The Maturing of America — http://www.n4a.org/pdf/MOAFinalReport.pdf
Getting Communities on Track for an Aging Population
Executive Summary

America and its communities are aging and aging rapidly. As the Baby Boom generation- born between 1946 and 1964- reaches retirement age, the number of Americans over age 65 is expected to reach 71.5 million by 2030- twice their number in the year 2000. At that point, one out of every five people in the nation will be an older adult. The fastest growing segment of America's aging population are those people over the age of 85 who are most likely to need the support of family, friends and the community to remain living independently.

The vast majority of older Americans want to age in their homes and communities for as long as possible. However, the aging of the population will pose new challenges for the delivery of local services such as health care, recreation, housing, transportation, public safety, employment and education. While these services assist a broad segment of the population, they also have a major impact on the quality of life of older Americans. The aging of America will also present opportunities as the nation's communities realize the largest population of educated and skilled older adults in its history.

To help cities and counties better meet the needs of their aging population, and to harness the experience and talent of their older citizens, five national organizations joined forces to identify ways to prepare for the aging of this population. Known as *The Maturing of America — Getting Communities on Track for an Aging Population*, the project is being led by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, in partnership with the International City/County Management Association, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities and Partners for Livable Communities. The initiative is funded by a grant from MetLife Foundation.

In the project's first phase, Maturing of America partners surveyed 10,000 local governments to:

• determine their "aging readiness" to provide programs, policies and services that address the needs of older adults and their caregivers;
• to ensure that their communities are "livable" for persons of all ages; and
• to harness the talent, wisdom and experience of older adults to contribute to the community at large.

The survey found that only 46 percent of American communities have begun to address the needs of the rapidly increasing aging population. The survey results show that although many communities have some programs to address the needs of older adults, few have undertaken a comprehensive assessment to make their communities "elder friendly" or livable communities for all ages

Survey findings indicate that local governments generally offer basic health and nutrition programs, but as yet do not have the policies, programs or services in place to promote the quality of life and the ability of older adults to live independently and contribute to their communities for as long as possible.. These services might include job retraining, flextime and other job accommodations; home chore services, home modification and senior-friendly housing options, tax relief, roadway redesign or public transportation assistance as well as volunteer opportunities targeted to older adults.

The needs of older adults are often interrelated. For example, providing housing will not be sufficient if residents lack transportation to get to basic services such as medical offices, the pharmacy or grocery store. These interdependent needs of older adults may require a completely new comprehensive, holistic approach to service delivery organization and management.

American's communities need to take a fresh look at their existing policies, programs and services to see if they address the needs of an aging population. Those communities who have already begun to test their "aging readiness" are now reaching out to their older citizens to engage them in discussions about what changes to local government services may be needed to enhance their quality of life and ensure that they can grow old successfully in the community.

Although some of the changes that may be necessary to respond to an aging population may take a significant investment, many potential quality-of-life improvements can be accomplished with little cost and some as part of the local governments regular maintenance schedules. Some examples include:

• Providing road signs and markings that are more visible and easily read by older drivers.
• Adjusting the timing on pedestrian crossings to accommodate the mobility impaired older adults.
• Changing zoning ordinances to allow smaller residences on smaller lots to accommodate empty nesters.

These changes as well as others that would assist older adults age in their community would, in fact, benefit the community at large. Replacing road signs with larger print signs would help citizens of all ages see signs more clearly. Increasing the timing at pedestrian crossings would help parents with small children. Backyard trash service would assist citizens of all ages who may be mobility impaired. Encouraging the development of smaller homes would benefit young adults without children and other citizens searching for affordable housing.

Responding to the maturing of America offers local governments the opportunity to make their communities livable communities for all ages--- good places to grow up and to grow old.

The report presents the findings of the Maturing of America survey as well as recommendations and solutions based on the
survey findings. A summary of the findings follows.

■ **HEALTH** ... Access to affordable health care and preventive services is a growing concern among older adults who have a greater risk of suffering from acute and chronic diseases.

Recommendation: Communities should play a major role in ensuring access to a range of needed preventive health care
services for older adults.

■ **NUTRITION** ... An estimated 4 million older adults in the United States suffer from food insecurity or the inability to afford, prepare or gain access to food.

Recommendation: Communities should support a range of healthy home-delivered and congregate meals, as well aseducational and purchasing assistance programs to ensure that at-risk older adults have access to adequate nutrition.

■ **EXERCISE** ... Too few older adults get sufficient daily exercise, despite research showing that exercise can greatly increase overall muscle strength, bone density, agility and general function.

Recommendation: Communities should provide a range of fitness programs to assist older adults to safely and effectively exercise to improve their overall health and well-being. Additionally, communities can ensure that their parks and recreational facilities include walking trails, benches and fitness facilities that would accommodate and attract older citizens.

■ **TRANSPORTATION** ... Reduced mobility can put an older person at higher risk of poor health, isolation and loneliness. Like the majority of American adults, older Americans rely on private automobiles to meet their mobility needs. However, the physical limitations that come with age may overtime restrict or eliminate an older person's ability to drive. Many older adults who cannot drive can still live independently if they have access to available, adequate, affordable and accessible public transportation.

Recommendation: Communities should offer driving assessment and training to help older adults remain on the road as safely as possible for as long as possible. Communities should also consider improvements to roadway design such as large print road signs, grooved lane dividers, dedicated left turn lanes and extended walk times at pedestrian crosswalks to accommodate older drivers and pedestrians. Additionally, local governments should assess their existing public transportation systems to see if they address the needs of an aging population.

■ **PUBLIC SAFETY/EMERGENCY SERVICES** ... Older adults often feel especially vulnerable to disasters or other emergencies, falls and injuries, and crime and victimization. An estimated half-million persons age 60 and older are abused, neglected or exploited in their domestic settings. Additionally older adults who suffer from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia are at risk for wandering and getting lost.

Recommendation: Communities should ensure that public safety personnel and first responders are trained to deal with the specialized needs of older adults and that these needs are specifically addressed in community disaster plans. They also need to investigate and consider adapting new technologies designed to ensure the safety and well-being of older adults.

■ **HOUSING** ... Studies have shown that older adults overwhelmingly prefer to "age in place" in their existing homes and communities, but may need to modify their existing home or move to another residence that is more accessible, more affordable or more appropriate in size to accommodate their changing needs.

Recommendation: Communities should play a critical role in promoting the development of home modification programs that assist older citizens to adapt their existing homes to meet their needs. Additionally, communities should assess their land use plans, zoning ordinances and building codes to promote the development of a range of housing options that meet the needs of an aging population. These should be as close as possible to transportation links and/or walkable distance from daily needs like medical services or shopping.

■ **TAXATION AND FINANCE** ... As older adults retire and face living on reduced and fixed incomes, their ability to pay taxes, especially property taxes, may become limited. Escalating real estate prices raise property tax assessments. These increases on top of rising fees for water, sewer and garbage collection can place serious financial strains on many older citizens ability to age in place.

Recommendation: Communities should assist older citizens by providing tax assistance and relief to those most in financial need. Additionally, communities should offer education and training for older adults about how to protect themselves against financial fraud and predatory lending.

■ **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT** ... Many older adults are remaining in the workforce and their numbers areexpected to rise in the future. Factors that will make it more likely that older adults will continue to work include the increasein the Social Security retirement age, the elimination or reduction of employer pension plans, fluctuations in the stock market,and elimination of employer-provided retiree health coverage. The rise in older workers will require communities to provide special job training or retraining, modified work schedules and other job accommodations.

Recommendation: Communities should develop or partner with others who offer job training and retraining programs andlifelong learning opportunities that assist older adults to remain in the workforce. Additionally, communities should promote employment options — such as part- and flex-time work options — to attract and retain an aging workforce.

■ **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT/VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES** ... As older adults either retire or move to parttime employment, studies have shown that they hope to have more time to "give back" to their communities or become involved in meaningful and purposeful activities. The increase in the number of older adults can be a boom for communities that need assistance in carrying out programs and services.

Recommendation: Communities should create and expand opportunities for the effective and purposeful participation of older citizens on community boards and commissions as well as to create and expand meaningful volunteer opportunities in local government and non-profit organizations.

■ **AGING/HUMAN SERVICES** ... As people age they may need a range of supportive services to assist them in aging successfully in their homes and communities for as long as possible. However, currently older adults and their caregivers must navigate a maze of fragmented systems in order to access services.

Recommendation: Communities should promote the development of a single point of entry for information and access to all aging services. Additionally, communities should increase their support for a continuum of supportive services that older adults need to remain living independently at home and in the community.

■ **POLICIES/GUIDELINES** ... Land use and other planning processes can significantly impact the ability of an older adult to age successfully in their home and community.

Recommendation: Communities need to broadly re-examine existing planning policies to reflect the needs of an aging population and to develop strategies to engage older adults to be actively engaged in these processes. These recommendations offer cities and counties concrete steps they can take to begin preparing for the aging of the Baby Boomers.

September 27, 2006—Washington, D.C.– "*The Maturing of America – Getting Communities on Track for an Aging Population,*" a new report led by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) and funded by MetLife Foundation, finds that only 46% of American communities have begun planning to address the needs of the exploding population of aging Baby Boomers. The Baby Boom generation - born between 1946 and 1964 - is rapidly approaching retirement age. When this trend hits its peak in 2030, the number of people over age 65 in the United States will soar to 71.5 million – twice their number in the year 2000- or one in every five Americans.

"Beyond traditional aging services such as senior centers, meals-on-wheels programs, and home care, communities clearly need to reassess their policies, programs and services in the areas of transportation, housing, land use planning, public safety, parks and recreation, workforce development and volunteerism/civic engagement," said Sandy Markwood, CEO, National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a). "To respond to the rapid rise in their aging population, communities will need to provide larger street signage, accessible housing, age appropriate fitness programs, as well as lifelong learning and job re-training opportunities. Although targeted to an aging population, these services would improve the quality of life for citizens of all ages."

The survey was conducted through a partnership with n4a and the International City/County Management Association, the National Association of Counties, the National League of Cities and Partners for Livable Communities. Questionnaires were sent to local governments asking about their "aging readiness." The results show that although many communities have some programs to address the needs of older adults, very few have undertaken a comprehensive assessment of what it would take to make their community "elder friendly." New England and Pacific Coast regions consistently show higher percentages of service availability and/or provision than other areas of the country. The full report is available at www.n4a.org/pdf/MOAFinalReport.pdf, and includes "best practices" from communities all across the U.S.