



COOK COUNTY AGE FRIENDLY ACTION PLAN

NOVEMBER 2025

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	3
COMMUNITY PROFILE	3
COOK COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS	5
A BRIEF HISTORY OF AGE-FRIENDLY WORK IN COOK COUNTY	5
COMMUNITY SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS.....	7
KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS.....	8
Top Concerns Across Domains (Ranked):	8
Cross-Domain Needs:.....	9
Strengths, Opportunity and Barriers:	9
Other Topics Discussed	10
INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAN	11
Overview Of the Planning Process and Decision-Making.....	11
Community And Partner Engagement.....	11
Plan Timeline and Goals	12
Coordination Across Community Partners.....	12
ACTION PLAN	13
CONCLUSION	17

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Starting in October 2023, Care Partners and Cook County Public Health implemented a local community engagement initiative designed to learn about the needs and experiences of older adults across Cook County. The project was rooted in our demographic reality: 30.1% of our population is 65 or olderⁱ. The rural nature of our geography, housing constraints, and limited health care accessibility present unique challenges to aging in Cook County. The county does not have assisted living, memory care, or hospice facilities, and options for long-term and home care remain limited. Middle housing is scarce or nonexistent, and our distance from larger urban areas limits access to specialized medical services. Through a partnership between Cook County Public Health, Care Partners of Cook County, the Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging, and community stakeholders, we pursued and received a grant from Age-Friendly Minnesota to learn more about how these challenges impact community members as they age. The project included community surveys and listening sessions, leading a set of community priorities, which are framed within the “Nine Domains of Livability,” a tool to assess and improve age-friendliness. The top priorities to emerge include Housing, Transportation, Communication and Information, and Health Services and Community Supports. This plan will guide how we implement, coordinate, and evaluate progress toward these priorities over the next five years.

At the April 16, 2024 meeting of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, following a presentation of findings from the initial community engagement process, the Commissioners unanimously approved joining Minnesota’s Age Friendly Communities network with a commitment to applying AARP Age Friendly lens to planning and programming across the county. A community celebration was held on June 25, 2024 at Studio 21 in Grand Marais.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Cook County spans 1,453 square miles in the remote northeastern corner of Minnesota, bordered by Lake Superior to the south and Canada to the north. With a population of 5,600, it is among the least populous counties in the state, yet one of the largest by land area. Communities include Grand Marais, Lutsen, Tofte, Schroeder, Hovland, Grand Portage, and the Gunflint Trail area, each with distinct character and cultural heritageⁱⁱ.

Cook County is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with older adults comprising roughly one third of the overall population and growing, a trend expected to continue for several years as residents age in place and retirees move to the areaⁱⁱⁱ.

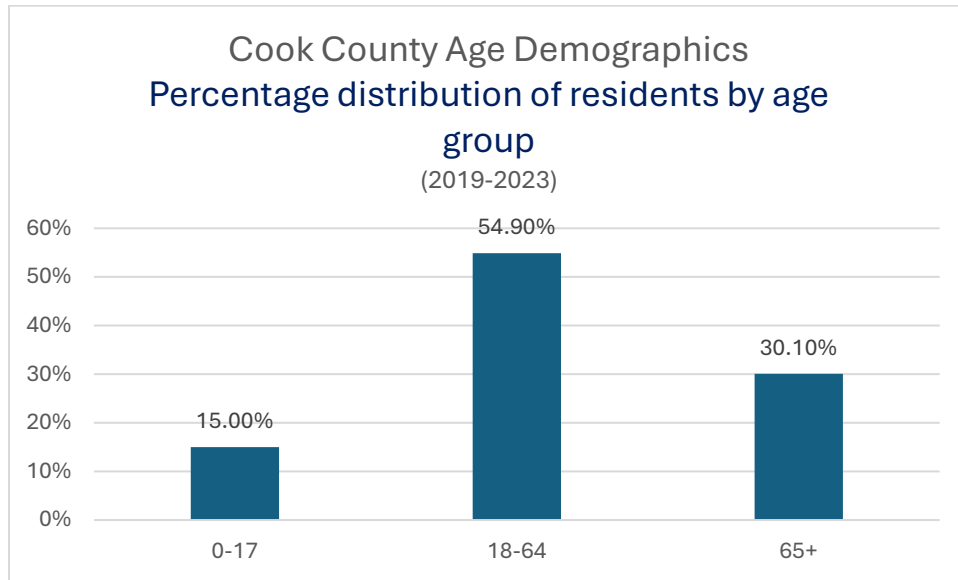


Figure 1. Age distribution of Cook County residents (2019–2023). *Source: Minnesota Compass, Wilder Research, 2025.*

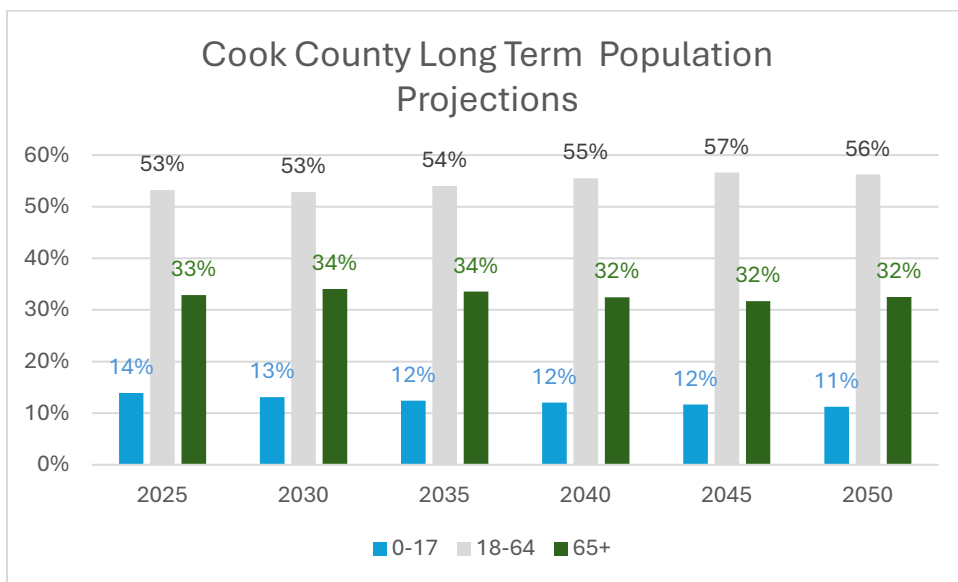


Figure 2. Long term population projections of Cook County residents. *Source: Minnesota State Demographic Center, 2024.*

The county is characterized by extreme seasonal weather, vast distances between communities, and limited public transportation. These frontier rural realities create

barriers to accessing essential services, especially for those without personal vehicles. Housing options are limited, especially for those seeking one-level or accessible homes, and middle housing is virtually nonexistent. Local healthcare resources include a Critical Access Hospital (North Shore Health), a Federally Qualified Health Center (Sawtooth Mountain Clinic), and a small network of home-based services. However, transportation gaps and geographic isolation continue to restrict access to specialty care.

COOK COUNTY DEMOGRAPHICS

Age: According to US Census data, 30.1% of Cook County residents are 65 and older^{iv}.

Poverty: 11.3% of the population lived below the poverty line, surpassing the Minnesota state average of 9.2%^v.

Varying abilities: Approximately 13.2% of residents report living with a disability, which is higher than the state average of 12%^{vi}.

Racial and Ethnic Composition: The county's population is predominantly White (84.3%), with Native American residents comprising 6.3%, and individuals identifying with two or more races at 5.2%^{vii}

Housing: 25.8% of households in Cook County are considered cost burdened. This is when a household spends more than 30% of its income on housing costs, which include rent or mortgage, and utility costs. This includes 24.3% of owner-occupied households and 32.3% of renter-occupied households^{viii}

Education: 97.3 % of adults in Cook County have at least a high school diploma and 45.6% have a Bachelor's or Advanced Degree^{ix}

Demographic Data Specific to Older Adults in Cook County^x:

Single-person older adult households: 20.9% of adults 65 and older are living alone in Cook County

Racial/Ethnic Identities of Older Adults in Cook County: 91.5% of those ages 65+ identify as white, with 5.8% identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AGE-FRIENDLY WORK IN COOK COUNTY

Cook County's Age-Friendly efforts formally began in 2023 with a grant from the Age-Friendly Minnesota program to conduct a county-wide community engagement

initiative to assess the needs and experiences of older adults across the geography of Cook County. This initiative built upon priorities identified in the 2023-2027 Community Health Assessment (CHA), which highlighted transportation, housing, and access to health services as priorities for improvement. Because 30.1% of the population of Cook County is age 65 or older, defining how these priorities look for older adults helps local government and its partner agencies be more aware of and responsive to how we address needs across the lifespan.

Concerns highlighted in the CHA that the Age-Friendly community engagement project sought to better understand from the perspectives of older adults in the community included the impact to health and well-being from:

- Distance to specialty medical services
- Issues related to aging-in-place due to the remote nature of the community and the limited services and housing stock available locally
- Limited transportation supports for regional non-emergency medical transportation

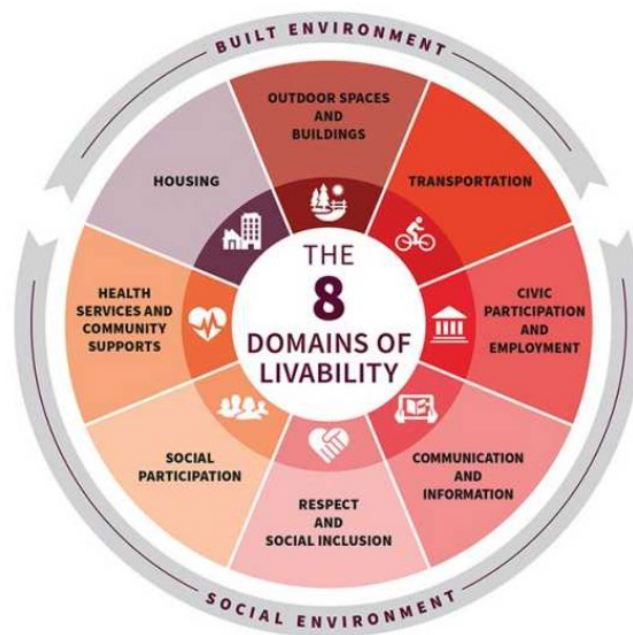


Figure 3. The 8 Domains of Livability: A framework developed by AARP to describe the community features that influence the quality of life for people of all ages, focusing on both the built and social environments. *Source: AARP Livable Communities. "The 8 Domains of Livability: An Introduction." AARP, 2025. Available at <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities>*

Guided by the AARP’s Domains of Livability^{xi}, the age friendly community engagement project was conducted through a community-wide survey and a series of listening sessions held across Cook County, including in Grand Portage. The AARP framework was used to structure the process, with technical support from the Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging (AAAA). The Cook County Board of Commissioners submitted a formal letter of commitment to join the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities with a celebration on June 25, 2024.

COMMUNITY SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS

To ensure accessibility and broad participation, an 86-question survey was made available online, in paper format, and by phone. In parallel, ten community listening sessions were held between October 2023 and February 2024 across Cook County, including Schroeder, Tofte, Lutsen, the Gunflint Trail (Mid-Trail and Trails-End), Grand Portage, Hovland, Grand Marais (at both the Library and the YMCA), and one virtual session via Zoom.

Outreach strategies included radio announcements, social media posts, email distribution, and physical flyers placed in high-traffic community locations. These efforts were designed to promote inclusive engagement and capture the diverse experiences and priorities of residents, especially older adults.

Both the forums and the surveys were anchored in a shared set of guiding questions based on the AARP’s Eight Domains of Livability, with an added focus on Disaster Preparedness. Residents were asked to reflect on what they value most in their communities, what should be preserved, and which areas need improvement. Topics included housing, transportation, outdoor spaces, civic participation, communication and information, health services, social inclusion, and community engagement. Participants were also invited to imagine their community in the year 2050 and suggest ways to enhance resilience to different types of emergencies that may occur.

During the forums, these questions shaped facilitated group discussions and written exercises, encouraging participants to share local knowledge and lived experiences. The surveys offered in multiple formats were promoted widely—not only during the forums but also through local media and partner networks—to ensure everyone had an opportunity to contribute. Emphasizing that Age-Friendly communities benefit people of

all ages, the surveys provided an important channel for feedback from those unable to attend in person.

Total survey responses: 160

Total listening sessions held: 10

Total participants in listening sessions: 100

Demographic information from survey respondents:

- Age distribution:
 - 65+ years: 60%
 - 45–64 years: 30%
 - Under 45: 10%
 - Gender: 72% female, 26% male, 2% other/prefer not to say
 - Ethnicity: 96% White, 2% Native, 2% other or multiracial
- Income:
 - Under \$50,000: 42%
 - \$50,000–\$100,000: 35%
 - Over \$100,000: 23%
- Geographic reach:
 - Responses from all regions of Cook County, with highest representation from Grand Marais, Lutsen, and Hovland
- Caregiver status: 41% identified as a caregiver

KEY FINDINGS FROM SURVEY AND LISTENING SESSIONS

Top Concerns Across Domains (Ranked):

1. **Health Services and Community Support:** Access to in-home supports, caregiver support, home health care, and specialized health services
2. **Housing:** Access to affordable, safe, and Age-Friendly housing
3. **Transportation:** Access to reliable, accessible, and affordable transportation options (especially when unable to drive oneself in a personal vehicle)
4. **Disaster Preparedness:** Inclusion in and awareness of severe weather and other emergency preparedness and response efforts
5. **Communication/Information:** Access to timely and reliable information about available services and resources

Cross-Domain Needs:

- **Transportation + Housing:** Respondents expressed concern in accessing a range of resources and services due to distance and a lack of transit options aside from using one's personal vehicle.
- **Communication + Health Services:** Respondents voiced a lack of awareness of available health support services, especially those for older adults and their caregivers.
- **Housing + Emergency Preparedness:** Participants noted limited resources for home safety modifications to prepare for severe weather and aging in place.

Strengths, Opportunity and Barriers:

When discussing the strengths, opportunities, and barriers to becoming more Age-Friendly as a community, respondents noted:

- **Strengths:** A strong sense of place and pride in nature and community; a spirit of collaboration; a high value placed on education and volunteerism
- **Opportunities:** Building off community strengths, respondents called out the mission/vision/and dedication to solving community challenges found across a wide variety of community organizations, many of which already collaborate with one another. The opportunity is one to introduce and incorporate the principles of Age-Friendly communities to existing work. Entities named by respondents as community assets include:
 - Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging
 - Boreal Waters Community Foundation
 - Care Partners of Cook County
 - Cook County Aging Coalition
 - Cook County Chamber of Commerce
 - Cook County Community Center
 - Cook County Higher Education
 - Cook County Historical Society
 - Cook County Public Health and Human Services
 - Faith communities
 - Grand Marais Art Colony
 - Grand Portage Elderly Nutrition Program
 - Grand Portage Health Services

- Grand Portage Human Services and Community Center
- Hub
- Lloyd K Johnson Foundation
- Local businesses
- North House Folk School
- Northland Foundation
- North Shore Health
- Sawtooth Mountain Clinic
- Violence Prevention Center
- Vital North Foundation
- **Barriers:** Alongside the strengths and opportunities for building an Age-Friendly community, respondents articulated multiple challenges to aging in Cook County. These included:
 - Geographic isolation
 - Long distance to specialized medical services
 - High cost of living, especially for limited income households
 - Aging infrastructure with limited contractor availability for home modifications or repairs

Other Topics Discussed

Aside from the most common themes found in the survey and listening session responses, other important sub-themes also arose. These included:

- The desire to preserve and teach Native American culture and traditions across generations
- The need for emergency shelter sites spread across the county's geography to accommodate the needs of people living in more remote places
- Promote Smoke-free indoor air and ventilation upgrades
- Creating safe, walkable/wheelchair accessible spaces in high-traffic areas such as downtown Grand Marais
- A high value placed on intergenerational spaces, activities and volunteer opportunities and an interest in offering more intergenerational activities

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAN

The Cook County Age-Friendly Action Plan reflects our community's commitment to supporting healthy aging across all townships, the City of Grand Marais, and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. This plan was developed in alignment with the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities, building on priorities identified through the 2023-2027 Community Health Assessment and extensive community engagement in 2023–2024. This plan recognizes aging as both a demographic reality and a call to action. The plan outlines achievable, cross-sector goals to ensure that older adults can remain active, connected, and supported across all domains of community life.

Overview Of the Planning Process and Decision-Making

The planning process was co-led by Cook County Public Health and Care Partners of Cook County, with key support from the Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging. This work was funded by an Age-Friendly Communities grant through the Minnesota Department of Human Services and was informed by community surveys and listening sessions.

The Aging Coalition of Cook County acted as a key reviewer for this plan, providing feedback which was taken into consideration as the plan evolved over time.

Decisions were grounded in local data, community input, and national best practices, emphasizing realistic timelines and sustainable impact.

Community And Partner Engagement

This plan was shaped by the voices of older adults, caregivers, service providers, and community leaders. Engagement activities included:

- A community-wide survey completed by 164 residents
- 10 Listening sessions across all townships and Grand Portage with over 100 attendees combined

These conversations elevated real stories and insights about aging in place, accessibility, and inclusion. Many priorities in this plan reflect direct feedback from participants, particularly the need for housing modifications, local transportation solutions, and greater connection between residents and available services.

Plan Timeline and Goals

The implementation phase of this plan spans from **July 2024 to July 2029**. Goals are organized by domain and framed to ensure feasibility, sustainability, and accountability. Each goal is supported by realistic strategies and clearly defined implementation actions.

Progress will be reviewed annually, and updates will be shared with the Cook County Aging Coalition.

Coordination Across Community Partners

Implementation of the Age-Friendly Action Plan is built on strong cross-agency collaboration. Core partners—**Care Partners of Cook County, Cook County Public Health and Human Services (PHHS)**, and the **Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging**—work alongside other community partners (including the **Cook County Aging Coalition**) to encourage an Age-Friendly lens across the community, encouraging services that are aligned, efficient, and responsive to the evolving needs of older adults.

Key strategies include:

- **Regular Collaboration:** Regular meetings between Care Partners and PHHS will support the evolution of Age-Friendly action plan activities, with regular communication to key partners at bi-monthly Cook County Aging Coalition meetings.
- **Service Navigation:** Partners with the Aging Coalition, Care Partners, and PHHS will promote community-wide resource directories such as Aging Well Resources to ensure that older adults are connected to housing, health, transportation, and caregiver support.
- **Community-Based Implementation:** By introducing Age-Friendly concepts, alongside this plan, to partners, we will ensure that the ideas raised in the Age-Friendly community engagement process will become integrated into work across different agencies. Organizers will be available to present on Age-Friendly concepts and community-based findings as requested.

ACTION PLAN

HOUSING				
Goal	Strategies	Implementation Actions	Metrics	Outcomes
Support access to safe, stable, and age- friendly housing	Advocate for accessible, creative housing options for older adults to age in place (e.g., accessibility retrofits, Accessory Dwelling Units, intergenerational living)	Coordinate with HRA, zoning, and Healthy Homes Program to prioritize aging-in-place designs and modifications	Number of trainings, meetings, etc. with community partners	Both HRA and Public Health staff will approach housing issues with an Age Friendly lens.
	Continue to Offer Healthy Homes assessments for older adults	Prioritize households with seniors and disabilities using age-in-place checklist during home visits	Report the number of healthy housing assessments completed for older adults.	Older adults will have access to knowledge and resources related to health and housing
	Continue to provide housing education	Host annual community workshops in coordination with the Cook County Aging Coalition	Record the time and date of workshop, including the number of attendees and its theme	

(ACTION PLAN – continued)

TRANSPORTATION				
Goal	Strategies	Implementation Actions	Metrics	Outcomes
Improve access to reliable, accessible transportation for older adults	Provide options for non-emergency medical transportation (e.g. Cook County Care Partners, Cook County In-home-support)	Continue to recruit volunteer drivers	Annual re-cap of volunteer driver capacity and needs for both Care Partners and Cook County Human Services at the Aging Coalition meeting	A stable range of non-emergency medical transportation resources will be available to older adults in Cook County
		Assess operational needs for the Boreal Transit project	Report on findings related to operational needs	
	Partner on regional transit efforts	Attend AEOA Transportation Advisory Council meetings	Quarterly report on AEOA updates will be provided to the Cook County Aging Coalition	Greater awareness of regional transportation resources, challenges, and opportunities for development

(ACTION PLAN – continued)

COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION				
Goal	Strategies	Implementation Actions	Metrics	Outcomes
Ensure older adults receive timely and accessible information on community resources	Promote use of Aging Well Resources and other local resources directories	Amplify Care Partners’ efforts to publicize Aging Well Resources	Number of mentions on WTIP via underwriting efforts	Widespread awareness of resources and services available to older adults
			Number of print and/or social media posts	
		Create an all-ages resource directory website for Cook County, using an Age-Friendly lens	Number and agendas for planning meetings Launch date for website	
	Ensure that older adults know how and where to access emergency communications	Develop materials and communications strategies that consider how older adults receive information	Emergency Preparedness Coordinator based in PHHS continues to lead efforts and reports updates at bi-monthly Aging Coalition Meetings	All emergency communications strategies will include multiple channels (online, radio, paper-based when applicable) and will center the needs of older adults across the geography of Cook County

(ACTION PLAN – continued)

HEALTH SERVICES & COMMUNITY SUPPORTS				
Goal	Strategies	Implementation Actions	Metrics	Outcome
Identify and support community-based services that make aging-in-place feasible	Promote existing local resources such as The Hub’s elder outreach programs, Care Partners’ caregiver, respite and care coordination services, and Grand Portage’s elder wellness services	Cross-promote programming across agencies serving older adults	Agendas and minutes for Aging Coalition share relevant programming among partner agencies	Older adults are well-connected to available community resources
		Continue to refer clients to available services across agencies		
	Support caregivers of older adults	Support existing support groups and promote peer-led programs	Number of events and opportunities for caregiver support	
Address social isolation and ageism through community programming	Amplify Aging Well Resources and its community event calendar	Tracking metrics for Aging Well Resources	Older adults have opportunities to connect with community events and resources	
	Continue to assess and document unmet particular service needs (such as assisted living, hospice, PCAs, respite etc.)	Gather information from potential service recipients as well as professional agencies and providers	Create a data gathering mechanism and a timeline/format for reporting back to the Aging Coalition	Aging service providers are better able to describe unmet service needs for older adults who wish to age in place in Cook County

(ACTION PLAN – continued)

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS				
Goal	Strategies	Implementation Actions	Metrics	Outcome
Prepare older adults for emergencies	Integrate preparedness education into existing individual service relationships with older adults	Add preparedness education materials to existing client-facing services through collaboration with partner agencies	Description and number of materials distributed and how they were distributed	Older adults receive information on preparedness at trusted partner sites throughout the community
	Encourage neighbors to check on one another during emergencies	Design and pilot a communications and engagement campaign to encourage neighbors to check on one another in emergencies	Written communications campaign and implementation plan available for review	Improved community connectedness during disasters reduces isolation and unmet needs of older adults in emergency situations
	Integrate the Age-Friendly lens in public health emergency planning	Center the needs of older adults in public health emergency plans	Public health emergency plans include a section on access and functional needs that include specific considerations of older adults	Public health emergency response situations will be more responsive to the needs and experiences of older adults

CONCLUSION

As an Age-Friendly community, Cook County remains committed to listening to and learning from the needs and experiences of its sizable and growing population of older adults. This action plan represents a way to take what we’ve learned and translate it into changes that will create a healthier community across the lifespan (after all,

everyone is aging). The strategies and action steps align in the areas of access to health services and community supports, housing, and transportation align with the priority health areas identified in the [2023-2027 Cook County Community Health Assessment](#). Strategies and action steps in the areas of communication and information and disaster preparedness also align with emergency preparedness efforts underway within Cook County Public Health. Given the unique nature of our remote, rural community—partnership among local agencies has always been crucial to advancing shared priorities. In that spirit, a theme interwoven throughout the action plan is the need to engage community members and partners in understanding and supporting the findings of our Age-Friendly engagement as well as the next steps we’ve identified as strategies to move this work forward.

ⁱ Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

ⁱⁱ Geospatial Analysis Center. (2019). *Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan: Cook County, Minnesota*. Duluth: University of Minnesota.

ⁱⁱⁱ Minnesota State Demographic Center. (2025, October 17). *Our Projections*. Retrieved from Population Data: <https://mn.gov/admin/demography/data-by-topic/population-data/our-projections/>; https://mn.gov/admin/assets/2024-Minnesota-Long-Term-Population-Projections%20v3_tcm36-626199.xlsx

^{iv} Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^v Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^{vi} Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^{vii} Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^{viii} Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^{ix} Wilder Research. (2025, October 17). Retrieved from Minnesota Compass: <https://www.mncompass.org/>

^x Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2025, October 17). *Aging Data Profiles*. Retrieved from Aging 2030: Aging Data Profiles: <https://developertoolmn.org/dhs/partners-and-providers/news-initiatives-reports-workgroups/aging/aging-2030/data-profiles/index.jsp>

^{xi} AARP. (2025, October 18). *The 8 Domains of Livability: An Introduction*. Retrieved from AARP Livable Communities: <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2016/8-domains-of-livability-introduction.html>