


A Community Report for
CLAY COUNTY



SMART AGING 
HEALTHY FUTURES

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-two percent of older Mississippians live in rural areas, and more than 80 percent of elderly Mississippians live in their own family dwellings. **The challenge for Mississippi is finding ways to maintain and improve the health of our senior residents while ensuring them the freedom of residing in their own homes.** This is especially true for rural areas with less formal support for seniors' health and well-being.

Based upon that need, the *Smart Aging: Healthy Futures* project was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities foster the healthy aging of their senior populations. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, the project is being conducted in Oktibbeha, Clay, Copiah, and Lincoln counties. In Copiah and Lincoln counties, the project is being directed in cooperation with Copiah-Lincoln Community College.

As part of this effort, a series of **Forums on Healthy Aging** were held to involve the community in a dialogue focused on identifying the resources—and the challenges—relative to healthy aging within the involved counties. From that dialogue, a number of community action groups were formed to begin developing community solutions to concerns relevant to the health and health care of seniors.

This report has been developed to give voice to the findings of those forums and the concerned, committed residents of Clay County who participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action. It is hoped that others reading this report will see it as more than an informational document. **Civic organizations, churches, businesses, schools, public officials, and others may find opportunities in these findings to improve the quality of life of our seniors** because they are a significant asset to our community.





OBJECTIVES

To meet the goal of assisting communities in their efforts to foster the healthy aging of their senior populations, the following objectives were established:

- Identify community resources and deficits relative to supporting the health and health care needs of its rural elderly population
- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to improve the health and health care accessibility of its rural elderly population
- Initiate various health promotion activities and educational programs focusing on rural aging populations within the community and their families and support systems

In October 2007, a focus group was held with a crosssection of the community including seniors, working and retired; a long-time physician; and ministers representing the needs and issues of those they serve. The meeting was held for the purpose of improving the project team’s understanding of the assets and the challenges to healthy aging within Clay County. The comments recorded during the focus group were later combined with information obtained from a series of individual interviews and observations made traveling around the county. A snapshot “First Impression” view of the positives and negatives relating to community attributes supportive of healthy aging was developed and aided the project team in their design of a series of community forums.

In late November and early December 2007, two public forums were held, one with individuals or organizations concerned about the health-related needs of seniors (loosely defined as 60 and older) and another with seniors themselves. The intent of the forums was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support seniors’ ability to age in a healthy manner.

Having identified many of the issues and concerns related to healthy aging, a third public forum was scheduled in January 2008 to chart a path forward. Given the opinions expressed in the first two forums, what, if anything, did the community want to do? Participants from the first two forums and other seniors and resource individuals were asked to attend. A Senior Fair held before and after the forum provided an opportunity to talk with health and health care professionals and gain valuable health-related information. Despite a cold and rainy day, 43 participants attended the forum, and 12 resource organizations exhibited at the fair.

The forums were conducted using a modified “World Café” format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in initiating table discussions of between six and eight individuals, and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. This process helps identify a group’s collective knowledge and enables people to join together to pursue common aims. The format aids communities in better understanding, relative to the health and health care of their aging population, what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute or relinquish for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

- What are the programs, services, and resources that encourage and support healthy aging in Clay County?
- If you had three wishes, which programs or services currently lacking are worth pursuing?
- What should be done to help seniors “navigate” the system?
- What are the main challenges to supporting the goal of healthy aging?

FINDINGS

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The overall assessment of Clay County developed by the First Impressions team was positive. They attempted to capture the likely thoughts and feelings of seniors' initial observations of the county's characteristics relating to healthy aging. In structuring their assessment, they viewed the following categories related to quality of life concerns for seniors:

- Health care services
- Entertainment and recreation
- Shopping
- Family life, including faith-based organizations
- Food: restaurants and grocery stores
- Senior-friendly: other seniors and activities
- Transportation: traffic, streets, and public transportation
- Housing: low-maintenance, affordable, and accessible

Many of the county's positives identified by the First Impressions team, from the hospital and the Wellness Center to numerous opportunities for outdoor recreation and access to city parks, will be highlighted in the forum results below. Potential negatives for seniors include a lack of public transportation options and concerns relating to traffic on Highway 45.



WHAT'S WORKING?

When participants were asked to consider what was working in Clay County to foster seniors' ability to age in a healthy manner, numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into three major categories: (1) general health and fitness; (2) social interaction and support; (3) social services. Examples for each category are listed below:

General Health and Fitness

- Wellness Center
- Walking trails
- MSU Extension Service health and nutrition programs
- Hospital health education programs
- Health fairs
- Flu shots
- PACE program
- Hospitals and physicians
- Wal-Mart \$4 prescriptions

Social Interaction and Support

- Church programs, outings, and meals
- AARP senior program
- Daycare socialization
- Churches visit nursing homes
- Exercise socialization
- Senior groups/meetings at banks

Social Services

- Food pantry
- Lindy's Place
- CCSA daycare center
- "Help needed" lights on rural roads
- Energy assistance programs
- Meals on Wheels
- Project Homestead
- Henry Clay Hotel
- Housing Authority placements
- Adopt-A-Family
- Clay County Christian Care
- Hospice organizations
- Angel Care
- Opportunity House
- Financial information and legal aid
- "Ms. Jefferson cooks for people"
- Medicaid waiver program services
- Medicaid transportation
- TRIAD

This is not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of healthy aging in Clay County, but it is representative and does indicate that the county starts from a position of strength in addressing the needs of its senior residents.

THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY

Forum participants were asked to consider what else was important and worth pursuing. If they had three wishes, what would they like to see added to the county? Following is a summary of the group's suggestions:

- A senior community center (recreation, computers, speakers, special events, fellowship)
- Transportation for seniors without regard for financial status (to medical facilities, grocery stores, recreation, getting around town)
- Prevent elder abuse – physical, mental, financial
- Senior exercise program – free, effective, easy to get to
- Volunteer help with small household needs: handyman program; help with yard work; help with clothing repair
- RSVP program
- Monthly blood pressure and glucose screenings
- Check-on-folks programs – calling chains or police
- Stop by and say, “Hi!”
- Housing issues – allow people to stay in their own homes; nursing homes for the very rich and the very poor; places for victims of elder abuse
- Medication management education
- Education for caregivers
- More senior daycare facilities, including “drop-in” basis
- Programs to involve seniors
- Programs to entertain seniors
- Pet therapy program
- Organized walking for seniors
- Combine children's and seniors' programs
- Pool for low-impact water aerobics

The wishes are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing. In the Community Action Group section below, we will discuss how the participants set priorities and began to focus on developing goals and action plans.



HOW TO ACCESS WHAT'S THERE

Throughout the forum process, we continuously discovered that resources often existed that people were unaware of and did not know how to access. A common dialogue would be a participant at Table A saying, “What we really need is X,” and a participant at Table B saying, “I think X is available if you call such and such.” Often, the issue becomes one of knowing what is available and how to “navigate” the system. Finding the needed information or service can present a complex and difficult web that may require more knowledge and more persistence than the average person possesses. When asked where seniors would most likely turn for information, the following suggestions were offered:

- Clearinghouse
- Resource manual
- Hotline
- Advertise where seniors visit – utilities, drug stores, grocery stores, pharmacies, churches, banks, etc.
- Educate hospital employees
- Radio, newspaper, West Point television, bulletin boards, social events, senior fairs
- Chamber of Commerce welcome package for seniors
- Volunteer program specializing in informing seniors of available programs/resources and changes

Frequently, help and information are needed when people are least able to deal with complicated searches and stumbling blocks. Ease of access to information and human assistance when needed were considered hallmarks of usefulness.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

With a view toward addressing some of the deficits noted by the forum participants, we asked that they identify some challenges to improving the prospects for healthy aging in Clay County. Following are the obstacles cited:

- Lack of funds and resources
- Growing number of seniors – here come the Boomers!
- Not knowing what is available
- Red tape
- Community participation
- Not having the will or desire for healthy aging
- Negative stigma of free programs
- Trust
- Cooperation, unity
- Racial issues between church organizations

Understanding and addressing potential roadblocks will help pave the way for a healthier future.

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the final forum, we asked participants to consider the “three wishes” identified at the earlier forums and determine two or three projects that the community could and should accomplish. From the priorities established in this discussion, we would form community action groups to tackle the identified projects. Forum participants identified the following areas as their top priorities:

- **Develop a senior citizen center**
- **Provide transportation services for seniors***
- **Develop a system of volunteer or paid help to meet household needs of seniors**
- **Establish a “check-on-folks” program***

Throughout the process that led to the establishment of community action groups, we stressed that success would come only if the community took responsibility for and leadership of any potential projects. The projects would not be driven by Mississippi State; our intent was to facilitate a process, engage the community, and offer guidance when possible. Day-to-day development and long-term sustainability would come only through community ownership.

To that end, we conducted a “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop following the establishment of the community action groups. The workshop brought interested individuals together and aided each group in establishing goals and action plans.

* These community action groups had an insufficient number of people participating in the “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop and, therefore, never became active.

SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES

The largest of the action groups began an effort to establish a center for seniors. It was a frustrating year at times with various false starts. However, thanks to the cooperation of the Department of Parks and Recreation, a likely location at one of the city’s park facilities is currently being considered as the home of a future senior center. The action group met with a similar group established through the Smart Aging project in Oktibbeha County and has visited the center established by that group in Starkville. Ideas for programming of interest to seniors, volunteer help, and day-to-day operations have flowed from those discussions. We are hopeful that a senior center will become a reality in Clay County within the coming year.

The group that began work on developing a system of volunteer or paid help to meet household needs of seniors disbanded due to various health problems. We hope the community will recognize this need and other groups may step in to fill this vital need.

Transportation for seniors within the county remains a concern. Fear of reaching a point in time when driving is no longer an option was frequently mentioned by older residents. Public transportation for medical needs is available only for Medicaid patients, and no public options exist for facilitating shopping needs or other activities. Social interaction is a key ingredient to healthy aging. Limited transportation options can certainly inhibit that interaction and can, for a variety of additional reasons, be a significant source of stress.

NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action teams formed around only a small number of those ideas, we hope the remainder will not be lost. **Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations, and government leaders can review the “three wishes” list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the healthy aging of the senior population.**

The list is far from exhaustive, and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the quality of life of older residents might envision other possibilities. An elementary school or Sunday school class might consider “adopting” a group of seniors and enjoy hearing stories of earlier times. A civic organization might initiate a “Simple Help for Seniors Volunteer Day” and change out ceiling light bulbs or perform other tasks that may be difficult for older residents yet too basic to hire a handyman. It is not infrequent for the quality of life of seniors to be impacted by what may seem like the “simplest” of things.

Clay County has many fine attributes that benefit seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve the quality of life of older adults, and that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. We hope you will join in the effort to make Clay County a place of *Smart Aging and Healthy Futures*.

CLAY COUNTY FACTS AND FIGURES

Clay County:

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005–2007 American Community Survey:

- 17.9% of Clay County’s population was estimated to be 60 and older (3,769).
- 38.6% of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 61.4% to be female.
 - Nationally, 76% of males 65 and older live with spouses; 19% live alone.
 - Nationally, 42% of women 65 and older live with spouses; 39% live alone.
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Clay County was estimated to be:

60–64	21.6% (815)
65–74	36.3% (1,368)
75–84	21.1% (795)
85 and over	21% (791)

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Throughout the preparation of this report, no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants' involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voice will be an impetus to additional actions that support the smart aging and healthy futures of our seniors.



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