

A Community Report for
ITAWAMBA 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 (loosely defined as 60 and older). Originally conducted in Oktibbeha, Clay, Copiah, and Lincoln counties, and the city of Pascagoula, the project was extended to Itawamba County beginning in early 2012.

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, supportive of healthy aging within Itawamba County. 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 Itawamba 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**—and realize they are a significant asset to the 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 senior population
- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to improve the health and health care accessibility of its senior population
- Initiate various health promotion activities and educational programs focusing on aging populations within the community and their families and support systems

PROCESS

In late January 2012, a public forum was held with older residents of the county and individuals or representatives of organizations concerned about the health-related needs of seniors. The intent of the forum was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support local seniors' ability to age in a healthy manner. More than 70 individuals participated in this event.

Having identified many of the issues and concerns related to healthy aging, a second public forum was scheduled in February to chart a path forward. Given the opinions expressed at the first forum, what, if anything, did the community want to do? Participants from the first forum and other seniors and resource individuals were asked to attend. Approximately 50 people attended this forum.

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 Itawamba 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

WHAT'S WORKING?

When participants were asked to consider what was working in Itawamba 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

- Melt Away Expo class
- Yoga class at Daniel Assisted Living
- Health fairs
- Itawamba Community College's Fitness Center (no charge for those 62 and older)
- Doctors and nurse practitioners
- Extension Service programs
- Walking tracks (Waterway and Mantachie)
- Rehab center
- Pharmacy delivery

Social Interaction and Support

- Mantachie Senior Center
- Carolina Senior Adult Community Theatre
- Senior programs in churches
- Tupelo symphony orchestra
- American Legion Mardi Gras

Social Services

- Complete Home Care
- Lift Inc.
- Meals on Wheels



- 911 system
- Food pantry
- Mantachie indigent program
- Itawamba Medicaid Waiver teams
- Personal housekeeping (Area Agency on Aging)
- Church clothes closet
- 211 (phone number sponsored by United Way that connects people to social services)
- Three Rivers resource directory

Other

- Park
- Senior assisted living apartments
- Itawamba Community College lunch for seniors at student prices
- Life Line
- Grocery store deliveries
- AARP driving school
- Good sheriff
- Personal care homes
- Comfort Keepers for private pay individuals
- Hospice

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



THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY

Having identified what was working in the county, 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 summation of the group's suggestions:

- Call tree through the sheriff's office (every morning; if no answer, sheriff checks)
- Would like to start a TRIAD (law enforcement, older adults, and community groups focused on senior safety)
- Transportation options for seniors
- Storm shelters, particularly in distant communities
- Medical and dental availability on weekends
- Heated pool therapy
- Networking (resource programs)
- Newspapers to list services available to seniors
- Project Lifesaver Bracelet (helps to locate and rescue those who may wander)
- Community gardening area/project/resource for seniors (garden clubs and Master Gardeners could help)
- Increase downtown shopping
- Increase dental and eye care
- More social activities (dancing, etc.)
- Utility bills regulated for elderly
- Database or resource book to find contacts
- More resources for seniors living farther out in the county and often on more limited incomes
- Zero lot housing
- Programs for healthy eating
- Adult day care
- Things to do for fun
- Computers for seniors
- Senior centers out in the county, as well as in Fulton
- Swimming pool for water aerobics
- Someone to help seniors work through medical bills
- Assistance during the first few months of being diagnosed with a catastrophic disease (LIFT does this voluntarily regardless of income and does taxes for anyone under \$49,000)
- Civic center
- Agricenter
- Central resource information/referral center
- Coordinated church efforts (recreation, service offerings, volunteer assistance)
- Youth community service projects focused on older adults
- Itawamba Community College expanded educational efforts in Fulton

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:

- Information pamphlets
- Newspapers and local news stations
- Information at welcome center
- Facebook
- Announcements where seniors gather
- Mailed list of available activities and calendar of events
- Information about how to organize valuable information in case of disaster (workshops and meetings in advance of an emergency)
- Mailed flyers
- Services for seniors as part of phone book (senior section)
- Fulton TV and radio station
- Agencies sponsoring TV and radio spots
- Flyers inserted in utility bills and bank statements
- Public service announcements in doctors’ offices, dental offices, etc.
- Church announcements (have ministers spread information)

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 person-to-person 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 within the county. Following are the obstacles cited:

- So many programs no longer funded
- Many people right above the income cutoff line for getting assistance
- Challenge to get information to people
- People don’t always support programs that are available
- Transportation core problem—impacts many areas—if programs die because of lack of attendance, might be because people can’t get there
- Communication—information, promotion does not get out
- Emails work, but everyone is not on the Internet
- County is so rural—can’t have facilities in every community
- Used to have a book mobile that served as an information source
- Places where people of color do not feel welcome
- Churches do not necessarily cooperate or serve non-church members
- 40 percent of seniors do not go to church, so must be reached another way
- Many seniors are completely alone, making it difficult to connect with others

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

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the second and final forum, we asked participants to consider the “three wishes” identified at the earlier forum 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 three areas as their top priorities:

- **Develop an information/resource center to address senior needs/concerns**
- **Create transportation options for seniors**
- **Increase the availability of social activities for seniors**

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

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

EARLY SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

This is a preliminary report. The work of the community action groups (CAGs) has just begun. That said, the groups have made significant strides toward promoting a healthier future for Itawamba County’s seniors.

The group focusing on developing information related to available resources for seniors decided to produce a directory of information. CAG members have diligently researched services and resources helpful to seniors; brief descriptions along with contact information have been compiled. A draft directory has been completed, and the group is currently addressing issues relating to its publication and dissemination. Along with print copies, the group is pursuing the possibility of publishing the document on the web. A web



publication will be easier to update and, therefore, help to address the challenge of maintaining current information. Another challenge will be in securing funding for the printed copies. The committee has various ideas to address that issue once they determine the final format, numbers needed, and distribution plan. Those factors will determine the amount of funding needed to provide this helpful tool not just for seniors, but also for many who serve as “first responders” to senior concerns. These first responders often include clergy and medical personnel who would benefit from the information being prepared.

Another group took on the seemingly formidable task of increasing transportation options for seniors. Many seniors do not have access to transportation, may no longer be able to drive, or fear reaching a point in time when driving is no longer an option. Lack of available transportation adds a significant layer of difficulty to scheduling and getting to medical appointments, shopping, paying bills, visiting friends, and attending social, civic, and other functions. All these impact seniors’ quality of life, as well as their ability to contribute to the community as a whole. In Itawamba County, as well as many other locations in Mississippi, transportation was cited as a core problem affecting the health and well-being of seniors.

Transportation CAG members identified and met with a social service agency that may be able to provide van service to county aging and disabled individuals. Following those discussions, the CAG met with the Itawamba County Board of Supervisors and began a dialogue about possible county funding for the initiative. Additionally, the CAG is developing ideas for additional possible funding sources if needed. Funding is the primary initial challenge; sizing the anticipated usage is also a consideration. The CAG is inclined to start small and grow as the need and usage can be better assessed once a service is in place.

The mission of the final group was to develop and identify social activities for seniors in order to promote healthy lifestyles through social interaction. They have begun by discussing organizing activities in four areas of the county—Tilden, Mantachie, Tremont, and the Carolina community. The volunteer fire department in Tilden has offered its location for senior social activities in that part of the county. The committee continues to work on securing locations and planning future events.

In addition to the efforts of the CAGs, six Itawamba Community College nursing students attended the Healthy Futures Volunteer training sponsored by MSU Extension Service. The students are now prepared to deliver presentations to seniors, in a group or one-on-one, about Alzheimer’s disease, oral health, vision care, and self-care for mature adults. This aspect of the project will help the students fulfill their necessary community service obligation while providing valuable health information to seniors.



NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you or members of your organization are interested in participating in any of the efforts discussed above, we encourage you to contact the Itawamba County Extension office at (662) 862-3201 for information on how you can join one of the community action groups. Their activities are ongoing, and the greater the level of community participation, the better the final outcomes.

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 Itawamba County’s senior population. The list is far from exhaustive, and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the quality of life of the county’s 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. This event could coordinate help for seniors, such as changing ceiling light bulbs or performing 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.

Itawamba County has many fine attributes that benefit its seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve their quality of life, and that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. We hope you will join in the effort to make Itawamba County a place of smart aging and healthy futures.



ITAWAMBA COUNTY FACTS AND FIGURES

According to the 2010 U.S. Census:

- 15.8% of Itawamba County's population was estimated to be 65 and older, as compared to 12.8% of Mississippi's population.
- 42.6% of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 57.4% to be female.
- 18.6% of Itawamba County's 65 and over male population live alone.
- 34.4% of Itawamba County's 65 and over female population live alone.
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Itawamba County was estimated to be approximately:

60–64	26.4% (1,334)
65–74	42.1% (2,130)
75–84	22.7% (1,146)
85 and over	8.8% (445)



Smart Aging: Healthy Futures A Community Report for Itawamba County
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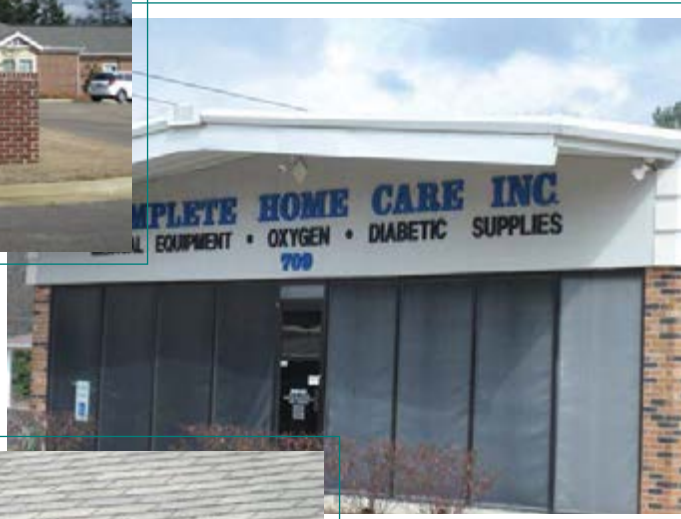
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Throughout the preparation of this report, no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants' involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voices will be an impetus to additional actions that support the smart aging and healthy futures of Itawamba County's seniors.



Any conclusions or recommendations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of Mississippi State University. Neither do the findings necessarily reflect the opinion of Mississippi State University; they are a reporting of the expressed views of the Itawamba County project participants.

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