

Assessing the "livability" of cities & towns in central North Carolina for older adults: Implementing the "TJCOG Livability Self-Assessment" pilot study

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Abstract

The demographic changes in aging are occurring both nationally and globally. The dramatic increase in the older adult population raises a critical issue demanding immediate attention: how will we support and care for this growing population of older adults? In 2014, the Triangle J Council of Governments (TJCOG), located in Durham, North Carolina, developed the electronic "TJCOG Livability Self-Assessment for Municipalities" and an accompanying Toolkit as a way to help the cities and town in their region prepare for the long-term needs of their aging community members. It was based on the Stanford Center for Longevity's report: "Livable Community Indicators for Sustainable Aging in Place." The report presented a framework for how livable community characteristics influence aging in place, including measurable indicators on housing, transportation, safety, health care, supportive services, retail, social integration, and community participation.

In order to provide information on the usability and effectiveness of the Livability Self-Assessment and Toolkit, and to prepare for broader implementation of these resources, a pilot-study was conducted with five cities and towns from the Triangle J Region. Key informants were self-selected by each of the municipalities, including city or town planners or other government representatives. Participants were interviewed following completion of the electronic Assessment and six months later. The analysis of the interviews and Assessment results provided specific recommendations for enhancing the Livability Self-Assessment and accompanying Toolkit and insights into the facilitators and challenges for using the findings of the Assessment to promote community dialogue and collective planning for the rising older adult population.

The results of the study conclude the TJCOG Livability Self-Assessment for Municipalities is a useable and potentially effective electronic tool to assist communities in examining their livability, identifying areas of strength and improvement. An eight step plan for change is offered on how to approach sustainable and long-lasting change. While the Assessment was developed for the cities and towns within the Triangle J Region, the possibilities for broad-based public health impact extend beyond the region, with state, national and international opportunities.