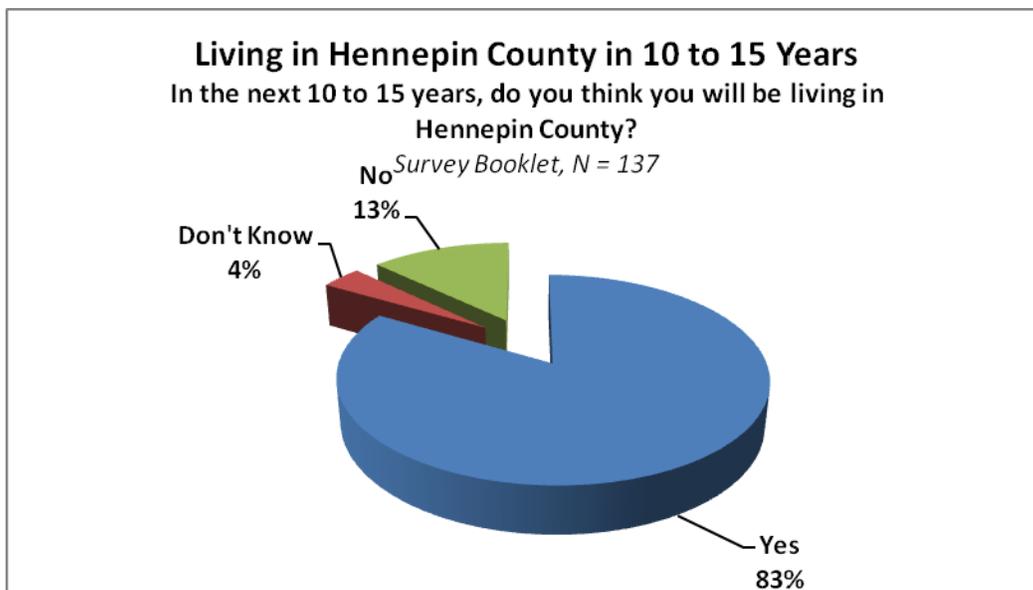
## HENNEPIN COUNTY

**Preview of Hennepin County.** In the final portion of each focus group, we asked participants questions about their future plans to live in Hennepin County, and their expectations of government as they age. Nearly 80 percent of participants indicate they plan to be living in Hennepin County in the next 10 to 15 years, many for the rest of their lives.

Response to written questions about their expectations of government (in general) indicate concern about services, particularly related to health care, housing and transportation. Although we heard divided opinions about the role of Hennepin County, most indicated in response to written questions that the County has a role in services, again related to health care, housing, transportation...and in particular, providing coordination and access to information about services. Again in written questions, participants identified priorities for the County to consider in their preparation for the aging boomers, which include senior employment, affordable health care and housing, and transportation.

In focus group discussions, participants expressed these concerns and also discussed solutions and opportunities, with specific calls for the County to be conscious of how it delivers services, and to afford dignity, respect and equal treatment to all residents. Participants across a number of groups also articulated a self organizing impulse, with suggestions for ways in which aging residents can be involved in creating the options and services which will be needed for this generation as they age.

**Living in Hennepin County in the future.** The vast majority of participants – 80 percent -- plan to live in Hennepin County in the next 10 to 15 years. Many of them answered they plan to live here as long as they live.







and the land, for us, you know, we're \$15,000, \$16,000 a year for property taxes. That's a pretty big piece of your income."

These views are backdrop to comments in one group about limiting the role of government at the county level.

"I would say that, you know, maintaining their core functions and responsibilities to not be growing services and trying to increase access and grow government to the extent that we won't be able to afford to stay in our homes and our properties is one issue. Government should keep to its core responsibility of public safety and providing some of the basic infrastructure and let the rest of us take care of it."

"It would be develop a system of personal responsibility and accountability. If you're going to get money, if you're going to get a service, if you're going to get anything, there is a responsibility that goes with it, you have to work for it, nothing is free. But I said cut taxes, and the way that I would suggest doing that is make people responsible if they're taking social services, that they're not using drugs — test them, I don't care what. Cut the caring for those who like handouts. Make those people be accountable and show proof of need."

**Maintaining Services.** In most of the focus groups, we heard concern about the maintenance of important existing services. People reported already experiencing cuts in chore services, library hours and public programs for medical care. Their concern is about whether these services will be available for them in the coming 15 years.

"I know for me in the last few years, like I had mentioned before that I used to get outdoor chore services from the county, they took care of my yard and my snow and once or twice a year they would come and rake and I don't qualify for any of those anymore because they cut the service."

"Whatever you have continued in the past, would like to continue what we have today. Medical, place to live, peaceful. Three things."

"If he has health care, housing for to stay, organization to support. If everything now can be, it is OK. But if it get worse, no health care, no living, no helping, then it would be bad. But if all the same, can manage."

**Public Safety.** Across groups, including the exurban group, there is agreement that government and the County have a responsibility for public safety.

"You have two core services that the county has to provide, and that's your public safety services and your public works services."

"Tying it back to the safety issues, you cannot do away with your 911, you cannot do away with the jail, you cannot do away with your criminal justice system, and those are pieces of the puzzle that are there that's got to be maintained and built."

"Well making sure that the services are in place as far as adequate fire, police, safety of streets, lighting, a lot of things that people mention."

"My concern with the safety was — getting back to plowing roads and making things accessible, because if I fall in my house and call 911 and the ambulance can't get to me, then what's the

point. You know, people just don't realize how important it is to have timely plowed, safe roads, because it's not just us driving. It's all the safety equipment. Everything."

**Information and access to services.** A frequently discussed issue for the county's role, across economic levels of participants, had to do with providing aging residents information about services and help to navigate systems, to assure access to services which might help them. The discussions often implied these are services that need to be developed.

"You're saying how many of us are getting old and how many young people, I don't know that it takes a rocket scientist to say that we probably are going to have to do things differently. If it's that many people who are aging, then there needs to be more aging services."

"I think a key issue is information and access to affordable healthcare, so whatever — and that's come up over and over again. So whatever roles the county could play to move that forward I guess I would say is a message."

"Well, yeah, the printed information that translates all of the gobbledygook into simple English is what helps. But it's, you know, information translated and comparing. So if Medicare provides good stuff, the county's role can be making sure that everybody knows that and is able to go there and find the information — Or having educational sessions at the libraries or parks or places where people could gather to get that information, where they would — or at high rises or places like that."

As discussed in the services section, many participants commented on the need to have people who can develop personal contact and help in navigating the service systems.

"Visiting social workers, people who could come to your house, instead of you having to go to where they are, and could tell you about things that might be helpful or bring you information about this, as for me, my age, my eyes may not work so well and I may not be able to read all the stuff or use the computer or whatever."

**Encouraging boomers to "Get Ready."** We had discussions in most groups about whether or not participants had completed health care directives, or made legal arrangements to cover their financial obligations if they became unable to do so — as in a durable power of attorney. The number of participants who have done so is relatively low (31 percent of health care directives; 39 percent legal arrangements.) In many of the focus group discussions, particularly in lower income and immigrant communities, we heard concern that doing these things costs money. In other groups, people commented they knew they should do so, but haven't yet. While some participants acknowledge this is not directly a County responsibility, they had some suggestions about ways in which the County might encourage boomers to address these things, to "get ready" for aging:

"That is something where workshops on doing that and having the forms available and someone to help you at all the libraries and that sort of thing probably would be useful."

"It could be a service where it isn't the county's job to do it, but the county can help people think about it and find out maybe whose job it is to do it or think about — you know, a checklist. We've talked about the living wills and that sort of thing. Okay, seniors should be thinking about all of these things and maybe talking about them in groups like this, and then you go home and you kind of figure it out for yourself. You don't expect — I don't expect the county to come and see me if I don't answer the phone for two days, but I might find a chain of friends where we

would call each other every day or two and just say, “Hi, how are you?” So it wouldn’t be the county doing it, but the county might kind of help me think about how it might get done.”

“So now we have to have check offs of things you ought to do as you're getting older. And you get \$10 back on your property taxes.”

**Partner in planning.** In a number of groups there was discussion about a role that Hennepin County can play in a number of areas, affecting things that might not be the direct responsibility or purview of the County, but where the County can exert influence or play an important role.

“I’m not very well versed on how much purview the County has on urban planning. I mean, that’s a big thing, urban planning. But what we are talking about safe neighborhoods, recreation and shopping and leisure activities within walking distance for people who can’t get around, planning our communities so that we have what we need closer to us. So whatever effect at the county level can be exerted on urban planning in a way to serve those interests would be a good thing.”

“But we’ve talked a lot about information and kind of trying to make things happen that are not necessarily the county’s responsibility, but what the county seems to be really good at is building coalitions and finding ways for people to work together, like, you know, using libraries for a lot of different things, and I think the result of this, of seeing what kinds of things seniors need, a lot of them.”

“I think as you go on, you’ll find lots of people wanting things that are just simply not the county’s business, but the county can help them by finding out whose business it is and helping them with it. So I think that would be the thing, to continue to build coalitions and finding ways to make them happen by using county resources, using the buildings, offering them for other things, using the staff to work together to get people information to deal with these issues, working with the local governments, of course, a lot.”

**Housing options.** Although we did not directly ask questions about housing, we heard about it often and it was often discussed in the context of other solutions or possibilities for aging. No one suggested the County had a sole or direct role in housing, but many suggested it could be a priority for the County to find strategies or incentives to address housing.

“I want tax incentives for private folks to come in, not depend on the government to come in and build these multi unit — not the big high rises that have swimming pools and want to attract wealthy old people, but for us who don’t have it, some sort of incentive so they will be built, because the County’s not going to be able to do it.”

“I hope that they’re really emphasizing the concept of housing for everyone. There’s a lot of talk about housing for workforce housing and affordable housing, but also there needs to be a mix of ages for that housing.”

There was discussion in more than half of the focus groups about the need for more housing options for residents as they age.

“In Russia we had for example buildings where people lived and first floor of building were stores or cleanings or whatever. So I understand that America is, especially Midwest is kind of like one story buildings all over, but for people who are retired, probably good to have different

architecture, consider something which would exclude transportation because if they would have access to pharmacy, library, grocery store, and some cultural activities so community centers, that would resolve a lot of issues.”

“I think a part of it, and I think it kind of ties into this, is to have affordable housing in areas in neighborhoods where you feel secure, where there are good services, where there's good lighting, there's good accessibility to things and where there maybe is a little land to be able to go out and, you know, grow a garden or bring your pet out for a while or something like that. I mean, I think for a lot of us — and I say that I'm going to stay in Hennepin County just because I realized it would be just another big transition to deal with, to, you know, think about going someplace else. But I think affordable housing for a lot of us is going to become a very, very major issue. Not only just affordable, but not how I think perhaps some of us think of things now in the sense of, you know, kind of desolate senior high rise places.”

“What is senior housing going to be like? And with so many aging people, there's going to be a long waiting list and realistically are we going to be able to stay in our houses when we're 70, 75, 80 you know? And then where are we going to go?”

In some of the discussions the concern for housing options was to have alternatives nursing homes.

“I fear ending up in one of those rest homes with two people in a room and you just lay there all day. I just fear that's going to be just sitting -- because I have no family. I never married so no children or anything and I'll just be there, existing.”

“I plan to be in better housing, you know. High rises — I live in a high rise building, and high rises — I'm grateful not to be homeless, because I've been homeless, but high rises are terrible places for human beings to live. Physically, you're walking on concrete floors. That's not good for your feet. That's not good for your health. And housing is very important.”

There were also discussions about providing more housing options, intermediary to nursing homes or utilizing an entirely new model.

“There ought to be some other intermediary places between a nursing home and a home that are eligible on a low income basis. I don't know what's out there but I would think that would be a place to focus some energy as far as developing services in the future so that -- you've got your PCA attendants and you've got other people coming into homes to provide services but what if you want the services to be provided by the home that you're in and you don't want to be in a nursing home?”

“I know in some communities they've started kind of innovative housing where, it's not like a group home but it's like a multiple dwelling kind of a home where you have the senior has their own apartment and they're totally, well it's like assisted living but they're connected maybe by four apartments but they're more like homes than apartments and on one level. And then the care giver, it's easier then to provide services in that way where people are kind of congregated plus they're not so isolated because there's usually a common area if you feel like you want some human interaction you can go to that like shared living room or whatever it is and kind of like it's a dorm.”

Participants discussed housing alternatives which may be more cost effective in providing care for aging seniors.

“Well personally I think it would be like a win, win situation to make available for most elderly to stay in their homes. To make that somehow available. Then it would be less money spent on health care, facilities, all that kind of stuff. That's one way I look at it.”

“Well and one of the obstacles to having people stay in their homes is the cost of care in their homes. So I think the county ---- would have to step in -- financially because what sends people to a nursing home instead of staying home with 24 hour care? There's a huge, huge differential in cost. So even though nursing homes are expensive, having care whether it's 12 hours or 24 hours, for many people, most people it's impossible, it's prohibitive. So in order to facilitate people staying in their homes, we have to provide for that care when they're in their homes.”

In various groups, there was a call for senior housing options that fit for culturally or ethnically specific groups.

“Right now most resource they have are mostly for mainstream. In future, I think we need housing for older Asian people. Right now Lao people living here 30 years, many of them getting old. And they cannot depend on their children like they did in their country. They keep their parents, kids over there. Here, kids go to work and don't have time to take care of children. Most Lao need to have place to stay together, like affordable housing for Lao, so they can meet each other there, talk in their own language, Here the population is over 30,000 people here, Asians and some Lao. So it is possible we could have something....”

Well, I would say a range of housing options for LGBT seniors, so people feel that there's choice out there, they can choose whatever---“

**Employment.** In the vast majority of groups, participants raised concern about jobs and the unavailability of jobs for those currently in this age demographic. As the section on financial security indicated, most of the people in this age demographic plan or wish to work longer (past the traditional retirement age of 65) due to ongoing financial uncertainty. For those who have traditionally earned low income wages, and for those who have involuntarily lost jobs (some of them long term jobs) before retirement age, the greatest need is for income. Participants in most of the low income and immigrant groups identified employment as the top, or within the top three, priorities.

In one of the focus groups, a senior employment-related program, the benefits of the support and door-opening training which the program provides were clear. Even relatively small amounts of pay made a critical difference in maintaining stable housing, acquiring and upgrading job skills, and learning of other programs and benefits which might help them. Models exist in other parts of the country. Exploring ways in which training or employment programs might afford “senior” benefits, e.g. funds for Medicare supplemental insurance, could offer multiple benefits – to senior employees and to organizations and communities.

“More jobs, because there are a lot of people with not yet the retirement age and they are not working.”

“Also maybe try to do like this -- like some companies if they hire like a certain amount or percentage of like person's with disability, they have some benefits and maybe too it's the same with people with age if they hire like people after 60 they have some benefits too.”

“I don't feel like either the private sector or the public sector is doing a good job at trying to address this. I think there's a lot of — I feel there's a lot of hand wringing, this whole hand

wringing about all of us who are aging and going to be retiring and we're going to be living off the other 4 percent, and I think there's, like I say, a lot of hand wringing about that, but I haven't heard very many people actually actively be proponents for those of us who truly are still able to contribute, still want to contribute at whatever speed, you know?"

**Fostering more senior friendly neighborhoods.** We also heard frequently about the role of government, or the County, in working with other entities to foster more senior friendly neighborhoods or built environments

"Just continue to coordinate the infrastructure that's going to support the people of all ages like the complete streets, making sure there are transportation options available, even if they have to subsidize so maybe each community at least has some access even if it's only a couple buses a day, for example."

"I think supporting infrastructure for livability, of neighbors, to help people age in place if they desire to, and then a menu of services that help that happen."

In the section on safety, we heard appreciation for improvements made to date in some neighborhoods and support for more. These included things like more use of low-level lighting, larger type size on signs, more reflective signs, police riding buses, maintenance of sidewalks and bus shelters.

**Fostering a climate of acceptance and respect.** We heard a great deal of discussion across a number of groups about the tensions and issues among Hennepin County residents based on race, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation and income. Sometimes this was very negative and ugly – describing differential treatment by public officials, accusing others of getting benefits they shouldn't, and identifying certain groups of people as less deserving. Participants raised concerns about the current political climate which is polarizing and feeds into such sentiments. Focus group comments call for the County to foster a climate of acceptance and respect between and among groups.

"Look honestly at immigration in this country. It's a big problem in the Western countries. Liberians take care of us, Somalis take care of us. Help integrate them and their cultures into our culture, because they will be taking care of us. And we love our children, but there won't be enough of our children. So isolating them, making them the other, is not going to help us or our country in the future. They're here.

"They have to respect our religious bylaws and start with us for example we grew up and were raised in the religion and that we are different so we want all the decisions being made should not have any conflict with our belief. So we want the county to put our beliefs first and then respect that. Other than that we are like any other human. Respect the culture and our difference."

"We're old, getting old, and having to deal with racism when you're old is bad, period. I'm not old, old, but you know what I'm saying. And I realize that racism is not going to go away. We go through racism, ageism, sexism, classism, but the worst one in my life is that race piece. It goes deep and it cuts."

As previous portions of the report suggested, discussion in the GLBT focus group particularly focused on the proposed "marriage" amendment as having a highly negative effect on feelings of safety and acceptance with the state. In that group were specific comments about how the County might affirm its GLBT residents and assure respect for chosen families in areas within its jurisdiction.

“What can Hennepin County do? And there is an argument here. We do — if we live in the Hennepin County area, if we are Hennepin County taxpayers, Hennepin County can take and say, “We as a County support GLBT folks, and we are not going to stand with the State or anyone else in this marriage amendment stuff and all that other thing. We are going to give our residents — whether they're GLBT, whether they're black, green, pink, it doesn't matter. We're going to give all of our residents equal treatment under the law.”

“Hennepin County could look at where it does have jurisdiction, where it does have the ability to be humane and inclusive in its policies and also be an advocate for that. In its own medical center and its own — you know, wherever it has the ability to do that.”

**Engage residents/seniors in solutions.** We also heard from participants an interest in being part of the solutions and to be engaged in the work the County does to prepare for the aging of its residents.

“And also while you're making those policy decisions, pull from us. We need to be given the opportunity to talk to legislators, people in DC that make these decisions, because we're living it every day. We want an opportunity for our voices to be heard and to have a direct say in changing policy — because we've got to make some changes, because we're hurting as a society. We want them to hear our voices and what we have to say, and we want them to act on it, because when we go to the polls, we'll remember this on election day.”

“I would say listen more to what seniors want rather than thinking they have all the answers.”

Comments in this vein emphasized that the senior boomers can be a formidable political force.

Yeah, but there's also — yeah, I mean, we're part of a big chunk of people, and among us there have to be some people who are aware and who speak, and if we give them attention and contribute to what they're thinking and what they're saying and what they're doing and this is all at the local level, then those ideas can become stronger and are more likely to be carried out.

**Education and information.** We heard interesting discussions about various ways in which education and support help address aging issues. This is a place where the role of the County is not necessarily to do these things, but to encourage or support such efforts.

“One of the things that I would really like — and sometimes people think this is funny and humorous — is how to grow old. In America we only talk about being young, young at heart, and actually, I think children do lead us forward. But how to grow old, like community ed courses about growing old, because we're living a long time. And it's like the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about is how to grow old, you know, with vitality but with reality.”

“He was telling me that one of the best things to do for Somali elders is that they could be treated or shown what to expect here as they grow older. Like you have today there are many elders who have never even thought about this. I never thought about it. I know today, but how do you live in 30 years. I never thought so I think bringing them together in a park or somewhere where they talk about issues and socialize would be very helpful and ask them how do you interact with your children, how do you interact with other community members. That would be very helpful.”



**HOUSING.** Housing is also a major priority highlighted in the word cloud, as the issue was raised in many of the focus groups. The needs differ for different groups. Those who are well off with resources express some interest in downsizing responsibility, as well as relocating to reduce dependence on cars. Many of those previously considered middle class worry about maintaining their current housing and call for affordable options which might allow them to maintain preferences, such as gardening or having pets, in addition to improving transportation options. Those who are now in financial straits hope that affordable housing would allow them to avoid homelessness, remain independent, to have their own space, and address transportation issues.

Some foresee the need to have services, which some suggested can be more efficiently provided in group settings, which also reduce the likelihood of social isolation. We heard clear preference for smaller settings (not “warehouse”), a call for alternatives between independent living and assisted living—perhaps a more finely grained continuum of care. Uniformly across groups, we heard fear and negative views about existing nursing homes and care facilities and tremendous trepidation that the increase in older people needing care would lead to “warehousing” and crowding, “stacking” people 4 or more to a room.

Many of the groups also wished for options that would allow them to live with some sense of community among others like them. The GLBT group mentioned repeatedly the safety and comfort fears of existing assisted living and nursing home facilities, Lao and Russian immigrant groups articulated their wish to have space, in public or otherwise affordable housing, to live together.

In more than one group, there was a recognition that government entities are not able to accomplish all that will be needed for the bulge of aging boomers. They suggested the County work with other partners, explore tax incentives, and find ways to coordinate housing and services in order to develop more of the housing alternatives that will be needed.

**WORK AND EMPLOYMENT.** Although employment issues do not loom as large on the word cloud, we heard loudly and clearly across the focus groups concern about employment. There are issues for those who plan to continue employment, enormous hunger for employment among many groups, and an interest in volunteering – to give back, to keep busy, and to make difference for others.

Within the focus groups, we heard about very challenging financial situations for those who were involuntarily unemployed past the age of 50. Almost uniformly, people in that circumstance wish for paid work, whether they are continuing to seek work or not. Some are discouraged in this economic climate, having sought work for several years without success. Being without income before traditional retirement age wreaks havoc on savings, reduces Social Security for those who have little choice but draw upon it as soon as they are able, and leads to health care issues as people struggle to fill the gap before Medicare eligibility.

One of the focus groups included people in an employment-related training program for people 55 years and older. Relatively modest salaries make an enormous difference for these participants, some of whom have been homeless. In addition, the participants reported acquiring skills, learning about available services and building new social connections.

Most of those in the employment program acknowledge age discrimination, already faced in previous jobs, and a likely barrier to finding paid employment past the program. We also heard about age discrimination from those in other groups, including multiple immigrant groups and the group of

independent women. We heard in one group a suggestion for a financial incentive – similar to tax credits for businesses who hire currently unemployed, or disabled employees.

Participants recommended enlisting people in this aging cohort in becoming part of the solution. If the County develops or adapts existing information and referral services to assist boomers as they age, there is a logic to hiring from this age group to provide them. There are models within Minnesota and elsewhere of a kind of “senior corps” program which provides modest or minimal wages, but work that is rewarding and makes a difference in range of employment or social services. Exploring whether minimal benefits, such as the cost of a Medicare supplemental policy, might be offered would add to the value for participants.

Finally, we also heard an enormous thirst for volunteering. Some of those we heard from look forward to retirement and more time to “give back” and make a difference in communities important to them. We also heard again and again, often in immigrant communities, about a desire to keep busy, avoid boredom, and be engaged with others through volunteering. Some of this is done informally, but much human energy and talent could be tapped by providing organized options in areas of need.

**SERVICES.** In focus groups, we heard concerns about maintaining existing services, sometimes specifically applied to the most currently used county services – parks and recreation and library services. In discussing services, focus group participants most often called for ways to provide efficient, accessible information about available services. Those who have not used social services previously indicated they do not know what services are available. Some participants who are very experienced in navigating health and social services point out the challenge, and frequently discovered services they were unaware of after they needed them.

There was much discussion in the groups, reflected in the services section, about how to do this in a way tailored to an aging population. Many advocated some face to face opportunity, or chance to work with an individual who can help them navigate and interpret the available information. There was also much discussion about how and where to do this, to make it accessible geographically and to boomers who do not identify themselves and would not respond to “senior” services.

In some groups, there was discussion about the importance of The County coordinating with and/or building on existing services is a logical and cost effective strategy for developing services for aging boomers. In addition, across a number of the focus groups, we heard a call to engage boomers in developing solutions, and possible models for creating employment or volunteer options for those in this age demographic.

**TAXES.** We heard about taxes as a priority in more than one of the groups. Property taxes were the overriding issue in the exurban group, and mentioned in an additional five or six groups. In examining the written responses, we found that concern about property taxes were an issue for about half of the homeowners. Exurban participants feel that taxes will drive them off their property and threaten their current way of life; homeowners, most of whom have experienced some hits in this recession, worry they will not be able to remain in their homes. In at least one of the groups, these concerns were balanced by recognition that lowering property taxes is not likely feasible, in a stressed economic time and as more of the population ages, essentially supported by fewer people of wage earning ages.

There was mention of senior rebates, although no one thought this was realistic. One participant mentioned another state where those over a certain age no longer pay school taxes. One group

wondered whether there could be some form of tax credit or rebate for those providing caregiving services to family members.

Participants in one of the groups suggested using the County's tax notices as a communication vehicle. The suggestion is to develop a checklist, as well as resources, to encourage those over 65 to "get ready" by attending to health care directives and powers of attorney. This could be done as information alone, or with further incentive – a \$10 rebate on property taxes for those who check off the list and return it.

**EMPOWERING SELF ORGANIZED SOLUTIONS.** Finally, we heard from a number of these groups that the boomers are an activist generation which has previously risen to the challenge of addressing social issues. There were suggestions about housing options, transportation alternatives, advocating for universal health care, and developing communities of support. Some participants suggested that government entities need to be creative in thinking about how they can support and encourage that impulse, fostering solutions to the inevitable issues of a larger aging population. In other groups, participants asked that the County continue the dialogue with people in the key demographic, inviting their participation in planning activities.

We heard about some specific ways the County might do this.

- Encourage education strategies which allow people to learn about and address these issues. Suggestions included courses or materials on "aging well"; supporting career pathways for those who will care for the aging population; and developing a new profession, like a financial planner or hairdresser, who knows the client and can provide guidance and identify resources to help those aging plan ahead and make optimal choices as they grow older. This could also include developing materials, templates and encouraging current service providers to reach out to this age demographic to "get ready" by completing health care directives and making decisions about power of attorney. It would also help to identify alternatives for those who do not have family or friends who they can name in these documents.
- Acknowledge the relationships people develop, whether or not they fit traditional definitions of family. In the independent/uncoupled women group, and in the GLBT group, we heard about situations where health care or social services did not take into account important relationships, whether partners or friends. As one participant pointed out, much of the literature on aging emphasizes how important support systems are for everyone as they age. When that support system varies from legal familial relationships, it still needs to be included and embraced as part of how individuals manage issues, live through health challenges, and make their journey through the aging process.