"The golden years aren’t so golden."
Older adults in the Finger Lakes share their concerns

Between February 2021 and March 2022, Common Ground Health conducted nine focus groups with 92 older adults (aged 55 and older) on behalf of the Sage II Commission. Participants were 78% people of color and 72% women. We also conducted focus groups specifically to hear perspectives from men, Deaf and Latino older adults.

We asked participants the following three questions:
1. What is most important to you as you age?
2. What do you need so that you can safely stay in your home as you age?
3. What are you most concerned about in your current living situation?

Seven themes were identified: personal safety, information, housing, connection, independence, transportation and technology. Themes are listed below in order of how often the subject was brought up in all of the sessions.

Personal safety

Seniors are concerned about neighborhood safety and home security. They identified in-home accessibility needs such as grab bars, walk or roll-in showers, single-story homes, flashing doorbells and alarms. Seniors are interested in services that could check in on seniors living alone, and advise on and install accessibility features. Elder abuse and adequate screening of staff providing home care services were major concerns. Deaf and Latino seniors have additional concerns for their personal safety related to language barriers, both in terms of every day communication and emergencies.

- "... always a concern about elderly people and crime, people being robbed or taken advantage of."
- "Establish a connection ‘check in’ especially when living alone."
- "Someone to advise (us) about improving safety in the home: may need bars or a walk-in tub, secured rugs to prevent falls, optimal lighting."
- "A lot of senior apartments I’ve walked into and I’m shocked to see bath tubs. Seniors need walk-in showers. No grab bars? How can you call this a senior apartment?"
- "Deaf people need flashing lights for doorbells and alarms... I moved into a new facility and had to pay for these things. A lot of deaf people own these things but had to pay out of pocket. I wish we could tell facilities they need to have these things. Talking alarms don’t do us any good."

Information

Access to information is a common cause of concern for participants, covering the who, what, where and how of obtaining information on a variety of concerns. Seniors are unaware of existing services to assist with housing, social care and home renovations. Neighborhood groups, churches, health
care and other community-based organizations can expand their coverage to ensure seniors in their community know what to do and where to get services they need. Additionally, communication methods must be accessible for people who speak other languages, including American Sign Language, Spanish, and other languages.

- "Where are the resources? Who do I talk to about home care, aids service, legal service?"
- "There’s no central advocate or resources. Calling contractors is intimidating. How do you know who to call? The Internet is a minefield. Nice to have someone with knowledge of services."
- "I always have had the idea that we should have an agency that would service older adults. One that you can call, tell them your problem and they help you with it. For instance, you could call about a Spectrum, RG&E issue and they could assist you. I don’t mean they would give you a phone number but rather they help you with your problem."

### Housing

Housing concerns for seniors include availability, accessibility, affordability, amenities and community. Seniors want affordable, single-floor living with amenities such as laundry, storage, convenient parking, help with outdoor maintenance, and respectful and responsive landlords. A variety of housing options must be available – some seniors indicated a desire for seniors-only communities, while others were interested in or required multi-generational living opportunities.

- "Affordable housing. Seniors need a place to live without paying a fortune for it."
- "We have a lot of those service paid for – grass cutting, shoveling, spring/summer trees cut back. I used to take care of all that, now I have to pay someone to do that."
- "I have 3 flights of stairs. I love grocery shopping in the winter – I can bring 2 bags in and leave groceries in the car overnight. In summer can’t get more than 2 bags of groceries at once."

### Connection

Seniors want to be connected to others in their communities, through senior centers, churches and other social activities. Connection to family is important, for both companionship and general support. In light of the risks of the pandemic, participants are interested in learning about and using technology to facilitate socialization while also reducing the need for transportation. Some expressed fears associated with isolation – wondering who they can contact when they need help. Some married couples also were concerned for their futures in the event of an illness or death of themselves or their spouse.

- "We live in a house by ourselves. I am my wife’s caregiver. I’m concerned because we’re the only two people living here."
- "...(able) to meet with family, friends, be a part of groups..."
- "A while back I felt lonely, isolated. Thank goodness for the Centro the Oro, my son told me about it. This program has help me fill the void, emptiness that I felt. Now I can come and talk to others and socialize talk with others. Thank god that this program appeared since I don’t feel alone any more. My church has also helped me a lot. Now I come here and we can..."
Independence

Concerns around independence range from the desire to stay at home and out of nursing homes, to the ability to travel independently. Seniors want to continue to drive and shop for themselves and may require assistance, especially in areas with few transportation options. Many fear becoming a burden to their family members.

- "I don’t want to be a burden to my children."
- "Maintain independence, even when help is needed."
- "Able to get out and stay independent."
- "Some services are only available for low income. We are trying to predict for the future – if we have too much income, we can’t qualify but we don’t have enough to pay out of pocket. Need to talk about not just low income."

Transportation

Seniors expressed frustration around lack of access and choice for transportation. Some seniors who still drive expressed increasing reluctance due to safety concerns, but do not see viable alternatives. Those who rely on the buses felt that recent schedule and route changes made things harder for them, especially in winter when sidewalks are not clear. People in the suburbs and rural areas especially struggled with public transportation options. In general, they want more options to decide their destinations and schedules.

- "Transportation is a huge need for all seniors…"
- "Being able to still drive, otherwise (you) can’t go anywhere, especially in the suburbs."
- "I rely on (the bus), I don’t have a car. I live about a 10 min. walk from the bus stop. In the winter this is pretty bad because of the snow and the sidewalks are not clean. The cars don’t respect pedestrians"
- "They made some changes to the bus route that do not benefit older people. You know when people get their checks they are eager to get out and buy food. We can walk to the corner get on the bus and get to the grocery store, but now we have to go all the way downtown in order to get to the grocery store. I don’t know who to take this complaint to."

Access to technology

As indicated in sections above, seniors recognize the value of technology as a potential solution to issues of information, connectedness, independence, transportation, and accessibility and safety. However, they need assistance with various aspects related to technology, including cost and access of devices and internet services, to training on basic use of technology, as well as safe usage.

- "There’s a gap between us as seniors and changes in technology and what we can do with our laptops. Is there a way to have programs to help with this?"
“Could they provide streaming to help address loneliness?”

**Special focus on language barriers**

Language barriers are a concern that underlie almost all of the themes identified above. We discussed these concerns in our focus groups with Deaf and Latino seniors. Communication is critical in accessing needed services and alleviating isolation and depression. Language barriers cause crucial gaps across the service spectrum, from companions and caregivers, to medical providers, transportation and other assistance services.

Both groups were especially concerned about nursing homes and home health services lacking bilingual/bicultural staff and interpreting services. Without dedicated housing or services provided to seniors who do not speak English, more efforts must be made in ensuring access to interpreters or video remote interpreting services.

- “You know that if you aren’t able to communicate that leads to withdrawing and isolation.”
- “There are no nursing homes for Spanish speakers. We are desperately in need of that. My mother is in a home and she has dementia. She has forgotten that she speak English and Spanish. She has difficulty communicating and advocating for herself. We are desperately in need of a nursing home that supports and cares for Spanish speakers in this community.”
- “There should be deaf senior housing, more accessible for all deaf seniors and exclusively deaf seniors. Accessible for wheelchairs, walkers, doorbells with lights. Grab bars, walk in showers. Equal access in the apartments or facilities for deaf seniors.”
- “We need to provide assistance and services who can come to the home and knows sign language.
- “The Welfare department has interpreter problems – not enough. They keep you on hold on the phone while they look for an interpreter and you wait, and wait, a long time. I tried to complete a recertification on the phone and I took all the documents to welfare and time passed I did not receive a notice of decision. Then I received a letter informing me that my case had been closed... Without an interpreter, how do you understand what you need to do or what is the deadline?”

**Conclusions**

The Sage II Commission encourages the reimagining of a system for older adults that meets their health and social-care needs, and supports their desire to remain independent and to live in the community for as long as possible. Across sectors, we have an opportunity to reach seniors before they are in crisis by expanding access to affordable housing, transportation, information, assistance services, and by fostering community connections. We promote additional efforts to promote equity in aging by addressing health disparities by race/ethnicity and language.

*About Common Ground Health*

Founded in 1974, Common Ground Health is one of the nation’s oldest and most effective regional health planning organizations. Located in Rochester, N.Y., the nonprofit serves the nine-county Finger Lakes region. We bring together health care, education, business, government and other sectors to find common ground on health issues. Learn more about our community tables, our data resources and our work improving population health at www.CommonGroundHealth.org.