

# Communities for a Lifetime

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Over the next 40 years, Indiana's population is expected to increase by 1 million people to nearly 7.5 million Hoosiers. That growth isn't unexpected, but one thing that has caught the attention of demographers is that Indiana's population is getting older.

According to the *Indiana Business Review*, a publication of the Indiana Business Research Center at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, the first Baby Boomers hit age 65 in 2011. By 2030, all Boomers will be 65, meaning that in less than 20 years, 13 percent of Indiana's population will be retirement age.

Taking into account all Hoosiers who are 55 and older, some 700,000 retirees and people approaching retirement age will be living in the state. And many of them are not headed to Florida; they're staying right here. That trend is forcing communities to take a close look and figure out how to address the demands that will put on public services.

The state is already looking ahead at that through a program known as Communities for a Lifetime. Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman's office recently awarded three grants of

\$16,000 each to communities around Indiana to encourage them to "welcome, value and support the meaningful participation of people of all abilities across the entire lifespan."

"Communities for a Lifetime is truly a collaborative and innovative effort for Indiana," says Skillman. "For the first time communities are looking at their long-term sustainability and determining what solutions will ensure their residents are invested and thriving in their communities of choice for years to come."

The three communities that received the grants are Valparaiso in Northwest Indiana, Huntington in Northeast Indiana, and Linton in Southern Indiana.

Helping those communities assess their needs, especially what will be needed to help retirees and senior citizens, is Dr. Phil Stafford, director of the Center on Aging and Community at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community at IU in Bloomington. "This initiative puts Indiana at the leading edge of the growing age-friendly community movement," says Stafford.

During a visit to Pines Retirement Village in Valparaiso in late spring, he told community

leaders they should prepare for what he calls "a silver tsunami." He says that by the middle of the century fully 12 percent of the state's population will be 65 or older; by 2030, one in three Hoosiers will be 55 or older.

"This is a very real phenomenon," says Stafford. "Many of these people will want to live in their home as long as they can, and that means communities need to reflect on how they will develop and grow."

Since 80 percent of older adults own their own home, it's understandable they would want to live there, says Stafford. "Home is an active form of environment for them. From our surveys, 94 percent have told us home is where they want to stay. Aging isn't just about time and body, it's a place."

As Stafford works with the three communities, the goal in each is to create a livable community for all ages. "The communities we've created thus far don't work all that well, especially the suburbs, where we have some retrofitting to do."

Stafford says the suburbs don't have easy access to public transportation. Homes are usually some distance from retail and government centers and far from entertainment choices—all



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things retirees say they want.

"The suburbs are low population density, auto-dependent areas that isolate elders who cannot drive," says Stafford. "They separate people from where they work and live and from where they shop and go to school."

One change that Stafford is discussing is how cities view their streets. "Streets should be for mobility, not just for cars," says Stafford. "They should be open for public transit, bikes, walkers, even golf carts."

All of those are pieces of a puzzle that's being put together to create the concept of an Elder-Friendly Community, says Stafford. "It comes down to one common goal—creating a good place to grow up and grow old."

Among the key principles being explored in Valparaiso, Huntington and Linton are neighborliness; creating an environment for growth, learning and autonomy; creating a positive image; diverse housing options; and creating a community for all ages. "Neighbors are not family, or even necessarily close friends," says Stafford. "Friendships may, however, emerge from the field of neighborly relations."

Stafford adds that most older people are prepared to deal with diminished capacity, but they want to be able to personally manage the process in an independent manner as long as possible.

"The older adult population of many towns and cities includes many people who have lived over 30 years in one location," says Stafford. "We have been struck time and again by the desire of older adults to remain in touch with people of all ages. While many common interests cement relations among the community of older adults, and places such as senior centers are valued as centers of such interest, there is a clear desire to remain involved with the total community."

Stafford says that as communities consider their options for dealing with an older population, it should be viewed as an opportunity, not a problem. "There are changes in store



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regarding our communities. Some are changing more quietly than others, but they are changing."

Stafford has been looking at Indiana's aging population for the last 12 years, talking with seniors, care providers, chambers of commerce and

community leaders around the state. "The Communities for a Lifetime grants are a part of the process. We were looking for communities that were ready to succeed. We looked at communities with housing, that were accessible and had good streets and sidewalks."

Stafford, who grew up in Hobart in Northwest Indiana, says his experience as a youngster there shaped his outlook on what livable communities need. "I remember that older people were a part of the neighborhood," says Stafford. "I guess I've always been a bit of a gadfly on this because I've always been interested in the community aspect of seniors."

Stafford says he hopes the work that evolves out of the Communities for a Lifetime will become a blueprint for communities across Indiana to make the necessary adjustments for an aging population.

"This could help drive economic development as well," says Stafford. "There are more startup businesses started by people between the ages of 45 to 60 than any other age group. They're looking at encore careers, so what can communities do to help make themselves more attractive to that group?"


Stafford says the national discourse right now is focused on the medical needs of older Americans, but there is a whole lot more to the discussion than medical care. "People want to stay put. We need to think in terms of living together and playing together. Seniors want to be a part of the community. Instead of senior centers, why not think community

centers where all ages can come together?

Valparaiso Mayor Jon Costas is a big proponent of the livability concept. Costas, a lawyer whose background is in elder law, says there is a lot a community like Valparaiso can do, not only for

seniors but for all residents.

"Demographics are changing everywhere. The trend of retirees moving to Florida isn't that great anymore. They want to remain in the community," says Costas. "Our older population is much more active so we've



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partnered with Pines Village Retirement Communities to create ElderStyle Valparaiso. We want to find out what's important for them."

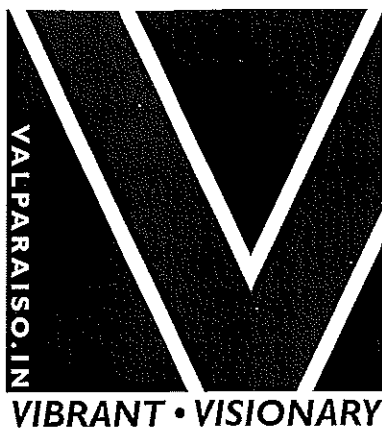
A city of 31,000, Valparaiso conducted a citywide audit to find out what assets it had in order to determine what was still needed. "We know we need to become more accessible," says Costas. "We need to create more partnerships. We're working with the YMCA, Valparaiso University and other organizations. They have lots of things that seniors like."

Costas says Valparaiso's downtown with its new Central Park Plaza has become a mecca for entertainment and dining, both of which are things seniors have told the city they like.

"We're a very progressive city. We encourage our citizens to enjoy the benefits of the city and to remain here and take advantage of the options we offer," says Costas.

John Siebert, director of Valparaiso's Parks and Recreation Department, is responsible for implementing ElderStyle. The program began in 2007 and a key part is the city's network of hiking and biking trails. The city currently has 15 miles of trails and Siebert says it's adding two miles a year.

"We want to be a community of choice for older adults," says Siebert. "The mayor had a vision for the entire lifespan, not just for young families. So far the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, both from residents and families. We have the pieces in place so aging in place can occur. We want to create a culture of wellness activities for



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everyone in the community."

Huntington Mayor Brooks Fetters says his community of 17,000 is doing all it can to encourage older adults to stay when they retire.

"We want to be a community for a lifetime," says Fetters. "For us, it started with an assessment of what we have and that turned out to be a look at neighborhood issues. Little things like help with yard work, or painting, or help around the house were things that were important to seniors. They want to do that as long as they can, but when they need help for those things, like making the house look nice for the whole neighborhood, that's where we can come in."

By connecting seniors with the

community and student groups (like Valparaiso, Huntington is home to a university), seniors are able to stay in their home longer. "Cross-generational activities like this benefit everyone," says Fetters.

Huntington also is discussing the possibility of allowing golf carts to be used on city streets. "Different groups have spoken out on it. It presents some challenges to us because to get to some of the retail areas, they're going to have to cross major highways."

Another issue being discussed is the city's network of trails. "We're not where we want to be with that right now, but we're a lot further along than we were a few years ago," says Fetters.

City-wide, Fetters says it's important for Huntington to be fully ADA-complaint in terms of sidewalk and building access.

"I want to make Huntington the best version of what it can be," says Fetters. "What I see is a vibrant group of individuals and if by doing what we can do will help prolong their life by five years, then we'll do it. It will enhance the quality of life in all our neighborhoods and make Huntington a better place to live."

Long term, Fetters says that if what Huntington does can help serve as a blueprint for other communities in Indiana, then that's a plus all the way around. "We're trying to be very proactive and address change. We're certainly willing to share our experience with the understanding that we're not perfect."

When Linton's late Mayor Tom Jones died last year, he left a table full of things to do for

incoming Mayor John Wilkes. One of those was completing the town's assessment of what it needs to do to become one of Indiana's Communities for a Lifetime. Wilkes has fully embraced the concept. "We've developed a comprehensive plan and our primary issues are housing and services."

Linton, with just 5,400 people, is the smallest of the three Indiana communities receiving a Communities for a Lifetime grant. Wilkes says he's been fortunate to be able to lean on someone like Noble Stallons for support in the effort.

Stallons, the former head of the Utilities District of Western Indiana/REMC, is an advocate for the elderly. He is chairman of the Governor's Commission on Aging and for the past 15 years has been president of the Generations Area Agency on Aging in Greene County.

"We're a community that's focused on the elderly," says Stallons. "It's always been a caring community." Stallons says the first thing Linton did was list its assets and then it came up with a list of what else the community needed.

"Transportation was right at the top of the list," says Wilkes. That led to the city council in July passing an ordinance that allowed the use of golf carts on city streets. The carts have to be inspected and licensed (for a fee) by the city. The carts have to be insured and they can't travel on the highway that goes through town, but they can cross it.

"It's been very successful," says Wilkes. "It's a cost effective way for seniors to get around town.

It's also been a way for us to get the elderly involved in the community."

Stallons says he's proud that the effort is working and his focus has now moved on to providing adequate housing for seniors. "We need to keep

the elderly connected with the community and we need to make sure they're healthy. I think we're demonstrating that when we do what's good for the elderly, it's good for the entire community." ■

—RICK A. RICHARDS

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