

# *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities*

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# ***Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities***

**By Lucinda M. Beier, Ph.D. Director, Applied Social Research Unit, Illinois State University**

## **1. Executive Summary** ([Back to top](#))

The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project, conducted between 1995 and 1997, combined research and programming to facilitate planning for developing elder-friendly rural communities in Illinois. The project received financial support from the Retirement Research Foundation, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs (Western Illinois University), and the Cooperative Extension Service. A collaborative effort of the Applied Social Research Unit (Illinois State University), the Cooperative Extension Service (Springfield Extension Center), the Office of Continuing Education and Community Service (University of Illinois), and the Laboratory for Community and Economic Development (University of Illinois), the project views as essential the integration of elders' needs and preferences into community development planning.

Like the U.S. population in general, Illinois' population is aging rapidly. This trend is particularly apparent in rural areas, where the youth drain to cities means that the elderly make up a larger percentage of the population than in urban areas. This situation presents both opportunities and challenges to rural communities. The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project contends that deliberate planning to make communities elder-friendly will benefit all residents by taking advantage of the human and financial resources represented by current and future older residents. This planning will also help communities meet the challenge of supporting seniors as they age in place.

Community development planning starts with needs assessment. The Applied Social Research Unit/Community Research Services at Illinois State University conducted research to collect information about rural elders' quality of life and the extent to which local government officials and senior service providers are aware of seniors' wants and needs. Research activities included:

- a mail survey of approximately 1,128 randomly selected persons over age 60 living in Illinois' nonmetropolitan counties;
- a mail survey of 158 selected local leaders and service providers; and
- telephone interviews with 51 local leaders and service providers.

In addition to this research, the Rural Documentary Collection at Illinois State University was commissioned to take photographs illustrating the quality of life of rural seniors, the contributions elders make to their communities, and the needs of many older adults. Information resulting from this work supported ten public presentations and six one-day workshops in locations distributed around the state. In all, a total of approximately 500 people attended these events.

The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* one-day workshop program was designed to be adapted to the needs of a community, county, or region. Workshops were organized by project team members and local planning committees composed of Cooperative Extension Service personnel and representatives from other organizations including the Area Agency on Aging, county health department, local government, economic development committee, hospital, AARP, and senior service providers. Planning committee members were responsible for developing the workshop program, arranging for local speakers and facilitators, raising local funds (if necessary to support special costs, such as a reduced rate for senior participants or speakers' fees and travel expenses), assembling a mailing list for workshop invitations, organizing local publicity, and personally urging as many people as possible to attend the workshop.

For all but one workshop, the Applied Social Research Unit/Community Research Services (ASRU/CRS) of Illinois State University took on workshop administration responsibilities, including layout and printing of brochures, assembly of mailing lists, mailing of invitations, acceptance of registrations, payment of workshop expenses, and printing and collating of workshop materials. ASRU/CRS also performed follow-up

activities including analysis of evaluation form responses and composition of summaries resulting from roundtable discussions. In addition, ASRU/CRS served as fiscal agent for the project.

The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project met its objectives. It disseminated information about the needs and wishes of rural seniors to a large audience representing a diverse range of age groups, occupations, and experience of rural life. It introduced the same audience to innovative approaches to elder-inclusive community development planning, encouraging them to think "outside the box" about making the best use of all of their resources. It created and tested a model for research and programming which could be replicated both here in Illinois and elsewhere.

In addition, research conducted to support workshop development has resulted in publications reaching a wider audience. Research reports were mailed and distributed to a large number of people including legislators, agency staff, and members of the general public. Research results also supported publication of an article on older rural women in the public affairs magazine, *Illinois Issues*, in January 1996, and generated a number of newspaper reports appearing at around the same time. These publications raised awareness on the part of both policy makers and members of the general public of issues associated with rural aging.

Finally, the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project is a leader in viewing aging as a general community development issue. While there is considerable work on retiree attraction, assistive technology, adaptable housing, assisted living, the senior market, and other related topics, project team members have been unable to locate either publications or projects taking a holistic approach to the development of elder-friendly communities. Thus, the project retains considerable potential for informing those interested in both aging and community development issues, and for raising the consciousness of members of the public about the urgency and benefits of planning for the graying of our communities.

## **2. Project Description** ([Back to top](#))

The graying of America is no longer news. Demographers and politicians, marketers and actuaries continually remind us that more people are living longer than ever before. While, in 1970, fewer than 1.5 million Americans were age 85 or older, by 1990 that number had more than doubled and, with the influx of the "baby boomers," by 2045 it is expected to reach 15.4 million. Indeed, the elderly are the fastest growing segment of the American population. By 2030, one out of every four Americans will be age 60 or older.

This trend is especially evident in Illinois, which has the nation's seventh largest elderly population. In Illinois, the population aged 60 and over grew by 23 percent between 1970 and 1990 and is projected to grow by another 41 percent by the year 2020. Because of the youth drain to cities, rural regions of the state are aging more quickly than urban areas. In Illinois' metropolitan counties, persons over age 60 represent 16 percent of the total population, compared to 22 percent in rural counties.

These developments are often cited as a warning. The growing elderly population is sometimes characterized as a threat to national prosperity—a mob of greedy geezers placing an unacceptable burden on the shoulders of a proportionately small and shrinking group of younger people. Alternatively, the aging of America is presented as evidence of a need for expanding

service provision. The gerontology literature is replete with discussions of the challenge represented by an increasing population of frail seniors. Despite their differences, both of these perspectives tend to view older adults as essentially passive and needy, unable to help themselves or anyone else.

The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project, conducted between 1995 and 1997 by project partners from Illinois State University and the University of Illinois, takes the alternative view that the growing elderly population represents a significant and largely untapped resource for rural communities. Together with the other approaches mentioned above, the project maintains that the unprecedented demographic changes currently underway require concerted planning and policy development. However, it is unique in arguing that older adults must be integral to the planning effort, and that, by recognizing and incorporating both the capabilities and the needs of seniors, rural community developers can improve the quality of life for all residents.

During the past half century, community development has been driven, at least implicitly, by the needs of young families. Planning for housing and residential development, parks and recreational facilities, schools, employment, and other components of viable communities, has presumed that communities are largely composed of nuclear families with children under age eighteen. While rural communities must continue to meet the needs of younger residents, with steady growth in the number of rural seniors they should also consider the benefits of becoming deliberately elder-friendly.

What does this mean? According to Cheryl Barber, An in-vogue term since the mid-1980s is "user-friendly." We talk about VCRs, automobile dashboards, computer software, cable services, and even church services as being "user-friendly." Whatever is user-friendly is easy and convenient for the user; it helps and supports. User-friendly can refer to inanimate objects, environments, policies, and services. A service, program, policy, or facility is *elder-friendly* if it maximizes benefits to older adults and their families by its ease, convenience, helpfulness, and support. Examples include: large print directional signs; wide, unobstructed store aisles; longer walk signals at intersections; home delivery of groceries and prescription drugs; and volunteer opportunities.

These examples suggest ways of making existing services and facilities more accessible and user-friendly to older adults. However, incorporating seniors' perspectives into community development planning also addresses larger issues including:

- planning centrally located, appropriate, and affordable housing for older adults;

- creating networks of health care and senior service providers to coordinate the care of frail seniors;
- developing downtown businesses catering specifically to the elder market and making certain that infrastructure and amenities make it pleasant for seniors to use those businesses;
- creating intergenerational volunteer programs benefiting both older adults and younger community residents;
- fostering training, employment, and business opportunities for seniors who want or need paid work; and
- developing recreational facilities and/or activities especially targeting older adults.

Above all, elder-friendliness is an attitude that should imbue all public contact between business and service personnel and members of the general public. Elder-friendliness should become part of customer service training and general education.

The population of older adults is diverse. Although it is true that dependency and poverty increase with age, many seniors—particularly the "young-old" aged between 60 and 75—are healthy, active, and prosperous. Indeed, people between the ages of 55 and 74 have the largest amount of discretionary income of any age group. By investing in local financial institutions; buying local property; paying taxes; starting, staffing, and spending money in local businesses; seniors are major contributors to rural economies. Their financial contributions would be greater still if rural community and business leaders were to organize facilities and services appropriately for seniors' needs—to become more elder-friendly.

This effort, in turn, would support the development strategy of attracting retirees. Seniors moving into a community bring their money with them. Businesses serving older adults create jobs for younger people. Thus, planning which leads to the development of amenities and services for retirees may ultimately benefit all residents of the community, including young families and older seniors as they age in place.

In addition to the economic resource they represent, older adults are an important human resource. People are living longer and retiring earlier now than ever before. The median age of retirement today is 60.6, while the expectation of life at birth is 75. Thus, seniors have a large amount of discretionary time, a significant proportion of which is devoted to voluntary service. According to a 1988 survey, every day in the United States older adults contribute 163,000 hours of volunteer work. By deliberately recruiting seniors to serve in community-based programs, resource-starved rural communities can improve the range and quality of local services.

Seniors like living in rural communities. According to a 1995 Gallup poll, 60 percent of Americans over age 50 prefer small towns and rural areas to cities. A survey of Illinois' rural seniors conducted in 1995 for the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project revealed that the majority of respondents have lived in their communities for more than twenty years, and intend to remain where they are.

(See Appendix 2 for survey reports.) They like knowing their neighbors, participating in community organizations, and owning their own homes. They appreciate the relatively lower cost of living and freedom from crime of rural compared to urban living.

However, there are serious challenges facing rural elders and their communities which must be addressed if seniors are to age in place with independence and dignity. All rural residents face special and growing problems in gaining access to goods, services, and opportunities. Since these resources increasingly tend to be concentrated in more densely settled areas, rural-dwellers travel further to work, shop, and obtain health care, entertainment, educational, and other services than they did as recently as ten years ago.

This trend has a particularly marked impact on older adults who find it more difficult to leave their homes and communities than their younger neighbors. It strains the capabilities of informal rural care-givers who have fewer support options than their urban counterparts. It also affects rural service providers, who must serve relatively small numbers of people dispersed over relatively large geographical areas. Thus, in addition to recognizing and taking advantage of the resource represented by a growing elderly population, rural communities must plan to provide the support services their older residents will need as they age in place.

The *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project had the broad objective of informing and stimulating community-based planning to increase the elder-friendliness of rural Illinois communities. The project combined research and public programming to accomplish this goal.

### **3. Research activities** ([Back to top](#))

#### **3.1 Research** ([Back to top](#))

Many assumptions are made about the needs and wishes of older adults. These assumptions inform service provision of all kinds, including senior transportation, subsidized housing, group meal services, and other programs offered by public and private organizations. To obtain current information about rural seniors' experiences, needs, and preferences the Applied Social Research Unit/Community Research Services (ASRU/CRS) of Illinois State University conducted a mail survey of persons over age 60 living in Illinois' 74 nonmetropolitan counties regarding a range of quality of life issues. Then, to test the level of awareness regarding these issues on the part of those involved in community administration and senior service provision, ASRU/CRS conducted a mail survey of selected rural leaders and service providers (LSPs). Finally, to add a qualitative dimension to survey research results, ASRU/CRS conducted a series of telephone interviews with LSPs who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

In addition to research conducted by ASRU/CRS, the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project contracted with the Rural Documentary Collection at Illinois State University to take photographs illustrating the quality of life of rural seniors. These photographs were used at workshops and in research publications to

indicate both the challenges faced by seniors and the imaginative ways seniors meet these challenges. (See Appendix 3 for copies of selected photographs.)

### **3.2 Survey of rural seniors** ([Back to top](#))

Since 1989, the Illinois Rural Life Panel Survey project has annually surveyed approximately 2,000 residents of Illinois' nonmetropolitan counties regarding quality of life issues including access to goods, services, and opportunities; health care needs and preferences; education; employment; taxation; and community development options. In 1994 and 1995, Illinois Rural Life Panelists were surveyed regarding services available to and needed by seniors in their communities.

In the spring of 1995, ASRU/CRS conducted a special survey of older adults to support program development for the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project. To create a senior panel, 2,000 randomly selected new contacts were added to the 757 persons over age 60 already serving on the Illinois Rural Life Panel. ASRU/CRS staff members mailed eight-page survey questionnaires to 2,757 seniors living in nonmetropolitan counties. (A copy of this questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.) Questionnaires were completed and returned by 1,128 people, yielding an overall response rate of 41 percent. It is noteworthy that for seniors drawn from the Illinois Rural Life Panel, the response rate was 72 percent, while the response rate for persons added to create the Senior Panel was 29 percent .

Most responding Senior Panelists (SPs) live in communities with less than 5,000 people, although just over a quarter reside in communities with populations over 10,000. Nearly all are white. A slight majority are male, and two-thirds are married. Most are relatively young, between 60 and 70 years of age, and well educated, possessing a high school diploma or college degree. Only three quarters of SPs are retired. More respondents live in western and southern Illinois than in eastern and northern parts of the state, but all areas are well represented.

### **3.3 Survey of leaders and service providers** ([Back to top](#))

To determine the extent to which those whose professional responsibilities include service to older adults share seniors' perspectives on quality of life issues, the project team surveyed a group of selected key informants designated "Local Leaders and Service Providers," or LSPs. This group was composed of local government officials, law enforcement professionals, clergy, adult educators, health care professionals, and senior service providers geographically distributed throughout rural Illinois. Survey questionnaires were sent to 300 people; 158 LSPs completed and returned questionnaires yielding a response rate of 53 percent. (A copy of this questionnaire is included in Appendix 1.)

As with SPs, more LSPs live in southern and western Illinois, although other regions are also well represented. Most LSPs live in communities with fewer than 5,000 residents, although they tend to live in somewhat larger towns than the Senior Panelists. More men

(57%) than women (43%) responded to the survey. Most LSPs (60%) are between the ages of 41 and 60. A large majority (89%) have close friends or relatives over age 60 living in their communities. Participating LSPs are local government officials (39%), health care providers (23%), and other service providers (38%).

### **3.4 Interviews with leaders and service providers** [\(Back to top\)](#)

In summer, 1995, ASRU/CRS staff members conducted interviews with 51 LSPs who had indicated their willingness to be interviewed on survey questionnaires. Interview guides were developed for use with health care providers, local government officials, and senior service workers. (Copies of the interview guides appear in Appendix 1.) Interviewees were asked to evaluate current services available to seniors in their communities, identify major problems affecting seniors and providing services to them, and suggest ways of addressing the problems identified.

### **3.5 Research Results** [\(Back to top\)](#)

Research results indicate that most rural seniors are satisfied with their communities. (See Appendix 2 for research reports.) Indeed, most SPs (79%) and LSPs (87%) say that they would advise older adults to move to their community. More than four-fifths of SPs have lived in their communities for over 20 years; only seven percent indicate there is any chance they might move within the next year.

Senior Panelists make many contributions to their communities. Most (85%) are homeowners, and thus pay property taxes. The majority report they volunteer for local activities and groups including church programs (69%), charitable organizations (35%), local governing boards (16%), and nursing homes (14%). Two-thirds of SPs indicate they provide informal support to a spouse, relative, or friend. When asked about the advantages of having older residents living in rural communities, LSPs interviewed for this study referred to the small amount of crime and violence perpetrated by seniors; the opportunity to learn from their experience and knowledge; their good values; the money they spend in the community; the fact that seniors will take some jobs the young won't take; and the role models they present to younger people.

Nonetheless, survey findings reveal problems associated with the comfort and independence of rural seniors. Local access to goods, services, and opportunities is diminishing. For example, while most SPs continue to use local grocery and drug stores, many of these retail outlets are closing in rural communities. Thus, a growing number of older adults must either leave their home communities or depend upon others to pick up and deliver their food and medicines. Seniors also typically must leave their communities to consult medical specialists and obtain hospital care.

Most SPs solve their access problems by driving their own cars to urban areas. However, this solution works best for younger seniors. At about age 86, SPs report ceasing to drive and beginning to depend upon either friends and family members or public transportation to get from one place to another. That older adults should probably stop driving sooner is

indicated by the 47 percent of survey respondents who had been involved in a car accident during the past five years. One sheriff commented that seniors are often "terrible drivers," but are "too independent to give up driving." Over one-third of SPs report that their communities have no public transportation service. SPs and LSPs agree there is a need for more public transportation.

Rural communities lack the range of housing options available in metropolitan areas. As indicated above, most SPs have lived in their homes for 20 years or more. They experience difficulties with keeping their property in good repair; many require help with housework, yard care, and snow removal. LSPs maintain that rural seniors are placed in nursing homes earlier than their urban counterparts because of a lack of assisted living services and transitional housing.

They also indicate that although subsidized housing is available in many rural communities, it is often inappropriate or unappealing to seniors because of type (high rise), quality (poor), or environment (bad neighborhood and/or neighbors) of the housing available. One mayor expressed the need for a retirement center within walking distance of the downtown area. He said there are 20 nursing homes within a half-hour drive, but there really aren't many places for seniors to live who are in between complete independent living and nursing home living. When asked about the services and facilities they would like to have provided in "local housing you could afford," the majority of SPs indicated a desire for housekeeping services (71%), laundry facilities (64%), and prepared meals (62%).

People use more health care services in the last years of their lives than at any other time. Access to high quality affordable medical care is crucial for older adults wherever they live. The fact that 70 of Illinois' 74 nonmetropolitan counties are designated complete or partial Health Professional Shortage Areas by the Illinois State Department of Health indicates that rural seniors have fewer choices regarding providers and must travel further to obtain care than their urban counterparts. Senior Panelists are concerned about access, cost, and quality issues. LSPs are worried about the effects of ongoing concentration of health care services in urban areas, declining viability of rural providers, and potential effects of the trend toward managed care on rural health care provision. Responses from both groups indicate a need for more public information about the services provided by mid-level practitioners (primarily physician assistants and nurse practitioners) and a policy shift in favor of allowing more independence in the practices of these professionals who almost certainly will be providing the lion's share of primary health care in rural communities in the future.

As is true of other age groups, the quality of rural seniors' lives depends upon their financial resources and living circumstances. Research conducted for the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project indicates that the poorer and more isolated the older adult, the more difficult it is for the person to obtain needed goods and services. Both national figures and survey research results reveal that this problem is highly gendered, with older women experiencing a lower quality of life

than older men. This is because women live longer, have smaller retirement incomes, and are more likely to live alone than men.

To what extent do Senior Panelists and Leaders and Service Providers agree about the quality of life of older adults in rural communities? Generally speaking, there is a high level of awareness among LSPs—particularly health care and senior service providers—about elders’ needs and the services available to meet these needs. However, there are some areas where the perspectives of SPs and LSPs diverge.

- Compared to SPs, LSPs overrate the extent to which seniors use formally provided services, including the public library, senior center, park district program, and community college.
- LSPs perceive a greater availability of job opportunities for seniors than do SPs.
- LSPs underrate the extent to which seniors pay for support services.
- LSPs are somewhat more likely to believe that the needs of older residents are considered in the planning and implementation of community projects and services than are SPs.

According to the ASRU/CRS staff member who interviewed LSPs, "One can perceive a lack of genuine knowledge by many of the local government officials about the quality of the programs and services offered to seniors." To some degree, this may be due to the traditional consideration of the needs of and provision of services to older adults in isolation from other age groups. One senior service worker recommended an intergenerational approach to the development of elder-friendly communities, saying, "We need an ongoing dialogue between all levels of society that will bring the generations together. The needs of the young are often in conflict with the needs of the old. The old must not always vote down tax increases that may help the young, and the young must respect and care for the old. We need a dialogue to see how the elderly can be useful and improve society. The elderly can't be warehoused. Money can't solve everything."

#### **4. Public programming** ([Back to top](#))

##### **4.1 Workshops** ([Back to top](#))

To raise awareness in rural communities of the opportunities and challenges posed by the growing elderly, the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project team members made public presentations of research results and conducted one-day workshops at the request of local groups geographically distributed around the state. In all cases, presentations and workshops were tailored for the needs of the group involved. Approximately 500 people attended the presentations and workshops associated with this project.

##### **4.2 Workshop planning** ([Back to top](#))

The workshop planning team consisted of Lucinda Beier (Illinois State University), Cheryl Barber (University of Illinois), Jeri Marxman (Cooperative Extension Service), and Ann Silvis (University of Illinois). Each member of the team contributed unique skills and resources to the planning effort. Beier's organization conducts and publishes information emerging from survey and qualitative research projects; Barber's organization conducts a wide range of educational programs for seniors; Marxman's office is responsible for maintaining close links between the Cooperative Extension Service and local governments; and Silvis's organization conducts community development research and programming. Between the autumn of 1994 and spring of 1997, this group met at least monthly to plan project research and workshops.

Planning resulted in the development of a workshop program designed to be adapted to local needs. (A copy of the workshop brochure is included in Appendix 5.) This program includes presentations on elder-friendliness (delivered by Barber), research results (delivered by Beier), and ways participants can make their communities more elder-friendly (delivered by Marxman). Other workshop activities selected by local committees included:

- presentation of public data on regional demographic trends;
- presentations given by guest speakers on topics such as attracting retirees, crime prevention programs, and elder-friendliness;
- short presentations followed by facilitated discussions on topics including health care, identification and use of local resources, housing, safety and security, financial management, and marketing to seniors; and
- roundtable discussions focused on local needs and resources associated with making communities more elder-friendly.

The project team also put together the substantial binder distributed to all workshop participants. Although the exact composition of the binder varied somewhat from workshop to workshop, it always included the following:

- the workshop program;
- a paper describing a general approach to the development of elder-friendly communities;
- research reports published by ASRU/CRS, the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, and the Illinois Department on Aging;
- copies of the PowerPoint slides developed for the workshop presentation;
- descriptions of model programs that might be replicated in Illinois' rural communities;
- information about both local and statewide resources associated with community development and senior services; and
- information supporting implementation of elder-friendly projects at the local level.

Planning for each workshop began with assembly of a local committee composed of members drawn from the Cooperative Extension Service and other groups involved in senior services including the Area Agency on Aging , county health departments, economic development organizations, health care providers, and the AARP. Committee members were responsible for developing the final workshop program, arranging for local speakers and facilitators, raising local funds (if necessary to support special costs, such as a reduced rate for senior participants or speakers' fees and travel expenses), assembling a mailing list for workshop invitations, organizing local publicity, and personally urging as many people as possible to attend the workshop. In two cases, committee members also solicited door prizes from local donors.

In all but one case, the Applied Social Research Unit/Community Research Services (ASRU/CRS) at Illinois State University took on workshop administration responsibilities, including layout and printing of brochures, assembly of mailing lists, mailing of invitations, acceptance of registrations, payment of workshop expenses, and printing and collating of workshop materials. ASRU/CRS also performed some follow-up activities including analysis and dissemination of evaluation form responses, provision of contact lists of participants, and composition of summaries resulting from roundtable discussions. In addition, ASRU/CRS served as fiscal agent for the project.

#### 4.3 Workshops and presentations [\(Back to top\)](#)

Members of the project team made presentations about the project approach and research findings for the groups and/or events indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1: Public Presentations**

<b>Group/event</b>	<b>Presenter(s)</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Rural Health Update, Champaign	Beier	11/30/94	30
Illinois State University Annuitants, Normal	Beier	3/13/95	20
Carle Spring Gerontology Conference, Champaign	Beier	4/4/96	40
Family Life Conference, Allerton Park, Monticello	Barber, Beier, Marxman	4/12/96	15
Area Agency on Aging workshop, Rantoul	Beier	4/16/96	15
CES Unit Leaders Conference	Marxman	9/17/96	55
Illinois Intergenerational Initiative Conference, Governor's State University	Barber	9/13/96	25
Midwestern University Physician	Beier	10/17/96	25

Assistant Program, Downers Grove			
IDA/IDPH Health and Aging Conference, Chicago	Barber, Marxman	11/6-8/97	25
National Council on Aging Conference, Chicago	Barber	3/14-17/97	20
Family Service of Champaign County	Barber	4/9/97	8
<b>Total participants</b>			<b>313</b>

One-day workshops were conducted in the locations indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2: One-day workshops**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Area covered</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Springfield	state	3/7/96	41
Marion	13 Southern Illinois counties	9/26/96	43
Geneseo	6 Western Illinois counties	10/31/96	32
Rushville	9 Western Illinois counties	11/15/96	33
Mt. Carmel	2 Eastern Illinois counties	1/23/97	36
Carlinville	2 Central Illinois counties	3/19/97	34
<b>Total participants</b>			<b>219</b>

Beier, Barber, and Marxman will conduct a three-hour workshop *via* the Illinois Satellite Network on May 12, 1997, which will be broadcast at Carl Sandburg, Waubonsee, Rock Valley, Danville, Highland, Joliet, and Lewis and Clark community colleges. Additional satellite television broadcasts on senior employment and senior housing are planned for the near future.

#### **4.4 Workshop evaluations** ([Back to top](#))

The workshops conducted in Marion, Mt. Carmel, and Carlinville received the highest overall ratings from participants, while those attending workshops in Geneseo and Rushville were less enthusiastic. (Program evaluation reports for each workshop are included in Appendix 5.) This is interesting, because plans for the Geneseo and Rushville programs were far more ambitious than those for other locations, including nationally known presenters for plenary sessions and speakers with at least statewide reputations for parallel breakout sessions.

In general, the workshop activities receiving the highest ratings were breakout sessions, roundtable discussions, and presentations given by local people. (Law enforcement officials were popular with workshop participants.) Participants enjoyed the chance to

meet and talk with other people from a range of occupational backgrounds. Binder materials received high marks for both content and presentation quality.

#### **4.5 Follow-up activities** ([Back to top](#))

There was no expectation of follow-up activities on the part of participants in the workshop conducted in Springfield. Rather, that program was designed as a pilot, to help the project team identify successful and unsuccessful approaches, and incorporate what they learned in planning other workshops. The major lesson of the pilot was that packing too much information into the program and not allowing enough time for participants to talk and interact with each other is not successful. It is also important to know something about a speaker's effectiveness before inviting him or her to speak.

It is too soon to expect significant results from the workshop conducted in Carlinville at the end of March. Workshop participants have received copies of the attendance list to facilitate networking. They have also received reports from the afternoon breakout sessions. Workshops conducted elsewhere have generated the following activities:

##### Marion

Workshop participants intend to reassemble in the near future to continue discussing opportunities for collaboration among the different organizations providing services to older adults.

##### Geneseo

Jerry Schroeder, Assistant Director of the Western Area Agency on Aging (WAAA), reports that the workshop was discussed at length by his board. Issues raised during that discussion have raised sensitivity about issues associated with elder-friendliness and community planning. Schroeder believes this change in perspective will influence his agency's planning. In addition, the WAAA will be using data presented at the workshop as part of its needs assessment for next year's plan.

##### Mt. Carmel

According to Martha Spier, a local organizer who works for the Cooperative Extension Service, the local planning committee intends to get back together to organize a workshop on retirement planning. In addition, the groups assembled to talk about marketing to seniors and financial management intend to meet to continue their discussion.

Although project team organizations are prepared to provide support services as these are requested by community groups, the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project lacks the resources to stimulate and coordinate follow-up activities. The responsibility rests with local agencies, including county Cooperative Extension Service offices, county health departments, and the Area Agencies on Aging,

to provide follow-up information to workshop participants and act on ideas generated during workshop discussions by reconvening those participants to plan and implement specific projects.

## **5. Conclusions and recommendations** ([Back to top](#))

### **5.1 Conclusions** ([Back to top](#))

As a maiden voyage, the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project was a great success. It disseminated information about the needs and wishes of rural seniors to a large audience representing a diverse range of age groups, occupations, and experience of rural life. It introduced the same audience to innovative approaches to elder-inclusive community development planning and encouraged them to think "outside the box" about making the best use of all of their resources. It created and tested a model for research and programming which could be replicated both here in Illinois and elsewhere. The project met its objectives.

In addition, research conducted to support workshop development has resulted in publications reaching a wider audience. The Illinois Rural Life Panel reports summarizing information provided by the Senior Panelists and focusing on the circumstances of older women were mailed and distributed to a large number of people including members of the Illinois legislature and Illinois representatives to the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Survey research also supported publication of an article on older rural women in the public affairs magazine, Illinois Issues, in January 1996, and generated a number of newspaper reports appearing at around the same time. These publications raised awareness on the part of both policy makers and members of the general public of issues associated with rural aging. (Copies of publications appear in Appendix 2.)

Finally, the project is a leader in viewing aging as a general community development issue. While there is considerable work on retiree attraction, assistive technology, adaptable housing, assisted living, the senior market, and other related topics, project team members have been unable to locate either publications or projects taking a holistic approach to the development of elder-friendly communities. Thus, the project retains considerable potential for informing those interested in both aging and community development issues and for raising the consciousness of members of the public about the urgency and benefits of planning for the graying of our communities.

### **5.2 Recommendations** ([Back to top](#))

Recommendations will be discussed, first, in terms of the lessons learned from conducting research and workshops for this project. Second, the project team will make recommendations for future research and programming.

#### **5.2.1 Lessons learned** ([Back to top](#))

Survey research conducted for the *Coming of Age in Rural Illinois: Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* indicates a need for a larger sample if results are to be reliable at any geographical level other than the state as a whole. In addition, at eight pages, the survey questionnaire used in 1995 was very long—particularly for members of the "old-old" group over age 75. A shorter questionnaire with larger print would yield a higher response rate. Furthermore, at the design stage, greater attention should have been given to matching questions asked of Senior Panelists and Leaders and Service Providers. This would have facilitated comparison of responses of SPs and LSPs. Finally, there remain opportunities to analyze survey data in greater detail.

The workshops conducted for this project were each very different, thus offering the project team useful experience of successful and unsuccessful approaches to workshop development. Perhaps the most important lesson learned was to maintain realistic expectations. Despite herculean efforts to publicize workshops, attendance remained small. This is not necessarily a bad thing; workshop participants appeared to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere and networking opportunities afforded by the moderate-sized groups attending. However, plans for the workshop program should reflect this expectation. It is a mistake to invite big-name, highly priced speakers to small meetings located in rural areas.

It is also a mistake to plan too many breakout roundtable discussions for a small meeting; for a group of between 30 and 40 people, three roundtables are plenty. In addition, while it is desirable to involve as many local people in discussions as possible, it is unnecessary to ask more than one person to facilitate a roundtable. Finally, roundtables worked best when facilitators did not make formal presentations. Instead, it was helpful to provide general questions for discussion focused on specific topics, then to allow groups to talk about questions and report back to the reconvened workshop participants during a wrap-up session.

### **5.2.2 Recommendations for future research and programming** ([Back to top](#))

The effort to facilitate development of elder-friendly communities is worthwhile and should continue. The following recommendations should inform planning of the next project:

1. The project team should be assisted by an advisory group composed of representatives from state, federal, and local senior service agencies, key senior advocacy groups, business organizations, community development groups, and a media professional. This group will help to design research instruments, use and disseminate research results, select and publicize workshop locations, and either identify or provide guest speakers for workshops.
2. Additional survey research should be conducted to update and enhance information about seniors' quality of life. This time, the entire state of Illinois should be included to facilitate comparison of the experience of

urban, suburban, and rural seniors. This research would also make possible conduct of workshops anywhere in the state.

3. Establish links between the *Developing Elder-Friendly Communities* project and other community development programs such as *MAPPING the Future of Your Community* (Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, Western Illinois University), the *Competitive Communities Initiative* (Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs), and the *Illinois Main Street Program* (Illinois Lt. Governor's Office). Many communities identify projects serving seniors as a priority during the community development process. Access to the *Elder-Friendly Communities* workshop and publications would support success of those projects and lead to the development of increasingly elder-friendly communities.