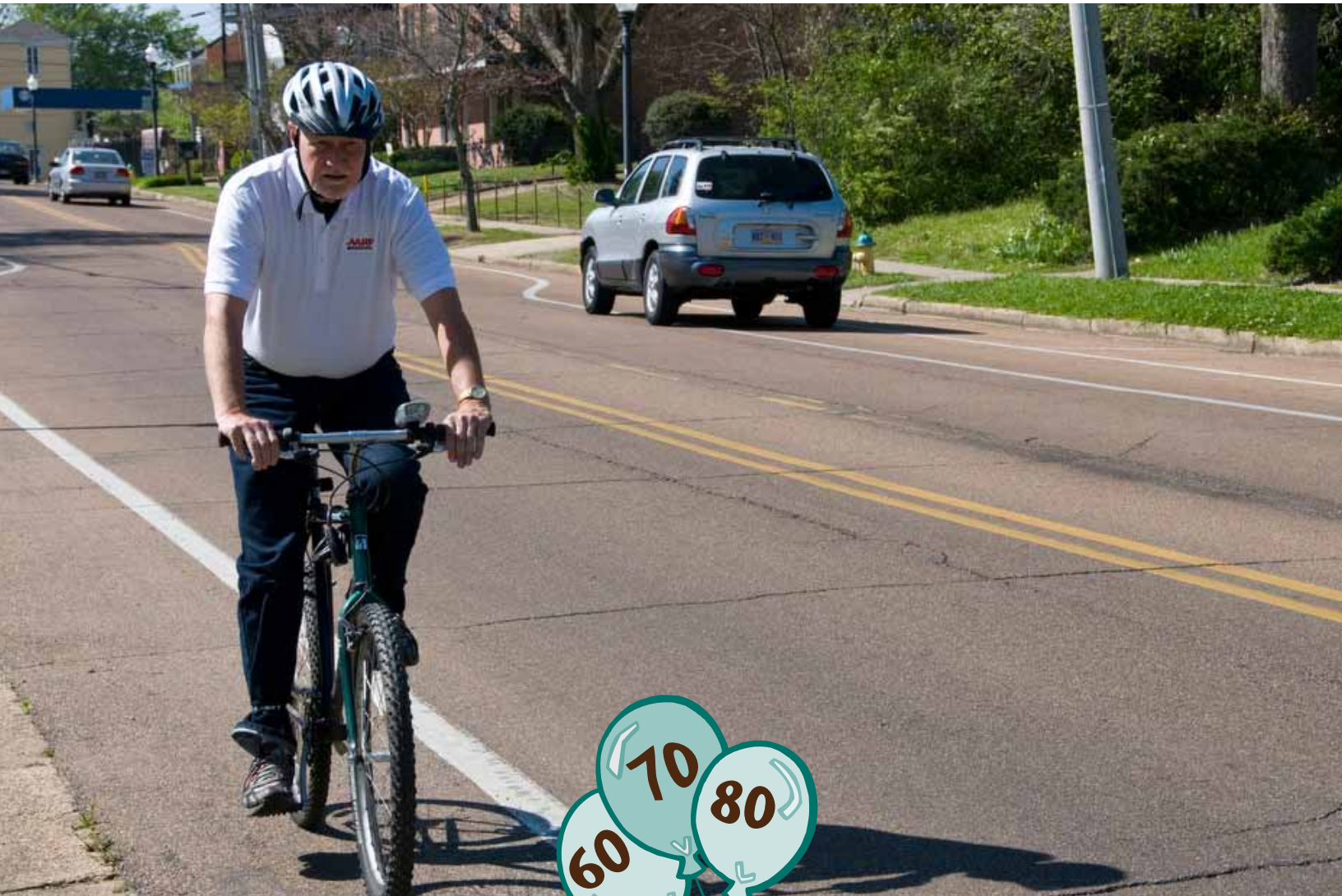


A Community Report for  
**OKTIBBEHA COUNTY**



**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 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—supportive of 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 Oktibbeha County who participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action.** Our hope is 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 assist 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 cross section 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 Oktibbeha 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. Fifty-five forum participants attended, as well as 23 exhibitors.

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 Oktibbeha 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?



## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The overall assessment of Oktibbeha County developed by the First Impressions team was highly 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 its surrounding health care infrastructure to an array of cultural, sports, and recreational activities, will be highlighted in the forum results below. Potential negatives for seniors include a lack of public transportation options and a shortage of patio homes, condominiums, and apartments in somewhat closed neighborhoods directed at the needs and preferences of seniors. The team also voiced a concern that lower-income seniors within Starkville, and many county seniors living outside of the city limits, may have limited access to resources contributing to a healthy quality of life.



## FORUMS

### WHAT'S WORKING?

When participants were asked to consider what was working in Oktibbeha 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**

- Hospital and walk-in clinics
- Wellness Center, Sanderson Center
- Health fairs
- Hospital programs
- Diabetic Boot Camp
- Lunch and Learn programs
- Physical therapy department
- Mississippi State University Extension Service health and nutrition programs
- Church programs
- Seniors exercise and Keenager programs, First Presbyterian
- Line dancing, First Methodist
- No smoking ordinance
- PACE class
- Walking trails
- Ramped sidewalks
- Downtown benches
- Media health and medical segments
- Wal-Mart \$4 prescriptions
- Department of Health



## Social Interaction and Support

- Clubs and organizations
- Newcomers Club
- Association of Retired Faculty
- AARP
- Red Hat Society
- Support groups
- Alzheimer's Support Group
- Diabetes Support Group
- Continuing education programs at MSU
- Emerson Family Center programs
- Relay for Life
- Welcome Wagon
- Churches
- Parks and Recreation – crafts and quilting

## Social Services

- Meals on Wheels
- Home health
- Hospice
- Homemaker and respite care services
- Angel Food program
- Prairie Opportunity
- Helping Hands ministry
- Community Counseling Services
- Sheriff's Department's daily reassurance program
- Life Line service
- Watchful Eye Care services
- Library

The forum responses are not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of healthy aging within Oktibbeha 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

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:

- Caregiver assistance
- Programs to help seniors with medications, a medical planner
- More walk-in and urgent care facilities
- More general practice physicians and a gerontologist
- People to help seniors and their caregivers better understand their health situation and access Internet information
- Educate clergy and medical personnel on available senior services
- Community-wide health and fitness campaign
- A senior citizen center (education, recreation, and information)
- Programs to help fight boredom and isolation; social visiting
- Hearing, vision, and oral care programs
- More living facilities appropriate for independent senior living
- More affordable assisted living facilities
- Program to prevent senior abuse
- Assistance for those without family
- Transportation (including evening hours and throughout the county)
- Home accident prevention programs
- Afternoon programs for seniors
- College students as “live-ins” for seniors
- Combine children’s daycare and senior programs
- Awareness days – sleep apnea, healthy eating
- A rural health agency to bring all services together
- Medicare education program
- Affordable wellness programs and services
- Transportation to or accessibility of programs for rural county residents
- Adult daycare center
- Guide to senior community services
- Volunteer opportunities for seniors
- Mentally challenging recreation – move beyond the stereotype of bingo

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:

- Newspaper (Starkville Daily News should start a “Seniors’ Corner”), early news TV, radio, utility company mailings, Internet

- Churches
- Places where seniors congregate – McDonald’s, Hardee’s, Sportsplex, Wellness Center, physicians’ offices, pharmacies
- Resource directory
- Educate nurses on senior resources
- Monthly newsletter
- Central phone line
- Start neighborhood networks
- Civic organizations, support groups
- Local “celebrity” to talk about important health issues
- A “point person”

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 identified 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:

- Seniors without a sense of purpose
- Limited financial resources
- Transportation problems
- Communication issues
- Cultural issues – fried and greasy more the norm than healthy eating
- Perception of aging – stereotyping the elderly
- Lack of cooperation among some churches in providing services
- Agencies’ failure to work together to better serve seniors
- Lack of public education
- Lack of sufficient legislation to support healthy aging

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 three areas as their top priorities:

- **Establishment of a senior center**
- **Education of clergy and medical personnel on services available for seniors**
- **Public transportation options 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.

## SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES

The largest of the action groups began an effort to establish a center for seniors within the county. Starting with little more than a desire and a belief that it could happen, the doors to a Senior Enrichment Center opened on July 28, 2008, thanks to the work of a committed group of senior volunteers. Initially, the seniors surveyed the public to ascertain interest in a center and gain insight into what should be offered by a center. They met with individuals that spearheaded centers in other parts of the state and held a public meeting to gauge the level of community support. Interest and support clearly established, they began to seek a start-up location.

Subsequent to a series of discussions with the Golden Triangle Planning and Development District (PDD, an umbrella organization for our local Area Agency on Aging), the PDD volunteered to convert a large room in their building, previously used for selling senior crafts, into a senior center. The PDD purchased furniture, a wide-screen television, and various games and puzzles for the center. The center is staffed predominantly by senior volunteers; the PDD has assigned a staff member to assist the seniors as needed, but this is truly the seniors’ center.

The volunteers plan programs and greet visiting seniors. Programs have been offered on such topics as “Laughter, the Best Medicine,” “Keeping Your Identity Safe,” “Songs You Grew Up With,” “Dog Behavior,” “Holiday Photography,” and assorted gardening and other topics. Field trips to various locations on the MSU campus, out-of-town museums, exercise outings to the walking track at Faith Baptist Church or the MSU coliseum, bridge lessons, and “Bring Your Lunch” activities add to the diversity of events and activities.

In little more than 5 months of operations, 635 individuals participated in one or more 2008 center activities. Volunteers provided over 1,500 hours of community service to staff the center and plan and deliver programs.



The Senior Enrichment Center is located in the Golden Triangle Planning and Development building at 106 Miley Road in Starkville and is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. The center's calendar of weekly events is published in the "Around Town" column in the Starkville Daily News.

Congratulations to the community action group team members and thanks to the Golden Triangle Planning and Development District; these individuals are making a difference in our community and improving the quality of life for our seniors.

Throughout the forums, it became readily apparent that resources frequently exist to help our seniors, but often people do not know of the resources or how to access them. Medical personnel and clergy are often the "first responders" to observing and responding to the needs of the senior residents in our community. With that in mind, one of the community action groups chose to focus on finding a way to inform medical personnel and clergy of the many services and resource individuals or organizations available to meet the needs of seniors within Oktibbeha County.

A booklet on aging concerns is under development by the volunteers with assistance from the project staff. The booklet will include descriptive information on services available and contact information on such topics as home delivered and congregate meals, respite and adult day care, support groups, victimization, assisted living, social and recreational opportunities, etc. The booklet will be distributed to all physicians' offices and places of worship within the county.

Transportation for seniors within the county remains a concern. The Area Agency on Aging (AAoA) does provide transportation within the city limits for seniors on weekdays from 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. However, their service is not known by all that might otherwise use it, and it does not extend into the county or operate in the evening or on weekends. The AAoA service requires an advance reservation. Medical appointments are given priority in scheduling, but the buses do take people shopping, to pay bills, to visit friends at nursing homes, etc. Though the service is certainly a significant asset for the community, a broader system with expanded hours and ease of use would enhance the quality of life of seniors throughout the county. Fear of reaching a point in time when driving is no longer an option was frequently mentioned by seniors. Many that do drive do not feel safe driving at night, but would otherwise participate in social, cultural, and civic activities in the evening. Social interaction is a key ingredient to healthy aging and limited transportation options can certainly inhibit that interaction. This can be a significant source of stress.



## NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you are a senior, we encourage you to visit the Senior Enrichment Center and take advantage of the planned activities and programs, or just stop in, sit down, and visit for a while. Seniors and non-seniors who have a particular interest, talent, or experience might volunteer to conduct a program. Volunteers are always needed to “just be there,” to ensure that someone is present to greet a new visitor. Daily activities are listed in the Starkville Daily News “Around Town” section.

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 our senior population. The list is far from exhaustive and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the quality of life of our 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 even if financially able to do so; it is not infrequent for the quality of life of seniors to be impacted by what may seem like the “simplest” of things.

Our county has many fine attributes that benefit our seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve their quality of life and, thereby, that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. We hope you will join in the effort to make Oktibbeha County a place of Smart Aging and Healthy Futures.



# OKTIBBEHA COUNTY FACTS AND FIGURES

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

- 13 percent of Oktibbeha County's population was estimated to be 60 and older
- 42 percent of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 58 percent to be female
- Nationally, 76 percent of males 65 and older live with spouses; 19 percent live alone
- Nationally, 42 percent of women 65 and older live with spouses; 39 percent live alone
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Oktibbeha County was estimated to be:

60–64	28.4 percent (1,594)
65–74	37.6 percent (2,107)
75–84	25.8 percent (1,448)
85 and over	8.2 percent (462)



**Smart Aging: Healthy Futures A Community Report for Oktibbeha County**  
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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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