



AGE-FRIENDLY MILWAUKEE COUNTY FOCUS GROUP REPORT NOVEMBER 2025



AGE-FRIENDLY MILWAUKEE COUNTY OVERVIEW

AARP Wisconsin welcomed Milwaukee County as a member of the “AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities” in September 2024. Milwaukee County is the first county in the state to earn the designation. The AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities helps participating communities become better for residents of all ages by addressing priority needs identified in the built and social environments.

FOCUS GROUP OVERVIEW

Focus groups (termed “Community Conversations” for the Age-Friendly Milwaukee County project) are structured meetings in which residents come together to share experiences, discuss common issues, and identify opportunities for improving community life. Age-Friendly Milwaukee County conducted five Community Conversations designed to gather more detail and personal perspectives to build upon and contextualize the results of a community survey conducted as part of the needs assessment phase of the project. Facilitated by Age-Friendly Milwaukee County staff and Steering Committee members, the Community Conversations centered on the eight Domains of Livability as defined by AARP. The Community Conversations were held in October & November 2025. A total of 84 individuals participated in the Community Conversations, with most groups consisting of 9-13 participants.

FOCUS GROUP PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS AND POPULATIONS

The Age-Friendly Milwaukee County partnered with five community organizations that serve populations that were less represented in the community survey. The selected organizations invited older adult members (primarily age 50+) to participate in the Community Conversations. Partner organizations and focus populations of the five Community Conversations were:

- 1) **O.A.S.I.S. (Milwaukee Recreation)**
Focus Population: Latinx Community
- 2) **Indian Council of the Elderly**
Focus Population: Native American Community
- 3) **LGBT Community Center**
Focus Population: LGBTQ+ Community
- 4) **Embassy Center MKE**
Focus Population: Black/African American Community
- 5) **Hmong American Friendship Association**
Focus Population: Hmong/Laotian Community

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Key points summarized below highlight major themes aggregated from all five Community Conversations and are organized by AARP’s Domains of Livability.

Social Participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling connected is important for having a sense of purpose and for mental health. • Interest in lifelong learning and classes for seniors. • Multi-generational family support is vital, but some populations often lack this support. • Senior centers are viewed favorably. Suggestion to include services such as banks in senior centers. Senior centers are currently overcrowded. • Interest in multi-generational community centers. • Activities within senior apartments could reduce transportation barriers. • Interest in home visitation programs to reduce isolation. • Many seniors need personal invitations to join activities and assistance with transportation. • Interest in designated senior events at downtown venues with accommodations built-in.

Transportation

General

- Transportation is especially difficult in winter and without a car.
- Need affordable transportation options that include help getting out of house and into destination location.

Car, Pedestrian & Bike Safety

- Streets are unsafe due to poor street lighting, road conditions, and speeding.
- Support more traffic calming features.
- Biking is unsafe in some areas due to bump outs obstructing shoulder.
- Walking is hazardous due to unsafe streets and insufficient time to cross.
- Car purchases and upkeep can be cost prohibitive.

Public Transportation

- Perception that seniors are using buses more than in the past.
- Desire for free senior bus passes and ambassadors to help with navigating buses.
- Specialized transit is unreliable, late, restrictive for purpose of ride, and is not available to all due to eligibility requirements. Many seniors unaware of specialized transit options and don't know how to use rideshare.
- Bus route cuts and long waits for connections make bus hard to use.
- Need for more bus shelters especially near senior centers/apartments.
- Public transportation feels unsafe.

Housing

Maintaining Home Ownership

- Suggest property tax relief for seniors.
- Multi-generational households help with housing cost and upkeep.
- Preference to age in place but need affordable maintenance, safety modifications and yard work assistance.

Senior Apartments

- Rent assistance and Section 8 have long waits and are hard to access.
- Long waiting lists (2–3 years) for senior apartments; limited interim options.
- Senior housing is unaffordable (\$1,200–\$1,700/month) and rent increases and loss of amenities are common especially when buildings are sold.
- Seniors unsure how to use tenant rights or civic systems for protection from predatory landlords. Suggest stronger housing laws protecting elderly tenants.
- Safety concerns in subsidized housing and in neighborhoods.
- Senior apartments should include on-site services, social programs, and transportation assistance.

Civic Participation

- Some seniors feel disconnected from civic engagement opportunities.
- Barriers to volunteering include unclear participation pathways, transportation challenges, not feeling appreciated, and burnout if reliant on the same volunteers.
- Some organizations also have a hard time finding volunteers. Creating an easy way to match senior volunteers with positions would be helpful.
- Teens could volunteer to help seniors, though safety concerns exist.
- Neighborhood associations viewed as effective for local engagement.
- Seniors should engage in political process so that their needs are addressed.
- Seniors can band together to directly address problems in the community.
- Appreciate events to meet neighbors.

Health

Health Insurance & Health Care Cost

- Many face difficulties navigating healthcare and insurance systems. Navigators would be helpful.
- Health insurance eligibility, coverage, and bills are confusing; multiple insurances are often required. Scams related to health insurance are common. Language barriers make healthcare navigation even more difficult.
- Healthcare and prescriptions are too expensive and costs are not transparent; medical debt is a concern and sometimes care is delayed due to cost.
- Free clinics fill some care gaps.
- Would like more communication about free or low-cost health services.

Health Services & Access

- Doctors do not always accept insurance plans; hard to find in-network providers and get appointments in general (health, dental, vision).
- Concern about push for medication over preventative and holistic care and inclusion of wellness as covered by insurance. Wellness incentives through insurance should be expanded.
- Need care and oversight in nursing homes that is sensitive to needs of special populations.
- ADRC is difficult to access, and response times are too long.
- Awareness of paid caretaking should be raised.

Health Education

- Need for more health education on nutrition, aging, and illness prevention.
- Desire for printed health information from doctors.

Communication & Information

Access to Information and Communication

- Need help knowing what resources, activities and programs are available and how to access them. Request for a central location and physical repository of resources and programs.
- Spam email and scam calls targeting seniors are common; need education about how to avoid.
- Appreciate information delivered at trusted community-based locations.
- Younger people are not always patient or considerate in communicating with older adults.
- Language barriers can make all forms of communication difficult.

Technology

- Older adults often lack tech skills and need help with smartphones, tablets, and computers.
- Digital communications should be formatted to accommodate those who are visually impaired.
- Online systems (appointments, applications) are barriers.
- Need non-digital communication—flyers, phone calls, TV, and in-person information.
- There is distrust in social media and modern news sources among older adults.
- Older adults need to be willing to learn how to use technology.

Income Security

- Fixed incomes not keeping pace with cost of living. Suggest senior tax relief and other discounts.
- Concerns about potential future cuts to SSI/SSDI benefits.
- Some older adults would be interested in continued employment but SSI earned income limits and mobility challenges make it difficult; publicize job opportunities for seniors.
- Financial advice for retirement planning would be helpful starting in young adulthood and continuing to maximize resources as an older adult.
- Limited eligibility for SNAP and other supports despite need.
- Most food pantries often provide unsuitable food; need choice-based options.



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CONCLUSION

The information gained through the Community Conversations conducted by Age-Friendly Milwaukee County is an important component of the needs assessment phase of the project. Overall, the Community Conversations reinforced major issues and trends identified through review of publicly available data, community survey results and walk audit findings. The most common themes expressed in the Community Conversations were difficulty obtaining information about available services and difficulty navigating healthcare and health insurance. While each Community Conversation had different emphases and surfaced unique insights, overall feedback was consistent across all of the populations engaged through Community Conversations.

The information gained through Community Conversations will be analyzed by the Age-Friendly Milwaukee County Steering Committee alongside other information gathered during the needs assessment phase of the project and will form the basis for prioritization of domains and issues, creation of a County-wide plan to address the issues, and, ultimately, improved livability for the residents of Milwaukee County now and in decades to come.

Age-Friendly Milwaukee County wishes to thank the community organizations that helped to organize the Community Conversations: O.A.S.I.S./Milwaukee Recreation, Indian Council of the Elderly, LGBT Community Center, Embassy Center MKE, and Hmong American Friendship Association. In addition, Age-Friendly Milwaukee County greatly appreciates the many residents who shared their time and insights as Community Conversation participants to help improve the broader community. Thank you also to the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and AARP which provided financial and in-kind support for the Community Conversations.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about Age-Friendly Milwaukee County, visit <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/DHHS/Older-Adults-Services/Age-Friendly-Communities> or contact Project Manager, Maria Melendes, at Maria.Melendes@milwaukeecountywi.gov.