

# Community Listening Sessions: Findings Summary

AGE-FRIENDLY EQUITY ALLIANCE, RAMSEY COUNTY  
PREPARED BY MORKEN CONSULTING

# Age-Friendly Equity Alliance, Ramsey County Community Listening Sessions: Findings Summary

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## OVERVIEW

This findings summary is based on three community listening sessions hosted by Age-Friendly Equity Alliance, Ramsey County (AFEA-RC) between October 2023 and March 2024.

The sessions were funded through an Age-Friendly Minnesota Community Grant to support AFEA-RC’s efforts to engage a wide range of community members in its work. AFEA-RC leaders planned to hold one session each focused on older African-American/Black residents, Somali residents, and Hmong residents.

**SESSION PURPOSE:** The purpose of the sessions, as shared with participants, was to hear from Ramsey County residents about what is important to them as they grow older in their communities, and use that input to:

- Develop and share recommendations with Ramsey County Commissioners
- Develop and share recommendations with cities in Ramsey County
- Engage residents and provide them with information and resources about how to get involved in making change in their communities

**Age-Friendly Equity Alliance, Ramsey County** works to impact programs and policies to create more livable communities for older adults. We are made up of older adults, private and public organizations, service and medical providers, and local governments.

## SESSIONS SNAPSHOT

	Mixed Session	Somali Session	Hmong Session
<b>DATE</b>	October 25, 2023	February 26, 2024	March 13, 2024
<b>FORMAT</b>	Community Listening Session	Focus Group	Focus Group
<b>VENUE</b>	St. Stephanus Lutheran Church, Frogtown neighborhood, Saint Paul	Highwood Hills Recreation Center, Battle Creek neighborhood, Saint Paul	Hmong Village, Eastside neighborhood, Saint Paul
<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	17 — <i>Mostly White and a few people of color. Majority women, a few men.</i>	6 — <i>All women</i>	6 — <i>3 women, 3 men</i>
<b>FACILITATOR</b>	AFEA-RC Consultant	Somali cultural community liaison	Hmong cultural community liaison

## **SESSION STRUCTURE:**

Each session was planned to follow a similar structure. Discussion questions, listed below, were adapted from AARP's [\*Roadmap to Livability: Community Listening Session Toolkit\*](#).

1. When you think about getting older, what do you like most about living in your community?
2. What changes are needed now — and in the future — in your community?
3. Wrapping up: Of everything we've talked about today, what is the most important to you?

## **BACKGROUND:**

Age-Friendly Equity Alliance, Ramsey County (AFEA-RC) is part of a global age friendly communities' movement, led by the World Health Organization and AARP, responding to unprecedented demographic shifts toward an older population. Engaging community members is vital to age friendly planning, because it helps ensure that people's lived experiences in their own communities are at the center of the work. Among other things, our aging experiences are greatly shaped by our cultural customs and beliefs. As Ramsey County becomes increasingly diverse, it is ever more important to hear directly from a wide range of people about what they want and need for themselves and their families in older age.

## SESSION SUMMARIES

This section provides more information about individual sessions. Please consider the following as you read:

- “Themes and Takeaways” are laid out slightly differently for each session. This reflects the composition and format of each group, and how nature of how the discussion flowed.
- Participant quotes are included for the Hmong and Somali sessions, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Session 1 had live notetakers and did not capture specific participant quotes.

### SESSION 1: Mixed Group

#### Helpful context:

AFEA-RC’s intent was that this session would include a significant proportion of African American and Black residents. However, most attendees were White with only a few people of color. Further, some attendees were simply community members, while others worked in the field of aging and provided input from a professional perspective. For these reasons, this session has been labeled a “Mixed Group.”

Unlike the Somali and Hmong sessions, which used very targeted outreach to recruit community elders, this one was advertised more broadly as a community listening session but intended to draw

more Black attendees. The session was held in the diverse Frogtown neighborhood and publicized with support from Frogtown Community Development Corp. and Hallie Q. Brown Community Center. The venue, while a Lutheran church, is a longtime neighborhood institution that also provides weekly free food distribution, serves as a polling place, and is familiar to many.

AFEA-RC plans to seek future grant funding to organize a more targeted session for African American/Black residents using lessons learned through this process.

### THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

Comments in this session reflected input both from community members and professionals who work in aging. This group raised the widest range of topics over the course of the discussion.

- **Neighborhood and immediate community are very important on various fronts.**
  - **Community design:**
    - **Walkability** and being able to get what you need close to home—including stores, services, and gathering places. The condition of sidewalks and bike paths is an important piece of this.
    - **Snow removal on neighborhood sidewalks and in parks was raised several times.** Snow and ice remain major barriers.
  - **Connecting with people**, especially through:
    - Affordable programming for various ages; volunteer opportunities; intergenerational activities/programs.

- **Local services and resources, especially:**
  - **Community assistance:** Block Nurse Programs and other community-based service providers and programs
  - **Volunteer opportunities** that provide social and community connection.
  - **Communication and information** made available through local channels – including flyers and small newspapers; internet alone isn't enough.
  - **Libraries and parks**
  - **More resources needed related to addiction and recovery.**
- **Food security** is a growing issue for many older people.
- **More affordable housing is needed.** Homelessness is on the rise for among older people. Little affordable housing is available for older adults and people with disabilities, and many people give up trying to access what's there.
- **More transportation options are needed.** Current options have significant drawbacks: buses aren't frequent enough; Metro Mobility requires appointments and a lot of time; Block Nurse Program can only provide two rides a month; and volunteer driver programs have issues related to gas and insurance.
- **Senior centers are valuable for social connection and as resource hubs,** though some senior centers in Ramsey County have closed in recent years. Modernized versions of senior centers are needed.
- **Systems: We need culture and communities that value aging, and systems that include older adults.**
  - **Ageism is harming us at an individual and systems level.** Change the narrative related to aging, and be aware of how ageism infuses public policy.
  - **Simplify and revamp systems that assist people.** Today, systems are designed to *disqualify* people for assistance rather than qualify them.
  - **Ramsey County needs to be intentional about putting an equity lens on everything they do.**

## SESSION 2: Somali elders

### Helpful context:

AFEA-RC worked with a cultural community liaison to plan the session, recruit participants, and facilitate it in Somali. The six participants all were women, and all residents of nearby Afton View Apartments, which includes both market rate and Section 8 units. The session was held in late afternoon. Participants were able to walk to the venue. They received a meal and a \$20 cash incentive.

The session was planned as a focus group with the intent for smaller-group conversation that could be audio-recorded in Somali and transcribed in English later. The focus group format also provided more predictable and controlled numbers that helped AFEA-RC stay within the grant budget for food and participant incentives.

## THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

This session's discussion ended up being less structured, with participants eager to begin sharing what was important to them rather than stick closely to planned questions.

- **We need a place to gather, sit, and be together.** In the apartment building, there is no common area for these residents to come together, keeping them isolated in their individual units.

*"In our apartments, we feel like captives in our own homes."*

- **"There aren't any elevators here. Up and down the stairs we must go."** As all participants live in the same apartment complex, all have similar experiences with their homes. The reported lack of elevators compels them to climb the stairs, which is difficult for many, and increases isolation.

*"All of those ups and down affect our knees, bodies, and minds."*

*"I find it really tough to climb the stairs. The landlord has not responded in way that is encouraging."*

- **Somali elders in Minneapolis are understood to be better off.** Participants believe that Somali elders in Minneapolis are treated with more respect and have access to more and better services. They wish that Somali elders in Saint Paul/Ramsey County had comparable services and were more valued highly in the community.
- **We need to be seen, and have our voices heard.** Participants feel invisible. They would like to meet with Ramsey County officials and/or other decisionmakers to communicate their needs and experiences.

*"Nobody pays attention to what we have to say or pays attention to us. Who should we talk to if we have an issue? We used to be busy, self-sufficient, and independent when we were younger, but our needs have changed."*

*"We need someone from Ramsey County who can assist us, listen to us and ask questions, and have a number as a hotline supporter."*

*"We have a roof over our heads in which to sleep. However, we are without rights. We are like the homeless in that nobody pays attention to what they have to say; similarly, nobody pays attention to us."*

## Session 3: Hmong elders

### Helpful context:

AFEA-RC worked with a cultural community liaison to plan the session, recruit participants, and facilitate it in Hmong. The six participants were three women and three men, most from St. Paul and one from Maplewood. The session was held in late morning in a meeting room at Hmong Village. Participants drove or rode with others to the session. They received a meal from an on-site food vendor recommended by the cultural liaison, and a \$20 cash incentive.

As with the Somali session, the Hmong session was planned as a focus group to allow for targeted recruitment efforts, simplify recording and transcription, and accommodate the grant budget for food and participant incentives.

Participants were gracious and grateful to be asked to share their thoughts and experiences. Some had prepared their input ahead of time. Two were Vietnam War veterans, and one brought photos from his time in the war.

## THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

This session, though more structured than the Somali session, loosely followed the three-question framework. Participants were ready to share their concerns and suggestions. The following details their priorities.

- **Neighborhood safety:** Numerous participants do not feel safe or like where they live. Fear of crime keeps them indoors and isolated, even though they would like to go outside.

*“The most important thing is, we would like that our area, our house, be ‘safety’ and not have the wrong people come hurt us, physically assault us, or do wrong to us.”*

*“As an elder, one wants to go stroll outside, but it’s not safe to stroll. I don’t get to live outside that house, I only stay inside... so it’s hard and lonely for me to live, but since I can’t go anywhere else, I can only stay where I am.”*

- **Appropriate, affordable housing:** Some participants’ homes are in unsafe neighborhoods; others live in buildings that are difficult to navigate due to mobility issues. Housing is expensive, especially if family is not able or available to help.

*“Sometimes, I have leg pain, so I would like to move. It’s not even like I wanted to live in another building, I just want to change levels, but they didn’t do that for me and they said that if I don’t stop fussing then I won’t get to live there; I was afraid so I stopped pushing for it.”*

- **Care for elders who don’t have family or children to help:** Hmong elders without children to help care for them, which is customary in Hmong culture, can be left in precarious positions. Even if there are children, they may not be interested in or able to afford caring for aging parents. Without this safety net, many Hmong elders experience depression, isolation, lack of language interpretation, and difficulty connecting to resources and services they might need.
- **Support for Veterans and families:** Hmong veterans of the U.S. military identify strongly with their veteran status – expressing pride in their service and gratitude for the opportunity to come to the U.S. There are also many Hmong widows in Minnesota, women whose husbands who died supporting the U.S.-initiated Secret War in Laos in the 1960s-70s. They wish the government would better support them

now to live with dignity as they grow older. Many are vulnerable here with limited English, often little money, and sometimes no children to help care for them in older age.

One participant requested getting a Veteran Health Identification Card to allow him to be treated at VA Medical Centers – a benefit he previously received but no longer has access to.

*“We want to thank the Americans’ love for us...But we still want enough to eat and a place to live. We still want a place to live... I want our American officials to care about our Hmong people.”*

- **Limited English makes it difficult to do things and increases vulnerability.** Language and communication issues make it hard to go to places and address anything related to basic living, such as housing, money, transportation, etc. Limited English also increases overall vulnerability.

Participants specifically mentioned wanting interpretation services at appointments, in the home, and in public places where needed.

- **Lower or eliminate co-pay costs for those with little money.**
- **A senior center/residence for Hmong elders: “This is what I desire most.”** Adult day centers for Hmong elders are hugely valued by the community. However, many Hmong elders continue to need support, companionship, and assistance in the evenings and on weekends, as well. Participants agreed that an affordable senior housing community that also offered supportive services and opportunities to socialize would be invaluable – a home where all their needs are met in one place.

Important features would include rooms for singles and couples; secure entrance; space and opportunities for socializing and exercising; capable staff who can assist with a variety of tasks, from completing paperwork to buying groceries.



# ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## ANALYSIS

- **The mixed group session included a wider array of topics, many of which were quality of life issues but also included discussion of problems with the system that prevent people from getting help;** the growing problems of food security, affordable housing shortages, and older adult homelessness were raised by people who were aware of those issues, not people experiencing them. **The Somali and Hmong sessions focused on more basic needs and issues** – safety, appropriate housing, isolation, and feeling voiceless. This speaks to the challenges faced by many immigrant elders, particularly those with little money.
- **The Somali and Hmong session reflect communities who are both disconnected from, and underserved by, systems that may provide support and services.** They feel little recourse to change or improve their own circumstances—due to limited English, little knowledge of how to track down help in the system, cracks in the system itself, feeling invisible, and fear of losing their housing, for example.
- **All sessions reinforce that the built environment matters, both your home and neighborhood.**
  - All groups highlighted the importance of sidewalks – they are both available and in good condition.
  - This includes snow removal, an ongoing challenge that needs more solutions. The mixed-group session discussed that neighborhood-level programs or assistance can be effective.

## INITIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are not exhaustive and should be considered a starting point. Issues surfaced through these conversations helped us better understand what is important to specific individuals and communities as well as pointed to some larger systemic issues. Both should be addressed.

- **Help immigrant elders raise their voice and access support**
  - Follow up with Somali elders for further engagement in a timely fashion to support them in connecting to elected officials and community leaders who can help them address their needs. They are actively interested in a visit from a representative of Ramsey County and/or other decisionmaker or elected official.
  - Identify ways to connect Hmong elders with existing resources and prioritize developing strategies to respond to pressing concerns shared during this session.
- **Invest in local-level facets of community life that are central to our lives as we age** – built environment, community-based services and supports, and programs that keep people engaged and contributing, among others.
- **Develop an age friendly equity planning and policy screen** to ensure that municipal decisions include consideration of a set of factors related to aging. This could be applied to many areas in city and county policy, including housing, transportation, human services,
- **Conduct audits of communications and language used related to aging.** Revise language to align with the [“Reframe Aging”](#) recommendations and establish practices to ensure that all new language and communications reflects those guidelines.
- **Reimagine city and county systems** to 1) integrate aging at a new level, and 2) ground the policy in commitment to maximizing eligibility for services.

This report was developed for Age-Friendly Equity Alliance, Ramsey County by Lydia Morken, Morken Consulting, through support from an Age-Friendly Minnesota Community Grant. The AFEA-RC Planning Team included:

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