

By Amy Geiszler-Jones

When the National Association for Area Agencies on Agencies — commonly called N4A — decided to take its Aging in Place Initiative on the road, Annette Graham was determined that Wichita would be one of the dozen stops that the nonprofit organization would make to help energize efforts for a “livable community” for all ages.

Graham is the executive director of the Central Plains Area Agency on Aging, which serves Sedgwick, Butler, Harvey and Sumner counties. As a N4A board member, she’s well aware of the national push to have communities access how ready they are to sustain and provide services for an aging population.

As the baby boomer generation — born between 1946 and 1964 — continues to reach retirement age, the number of Americans older than 65 is expected to reach 71.5 million by 2030. That’s twice the number of 65-plus Americans than the country had in the year 2000, according to national statistics.

The N4A was among five national organizations that partnered in 2005 to conduct a survey of 10,000 local governments to determine how ready these communities were to provide programs, policies and services to address an aging population.

“Less than half had even begun to think about that sort of planning,” said Sandy Markwood, N4A’s CEO.

Markwood noted that most older adults prefer to “age in place” in the communities where they’ve raised families and had careers. “Less than 5 percent of older adults are in nursing homes and that number is dwindling so we need to address” creating communities that can sustain an aging population, she said.

Armed with the survey data and bolstered by requests coming from communities to develop a program to help jumpstart such planning at local levels, the N4A — along with the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities and MetLife — selected 12 U.S. communities where it would help organize such efforts.

Communities ranging in size from Chicago and Miami to Wichita were selected to host what N4A called Aging in Place workshops.

### **The summer summit**

On June 23, 2009, more than 100 participants from not only senior service agencies but from the planning, building and government sectors, along with private citizens, came together at Wichita State University for the workshop “Revitalizing Communities for All Generations: Visioning a Livable Wichita Region.”

Efforts had already been under way in the community to include age-readiness planning, thanks to a subgroup of Visioneering Wichita called the Older Adult Alliance, Graham

said. Visioneering Wichita is the community-wide effort to engineer a plan for what the community should look like in 20 years.

“We’ve been working hard to reach out to others who normally don’t get involved in issues of aging because the issue of aging is much, much bigger than we tend to envision,” said Graham. For example, the Older Adult Alliance put together planning tips for builders of the Intrust Arena to address the needs of more mature audience members attending events there.

“This summit really was a tipping point to get more people integrated in talking about aging issues,” Graham said.

During the summer 2009 workshop, national and local experts talked about ways to encourage other concepts to create a livable community, a term that planners and aging experts are using to define creating communities that are promoting and enhancing the quality of life for older Americans. Elements of a livable community include home designs, transportation services, intergenerational activities, and neighborhood amenities.

“If you have a livable community for all ages, it helps communities draw upon the assets of an aging community,” said Markwood, one of the workshop speakers. Older adults often give back to communities through volunteerism and community involvement, Markwood pointed out.

Graham agrees with that point. “Aging adults are part of the fabric of our community and are still vibrant members. They add economic value and value to the family unit and make for a stronger community all around.”

The Wichita workshop was among the highest attended among the dozen summits nationwide, Graham said.

“The energy and enthusiasm of the people in Wichita was exciting,” Markwood said.

### **Summit outcomes**

Host communities were eligible to apply for what were called Jumpstart Grants — funded by the nonprofit Partners for Livable Communities — to help initiatives or programs related to creating a livable community.

The energy and enthusiasm that Markwood noted at the summit led to 14 community projects being funded, with grants that ranged from \$1,000 to \$2,500.

“You often don’t need a big grant or a new program,” Markwood said.

One of the programs funded in the Wichita community was as simple as creating a community garden in the Planeview neighborhood, where a grocery store isn’t within easy walking distance. Recently a resident of a northeast Wichita neighborhood called

Graham's agency to inquire about how to start a similar garden, after hearing about the the Planeview community garden.

"That's the kind of thing these grants were intended to do — jumpstart ideas of what can be done throughout the city," Graham said.

Other funded projects included creating universal design patio homes, a senior advocacy training program, intergenerational programming at senior centers and production of an aging-in-place DVD.

*This article is part of a four-part series that will look at the concept of and local efforts toward creating a livable community for all ages in the Wichita and surrounding areas.*

**EDITORIAL NOTE:** Becky, you can probably use the two following items as pullouts/box separately.

### **How to get involved**

One of the initiatives that developed from the June 2009 summit in Wichita on creating a community for all ages is an advocacy training project. The project, according to Annette Graham, Central Plains Area Agency on Aging executive director, will help train older adults on how to advocate for issues that affect themselves and their peers. The project gets under way with a training session on Thursday, March 25, from 1-4:30 p.m. at 2622 W. Central Ave. Space is limited so call early to RSVP to (316) 660-5229.

Residents also can become involved in the Older Adult Alliance, a subgroup of the Visioneering Wichita project. To join the group, call (316) 660-5232.

### **Online resources**

A complete report of the June 2009 livable community summit held in Wichita can be found at

[http://www.aginginplaceinitiative.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=228&Itemid=208](http://www.aginginplaceinitiative.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=228&Itemid=208).

Other places to read about the livable community concept are:

[www.aginginplaceiniative.org](http://www.aginginplaceiniative.org)

[www.n4a.org](http://www.n4a.org)

[www.cpaaa.org](http://www.cpaaa.org)