

## Imagining age-friendly communities

By *Jim Hamilton, MSc, MPA*

In an age-friendly community, there are walking trails with hard-pack surfaces, suitable for a walker or a baby stroller. There might be lights for nighttime safety, and benches for a quick rest. The benches would have armrests to aid the user in getting up or down. Age-friendly features in a community benefit people of all ages and encourage healthy, active lifestyles for all.

In an age-friendly community, planners and residents pay as much attention to the 'built' environment as to the social environment. Sidewalks are cleared of snow. Curb cuts making getting on and off sidewalks easy. Cobblestones, which collect snow and ice and are fall dangers, are taken out of the planning equation.

People get out and socialize because transportation is affordable and accessible. Age-friendly restaurants and grocery stores encourage healthy eating and make healthy choices easy. Programs are open to people at all income levels.

In an age-friendly community, everyone is involved in making their community a better place to live. That includes local municipal councils and staff, the business community, service organizations, student councils and youth organizations. It includes police services, health and social service agencies, local media, and most importantly, older residents themselves.

### **How age-friendly is your community?**

In 2007, the World Health Organization released *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide*. It encourages communities to consider eight 'domains' or areas to look at when planning for an age-friendly community:

- outdoor spaces and buildings
- transportation
- housing
- respect and social inclusion
- social participation
- civic participation and employment



- communication and information, and
- community support and health services.

Recognizing that many older adults live outside of cities, Canada followed with a resource titled *Age-Friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide*. Since then, communities across Canada and the world have developed action plans to become more age-friendly. They have started by asking "How age-friendly are we?"

You can ask the same question about your community. Consider your own opportunities for exercise, social connection, civic participation and healthy eating. And remember, the changes you make will benefit residents of all ages.

### **Learn more**

- Check with your local municipal office
- Visit the web site of your provincial seniors ministry
- Check out [www.agefriendlymanitoba.ca](http://www.agefriendlymanitoba.ca)
- Read age-friendly guides such as **Healthy Aging in Canada: A New Vision, A Vital Investment**.

About the Author: Jim Hamilton is the Associate Director of the Centre on Aging at the University of Manitoba, a member of the ALCOA Guardians (Board of Directors) and has served as a special advisor to the Public Health Agency of Canada on healthy aging and age-friendly communities.