

Boulder County  
“Creating Vibrant Communities in Which  
We All Age Well”

Plan Update

Community Conversation Summary Report

August, 2010



# Community Conversation Summary Report

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# INTRODUCTION

## Project Background

Building on a decade of collecting and analyzing information about the needs of older adults in Boulder County, an innovative group of managers responsible for aging services initiated the creation of a County-wide strategic plan in 2005. By 2006, the plan, “Creating Vibrant Communities in Which We All Age Well,” was in place as a community-owned guide to the future. Seventeen goals and 88 strategies were organized around four components, or quadrants, essential to a vibrant, healthy community that is committed to the strengths of its older adult population. Work groups were organized around major elements of the plan, with progress reported to the community in 2007 and again in 2008-2009.

Circumstances surrounding community resources and priorities began to change with the economic downturn in the fall of 2008, and by 2010 it was clear that it was time to work with the community to update the plan with a “reality check” about what older adults were experiencing every day. Boulder County authorized a survey, Community Assessment Survey for Older Adults (CASOA), to provide statistically-valid data based on a random sample of the County’s population of adults over the age of 60.

To enrich and provide depth to that survey and other concurrent research, qualitative research was designed to meet the following objectives:

- To gain first-hand understanding of the day-to-day experiences of older adults in Boulder County;
- To identify any significant unmet needs for that population;
- To identify any barriers that exist preventing ease of access to services that older adults expect and need; and
- To identify priorities held by older adults for aging well.

## Methodology

Anecdotal sharing of personal stories and circumstances often offers the best picture of people’s feelings, concerns, and lives. To that end, a series of small group Community Conversations was designed to reach older adults throughout the County. Between July 6<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 21 sessions were held, 11 in distinct geographic areas and 10 with targeted groups of constituencies.

The discussion with participants in each group was carried out through a structured but comfortable and informal conversation. Participants were invited through agency managers serving as the Leadership Team overseeing the implementation of the strategic plan, and efforts were made to reach beyond the “usual suspects” readily familiar with agency services and programs. Each group was moderated by a facilitator with assistance from a note-taking recorder. Facilitators and recorders were trained and were

available to moderate groups in any but their own home communities. In addition to the discussion, a written response form was completed by most participants, allowing them to add to the session record with a greater degree of anonymity.

Geographically-based Conversations were held in Allenspark, Boulder, Erie, Lafayette, Longmont, Louisville, and Nederland. Targeted constituency Conversations were held with groups of Latinos, family caregivers, lower income folks, men, residents of senior housing, the homeless, representatives of the faith community, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual adults, and veterans. More than 150 people participated in these Conversations, painting a rich portrait of life as an older adult in Boulder County.

A complete record of written and discussion comments from every geographic and targeted constituency Conversation can be found in the Appendices accompanying this report.

# OVERALL FINDINGS

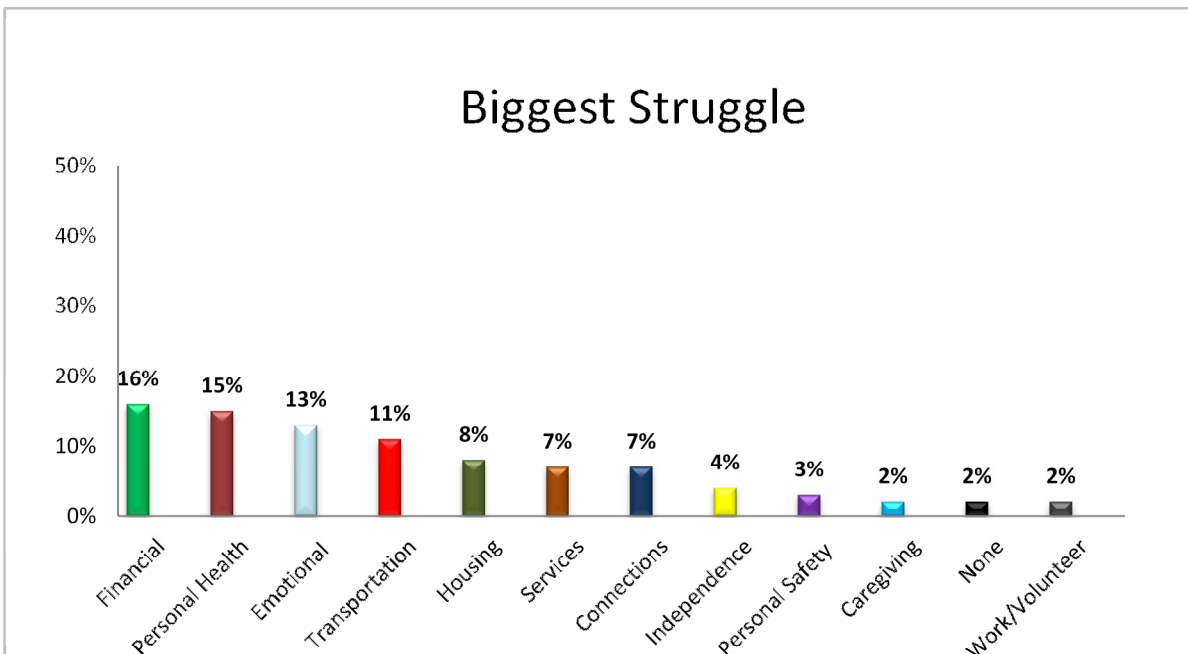
*“So many people have so many needs. They are trying to establish relationships. Everyone I know is in a state of flux.”*

## Central Themes

In searching for consistencies across groups, two major themes emerge as touchstones for all other findings:

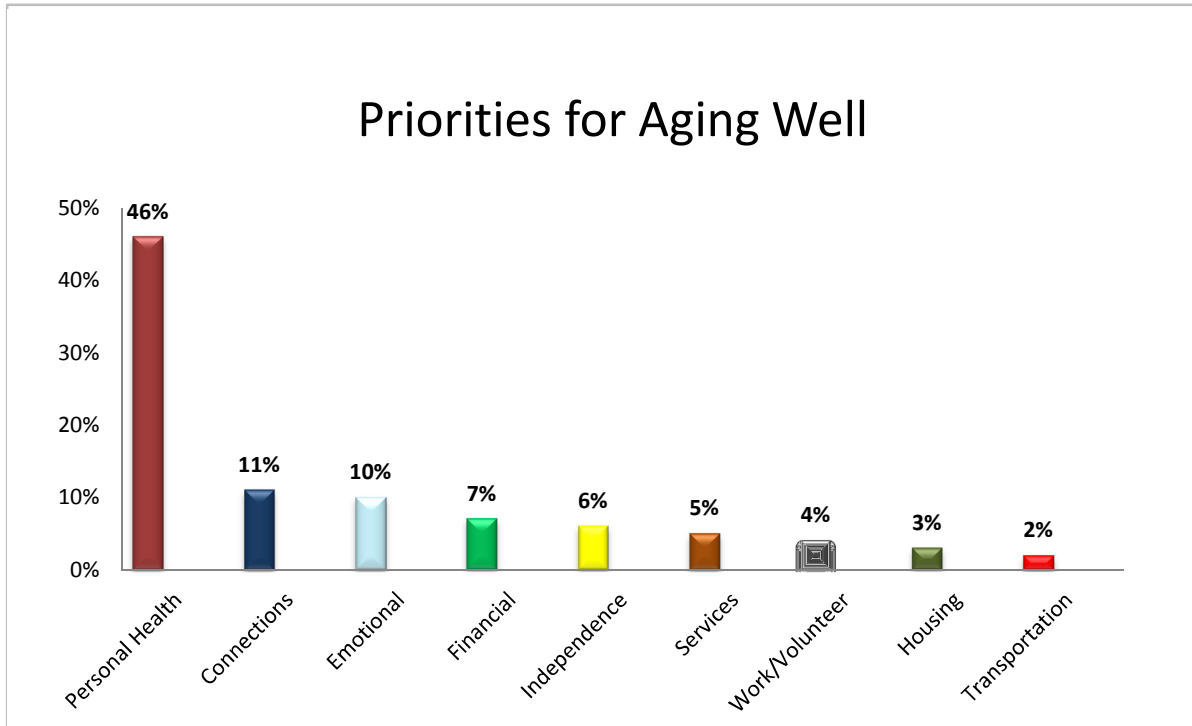
- The two most significant worries voiced by older adults focus on finances and personal health;
- The three most important factors cited for aging well are personal health, social and personal connections and emotional well-being.

These fundamental issues, of course, are interrelated and touch lives in a myriad of ways. There is worry about the economic impacts on people and their families as the cost of care for chronic medical conditions or the threat of catastrophic illness endangers financial security. The need to balance those threats with positive experience in order to retain one’s emotional equilibrium underscores the importance of personal value and interactions. The records of discussion across the Conversations weave these themes into an integral pattern.



Discussion about the biggest struggle faced by was supplemented by an open-ended question on the written response forms completed by each individual. Those results are telling.

A second open-ended question on the written form but not specifically covered in discussion asked participants to describe their highest priority when it comes to aging well. What they wrote highlights the significance of issues of health, social connections, emotional well-being, and financial security in the everyday lives of older adults.



# FINDINGS BY PLAN QUADRANT

## Quadrant: Addressing Basic Needs

- Conversation participants were not asked a question about financial issues, yet participants mentioned financial issues and affordability more often than any other topic except health, and extensive questions about health were posed as topics for discussion. Financial concerns focused on worries about out-living one's financial assets, the costs of health insurance, transportation services and other basic needs, means-testing for service assistance, the fiscal impacts of chronic or catastrophic illness, inability to find work to supplement incomes, and the need for financial guidance. *"It seems like we're getting hammered from every direction—financial and medical."*
- Housing (Goal #1) was also not raised as a discussion probe, but unmet housing needs were consistently cited nonetheless. People talked about the need for increased availability of subsidized housing, housing to fit seniors' needs (e.g. wheelchair accessibility, studs in walls for support, room for medical equipment), and located so that residents could walk to have access to necessities. The lack of housing availability and affordability were described as major barriers to satisfaction with living situations. *"Affordable housing is the biggest challenge of all and it will get bigger and bigger."*
- It is apparent that finding access to services (Goal #4) is often a frustrating experience for the older adults who participated in these Conversations. There are two associated issues: lack of information about service availability and appropriateness; and agency failure to follow up.

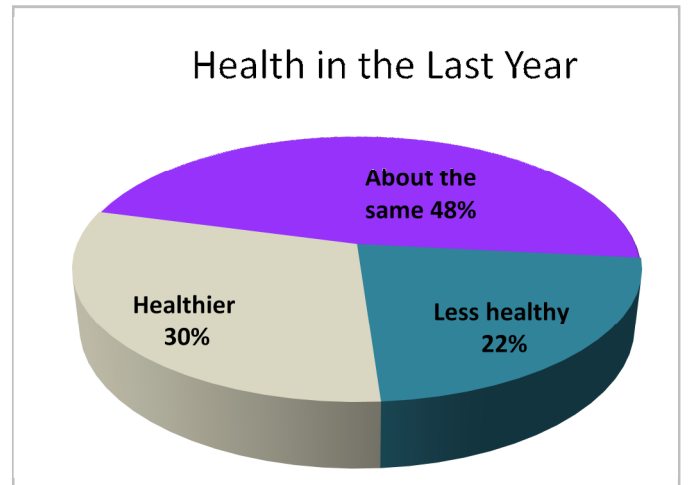
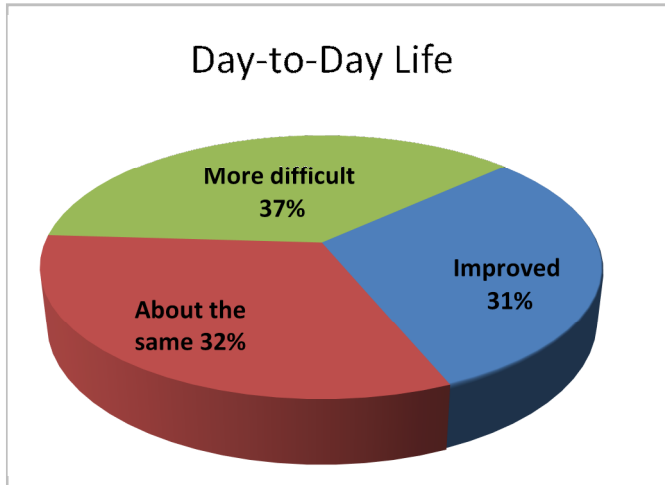
It's clear that comprehensive, coordinated information about services for older adults does exist in Boulder County. However, many people just don't know that it's available, while others feel overwhelmed with an inundation of separate brochures, flyers, and information about individual, specific services and agencies.

*"Some counselors don't have the information you ask for and say they'll get back to you and they don't."*

Agencies' failure to return calls requesting information and / or services is a major barrier in the way of achieving the goal to provide access to essential services that is "seamless, barrier-free, affordable, and welcoming". A significant number of people participating in these conversations cited having to leave a voice mail message and never knowing if it was

received, and / or speaking to someone who promised to call back but never did. Call-backs and follow-up fall far short of expectations and need.

- The first two questions on the form were intended to get discussion started and pertain to day-to-day life comparisons with health and general well-being over the previous twelve months. The charts below depict the responses received related to the essentiality of basic needs.



### Quadrant: Promoting Social and Civic Engagement

- As noted above, the importance of social connections is fundamental to emotional well-being and to aging well. Conversation participants who are already connected to senior centers or other community facilities praised those connections as essential to their daily lives. Senior housing residents clearly expressed the importance of the connections to one another that they share under a single roof. Homeless people in the Carriage House described their associations there – for better or worse – as “family”.

- Many Conversation participants believe a sense of purpose and usefulness, both through work that is paid and commitments that are voluntary, is an essential component of aging well. Paid work promotes financial health and security, while volunteer work promotes contribution, feeling of value, and emotional health. A surprising amount of willingness to volunteer in various ways emerged, even among populations who are struggling on a day-to-day basis themselves. A woman among low-income participants created excitement with her enthusiasm for helping tend the gardens of her older neighbors. People in one Latino Conversation expressed a need to be trained in how to volunteer, with one participant saying simply, “We need to be busy and volunteer our help.”

*“Neighbor-to-neighbor—make friends. It takes a minute to make a friend.”*

is paid and commitments that are voluntary, is an essential component of aging well. Paid work promotes financial health and security, while volunteer work promotes contribution, feeling of value, and emotional health. A surprising amount of willingness to volunteer

- A strong image of the barriers that exist to contributing to community through social engagement and work emerged through these conversations and stories. One woman told of having to change the wording on invitations to her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party because her friends and relatives didn't want to come to a 'senior' center. She invited them to the 'community center' instead. More than one group spoke of their dislike for the words 'senior' and 'elderly'. A member of the faith group conversation wondered how we have managed to lose the respect with which older civilizations referred to their 'elders'. The older adults in these conversations believe that their communities lack appreciation for their contributions to the fabric of life, that a stigma even exists toward those who need and receive services to help them age well.

*"Just because we are old doesn't mean that we can't contribute."*

*"Employers want senior experience at entry level wages."*

In speaking of the need to work as a means to help address significant financial concerns, some people said that they found discrimination because of age to be a significant barrier to work with meaningful pay. One veteran described a friend in his 80s who had been forced to take a menial job as his only option.

- The issue of overall community awareness and support did not come up spontaneously in these discussions. A question was posed at the end of each Conversation asking for participants' ideas about how to make aging well a priority in their communities. Once the topic was raised, however, the ideas and enthusiasm streamed forward. There was significant interest in helping to raise community awareness about issues of aging, evoking rich discussion and creative ideas.

## Quadrant: Optimizing Physical and Mental Health and Well-Being

- The levels of concern and need in this quadrant are huge. Personal health is recognized as the primary key to aging well. Many participants in these Conversations seem to have taken advice about eating well, exercising, and self-care to heart, although some have difficulty following through with what they know they should do. Even so, concerns about the cost of and access to needed health care can override the best of intentions, particularly because they can so severely impact financial stability. One diabetic man described the prospects for the rest of his life: his assets would be completely depleted, having been dedicated to health care until the end of his life, leaving no heritage for his children, and no discretionary spending while he lives. That scenario looms large as a possibility for many of the older adults engaged in these conversations.

*"I'm probably less healthy. I find that I do without some things that I know would improve my health but I just can't afford them."*

- Beyond the traditional concept of mental health, issues of emotional well-being were also raised repeatedly as central to aging well. Comment upon comment reflected the understanding among older adults that attitude is as much a key to aging with grace and dignity as is physical health. One woman present at the homeless discussion described having experienced cruel circumstances in her youth, but also said she tries her best to foster an “attitude of gratitude”.
- There are significant barriers to success facing people trying their best to live with strong physical health and sound emotional well-being:
  - an increase in the number of physicians who will not accept patients whose care is paid by Medicare or Medicaid;
  - means-testing to screen eligibility for service;
  - a lack of information about appropriate services among people with physical and mental health needs; and
  - language barriers preventing health and particularly mental health care.

Some people simply said it was just the nature of aging to encounter uncertainty.

*“My biggest struggle is losing control—increased complexity, speed, chaos, and the decline of absolutes.”*

### Quadrant: Maximizing In/Dependence and Supporting Caregivers

- A primary priority for many older adults engaged in these discussions is the ability to remain in their own homes for the rest of their lives. They understand that health care needs may interfere, but still want to be as independent as they can be for as long as they are able.
- Issues of mobility and transportation are at the heart of barriers threatening independence. Transportation issues create a lack of mobility and are of particular concern in mountain communities, among people with physical limitations such as poor eyesight, and among low-income folks. Difficulty in getting around creates barriers to participation in activities which promote physical health, emotional well-being, and social interaction, greatly increasing the likelihood of isolation of older adults. Specific concerns expressed include issues related to the use of Special Transit, including schedule reliability, lack of bilingual services, and lack of responsiveness. Other transportation issues relate to cost, distance of one’s home from a transit stop and general lack of transportation support necessary to live full lives.
  - *“I have to choose my doctor based on how close the bus drops me off at the front door.”*
- Unmet needs for family caregivers include, not surprisingly, the need for available and affordable respite care so that caregivers’ personal needs can be met. One caregiver, an older adult herself, recounted giving up her own medical appointments and physical health care because of the

*“There’s a lot of guilt and confusion between the needs you have yourself and the needs of the loved one, and that often results in illness of the caregiver.”*

difficulty of arranging care for her husband. The concurrent need for ongoing emotional support was evident in the conversation among caregivers, who talked about the guilt associated with simply taking care of oneself. In describing what would simplify their lives, one caregiver spoke of neighbors one street over who take care of each other’s needs while the

younger families on her own street with young children seem unaware of the difficulties she faces. A neighborhood-based network for help with home-centered tasks is on her wish list. Among these caregiver participants, there is a clear need for peer support through increased connection and for an informal care network.

### Highlights from Geographically-Based Conversations

- Transportation access to services is a major issue in mountain communities; people are sometimes finding it necessary to leave their homes and relocate closer to services when they can.
- In Erie, overlapping jurisdictions between Weld and Boulder Counties creates confusion. People said they were often uncertain about their own eligibility for service and about the appropriate place to seek help.
- In Longmont, Louisville, Lafayette, and Boulder, many, many participants expressed appreciation for the programs and services they take advantage of through their Senior Centers.
- In Nederland, lack of affordable housing for older adults appears to be a significant issue. Concerns were also expressed about food service quality, quantity and affordability. Mistrust of some service providers was also evident, as was a need for home assistance.

## Highlights from Target-Constituency Conversations

- Faith community participants expressed definite interest in the aging population and in helping to meet their needs. They are open to innovative ideas and programs.

*“People need someone to listen to them, to care about them, and to journey with them.”*

- The Latino folks in Longmont are frustrated with the amount of paperwork required to secure services and with the language barrier that they face. Some would like to learn to use a computer to be able to access the Internet, and would find it easier to begin in Spanish. They expressed particular difficulty with mental health issues and services, financial issues, a lack of transportation, and concern about immigration laws, both current and potential.
- The Latino participants in the Lafayette conversation seemed to be far more familiar with agencies providing services, raising no issues inconsistent with those found in other populations.
- Family caregivers need readily available and affordable respite care, and are interested in the possibility of an informal network of support.
- Homeless people at the Carriage House were welcoming and candid about their circumstances. There seem to be significant issues of job availability and mental health care.

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transsexual (LGBT) participants described issues no different than those faced by other targeted constituencies, but did voice endorsement for a LGBT support network.

*“No matter where you go, you are still illegal at night.”*

- Among low-income people at the OUR Center, transportation was a repeated topic and represents the greatest need and barrier to services and participation in community life. Financial stresses are also paramount among these participants.

*“Okay, are we going to pay our utilities or buy groceries?”*

- Among the group of men, the conversation encompassed their roles as volunteers and helpers themselves as well as their concerns about maintaining health as they age.
- The residents of the senior housing facility at Canyon Pointe are connected to each other and willing to help, even serving as advocates for one another. There are significant financial concerns among some, and some face a declining ability to cope, but most seem to have access to the services and information they need. They had a rousing conversation about ways to engage the broader community in issues of aging.

- Veterans face issues beyond what other older adults encounter. There are significant mental health needs along with financial issues that impact their current situations and anticipated futures. The need for quality jobs was among the issues that emerged, although asking for help of any kind might prove difficult for many. There was humor, goodwill and connection

*“The veteran population is a tricky population because we are survivors. We always have been, and we don’t want to ask for help.”*

among this group as they described issues common among veterans. They wonder whether their impressions of a community bias against vets might be accurate, and whether local governments assume that all their needs are met at the federal level. They understand that they are 20,000 strong in Boulder County and would like their voices to be heard, but their primary commitment is to helping each other.

# CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

*“We need to focus on what people actually need and not just what we think they need as they age.”*

- There is a strong sense of appreciation among older adults in Boulder County that the access they have to a wide array of services far exceeds that available in other communities.
- Acknowledging the diversity in the County, non-Spanish-speaking participants joined Latinos in recognizing that there is a language discrepancy causing a significant barrier for Latinos who are seeking services and / or who may be attempting to participate in the life of the broader community.
- The following section of this report has been challenging to organize. A number of the ideas and concepts contained in “Creating Vibrant Communities in Which We All Age Well” could have appropriately been classified under several different goals in the Plan. In recommending additions and emphasis, we have organized these recommendations in a way that seems logical to us and reflects how participants in the series of Community Conversations grouped and addressed issues.

Issue: Some older adults participating in these discussions expressed concerns about protection from and information about fraudulent practices and scams. Others stressed their anxiety about their physical safety, either from accidents or from intrusion.

Recommendation: Consider adding a goal within the Addressing Basic Needs Quadrant to address issues and strategies concerning personal safety. These concerns related directly to multiple suggestions for the establishment of an informal “buddy system” that could be friend-based, neighborhood-based, faith community-based, or non-profit-based. While not an overriding issue of concern, there was sufficient frequency of mention to warrant forwarding this suggestion.

Issue: Even among some of the older adults who are familiar with the County’s services and facilities, there is a clear lack of familiarity with the “One Call / One Source” program initiated as part of the Strategic Plan. Among those less accustomed to agencies and services in their communities, there is a significant lack of knowledge about the program. More than once, someone participating in the discussion would say something like, “What we need is a single source of information about all services available for older adults.”

Recommendation: A strong promotional program should be in place to make sure people are aware of the comprehensive, single source of information available to them through “One Call / One Source”. Multiple methods of promotion will help with spreading the word, including tapping into existing groups, agencies, and non-profits to help with dissemination.

Issue: There was no record of discussion among any group participating in a Community Conversation that could relate to Goal #9, “People celebrate and share common interests – *Common Ground Creates Common Good*. While the concept is sound, people customarily tend to coalesce around a specific issue, cause, or opportunity rather than coming together for its own sake.

Recommendation: Consider melding this concept into existing Goal 6 within the same Quadrant, Promoting Social and Civic Engagement.



Issue: There is a moderately strong expression of need among these participants for routine household assistance. “My biggest struggle is finding someone to help with the odds and ends around the house that I used to be able to do, like fixing a broken screen on a window,” remarked one older adult, with total concurrence by those in the same discussion group. This need bears directly on people’s ability to remain in their own homes and retain a measure of independence.

Recommendation: This service is indeed available in some places in Boulder County. Consider adding the promotion and expansion of this non-profit-provided service to the information agenda ahead. Including an additional strategy in Goal #14 could be aimed at addressing the need. Alternatively, the possibility of promoting a neighborhood-based or faith-based network of folks available to help might alleviate some of the need.



Issue: It is clear that social connections and emotional well-being are central to aging well. While senior centers across Boulder County are clearly doing an outstanding job at promoting social connections and activities, not everyone is a participant.

Recommendation: Opportunities to link people to their neighbors, to agencies, and to each other should be created intentionally and not be missed in the routine of doing business as usual. Is there a way to connect people “in place” in addition to offering them programs at community facilities? One of the Carriage House participants advocated a program like the Ad Council’s iconic American Indian with the tear mourning America’s tendency to litter as a way to mobilize attention to the needs of older adults. “Maybe old systems aren’t going to be effective anymore,” said a participant encouraging innovative approaches to reaching disengaged people.



Issue: The centrality of physical health and emotional well-being to a stable life have emerged as core concepts in the ability of older adults to age well.

Recommendation: The importance of these needs would seem to demand that the goals and strategies in this Quadrant receive a high level of emphasis as action plans for the next few years emerge.

Issue: The faith community leaders who participated in a Community Conversation, although small in number, were clearly engaged in issues affecting older adults.

Recommendation: Consider following up with those participants and expanding to other faith community representatives to share the collaborative research describing needs and barriers and to ask for their assistance in disseminating information about the availability of services, as well as supplementing County services for older adults.

Issue: As participants in these Conversations talked about whether it would be important to make aging well a priority across the community, there was excitement and creativity in the ideas they forwarded. Although there was also a degree of skepticism about whether younger people would ever be convinced that they, too, would eventually age, the older adults who were part of these discussions never faltered in their desire to have a voice and not be considered a segregated and separate part of their communities' people.

Recommendation: Consider adding to the Plan ways to mobilize older adults as advocates for their own strengths. Their voices will have a degree of credibility that advocates on their behalf cannot achieve.

Issue: The final issue is one of process rather than content. Persuading people to participate in small group discussions like these Community Conversations is difficult at best. While some of the 21 groups were made up of more than 10 people, many groups were much smaller. The greater the diversity of participants and voices, the greater the range of thinking and experience expressed will be, and the stronger the messages received.

Recommendation: Community Conversations should continue to be a method of choice to find out what people are experiencing on a day-to-day basis in the communities of Boulder County. For future consideration, there is likely to be greater success in engaging people in venues where they already can be found rather than hoping they will take the time to travel to a different and perhaps unfamiliar location. It's also likely to be more effective to reach people through personal connections with an organization or individual with whom there is already a relationship. This outreach takes considerably more time and attention than is customary but it is well worth the extra effort.