LARIMER COUNTY OFFICE ON AGING REPORT ON COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Events from September 19 - October 12, 2022
Report published December 2022

CENTER FOR
PUBLIC DELIBERATION
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Key Summary of Findings
By Martin Carcasson, PhD., CPD Director

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About the Center

The Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) serves as an impartial resource to the northern Colorado community. Working with students trained in small group facilitation, the CPD assists local government, schools boards, and community organizations by researching issues and developing useful background material, and then designs, facilitates, and reports on innovative public events. The interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication have been produced by CPD associates without the input of partner organizations to maintain impartiality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary
What you really need to know

Working with the Larimer County Office on Aging (LCOA), the CSU Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) designed and ran community focus groups in September and October as part of the public engagement strategy for LCOA process to develop their 4 year plan. The CPD ran meetings in Estes Park, Berthoud, Fort Collins, Loveland, and Wellington, as well as one on Zoom for any residents. A total of around 90 participants attended a community discussion, and 132 total surveys were completed (78 from in person CPD forums, 28 from LCOA meetings in Red Feather and Bellvue, and 26 completed online from people that were unable to attend a session or attended the Zoom session). This report presents insights from the data collected during the meetings and the online option.

Process overview

Community focus group processes were each an hour long. At the community focus groups, participants worked in small groups with trained CPD student facilitators and notetakers to complete a brief survey (Appendix A), and then discussed these four questions:

1. What resources, education, or support do we need to focus on more to help people be more effective caregivers?

2. Social isolation and loneliness are associated with higher mortality risk in older adults. How might older adults in the community become more socially active? How can we support these activities?

3. Based on results for Question 2 in the survey…. How can we better address these obstacles? How can we share/make people more aware of available resources?

4. What is the most important thing you want us to understand about older adults living in Larimer County?

CPD notetakers captured insights from the discussions, and participants also had the opportunity to provide written comments on the four questions as well. All together, this report utilized the table notes from fourteen small group discussions, the 132 surveys, and written comments on the four discussion questions.

Key Overall Insights from the Analysis

The analysis identified 8 primary themes from the surveys and discussions, each of which is discussed in the first section of the report (pp. 6-14)

- Improving Communication

- Improving Transportation

- The Critical Need and Role of Caregivers

- The Importance of Senior Centers

- Addressing Social Isolation

- A Call for Respect

- The Role of Technology

- Additional Programs and Services Discussed

In addition, the report engages some additional themes that while not as prevalent in the discussions as the key themes, still warrant consideration and response. Those included:

- Pride in self-sufficiency

- The Prevalence of Helpful Organizations

- Intergenerational connections

- Importance of volunteerism

- Concerns about ageism and elder abuse

Part three of the report provides some insights relevant to the specific communities, and a final section highlights some key tension that the CPD seens as particularly important to engage in the work of supporting our older residents.

Background

The Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) worked with the Larimer County Office on Aging Program Manager Erin Alt and Program Coordinator Nicole Limoges to design the surveys and the discussion questions. The process was designed to be a part of their engagement process to inform the Office on Aging Four Year Plan. The CPD has a group of trained CSU students to support events that shift from the one at a time at the microphone form of engagement to multiple small group conversations.

Deliberative processes are designed not only to capture the views of the attendees, but also to spark productive conversation between attendees as they work through the issues at hand. Similarly, reports of deliberative processes such as this one not only attempt to summarize the key themes heard during the events, but also to identify critical factual questions and better understand key differences and tensions that arose between participants' perspectives. Overall, the goal of deliberative engagement is to elevate our conversations and find ways to move conversations forward and ultimately improve decision-making. Ideally, such processes help shift discussions from unproductive adversarial processes where people talk past each other toward more collaborative processes that help us work together on difficult shared problems.

For more information on deliberative inquiry, visit
https://cpd.colostate.edu/what-is-deliberation/resources/.

Key Themes from the Data

Rather than simply present the data by walking through the survey results and discussion questions, the CPD team engaged all the data across its different forms, and in this section present the key themes that arose. They are organized by the frequency the themes were coded in the analysis.

Key Theme 1: Improving communication

The need for improved communication, particularly about available programs but also about needs and opportunities, was the most consistent topic of conversation in the small group discussions, by a rather significant margin. The results from the initial survey also clearly connect to the need for improved communication.

A primary insight here is simply that people are unaware of many of the different programs provided by the LCOA or otherwise available for older residents, and generally are seeking for better ways to connect to programs and events. The first question from the survey (Table 1), shows that participants often use a variety of methods to find information. The internet was the most common, but it is also interesting to note that only 55% of the surveys had the internet marked. As we will explore in the section on technology, the Internet is both a wonderful resource for connection and communication and a barrier for many older residents.

Table 1: Where do you go to find information about aging and available services?

	#	%
Internet	73	55%
Friends	58	44%
Senior Center	54	41%
Area Agency on Aging/Office on Aging	38	29%
County Department (Health & Human Services, Public Health, Social Services, etc.)	29	22%
Newspaper	26	20%
Radio	5	4%

Note: Participants could choose all that apply, so the percent is the percentage of the total surveys that checked that item

The second question on the survey provides the strongest argument for this theme. When asked to identify the obstacles to utilizing services and participating in classes/events, the most common answer by far was that programs and services were "not known." Over half of the participants chose that as one of the options, double that of any other answer (for this question, participants were asked to choose as many as apply).

Table 2: What are the key obstacles for you and others you know from utilizing services and participating in classes/events?

Program/services not known	69	52%
Program/services use technology I don't have or don't know how to use	33	25%
Program/services not convenient	30	23%
Program/services not available	24	18%
Program/services too expensive	20	15%

Note: Participants could choose all that apply, so the percent is the percentage of the total surveys that checked that item

Because the second discussion question asked people to discuss the results from this survey question and groups were notified of the results of this question once compiled at the event, there was significant discussion focused on this concern about the lack of awareness of programs and services. Analyzing those discussions revealed the following sub-themes:

- Overall, there was significant agreement concerning the lack of knowledge of what programs are available for seniors and what processes could be used to identify the correct information.

- Some participants shared stories of calling several different places and being unable to get the information they needed. Several calls for a clear hub for information were expressed. In one participant's words in Wellington: "Knowing who to contact is hard and participants have often just called every number they can find to glean the most information possible for resources."

- Participants suggested the need for more coordination between the LCOA and other potential sources of information. The most commonly mentioned included: local newspapers, libraries, senior centers, recreation centers, hospitals and doctor's offices, first responders, and social workers.

- Participants were often impressed with the LCOA's Answers on Aging publication, but some were unfamiliar with it before this meeting. (Some did request for the information to be organized in a way for residents in smaller communities to better find the resources connected to their specific community).

- Some participants suggested information needs to be mailed directly to older residents as the best way to address the communication gap. Others suggested information workshops on key topics.

While this theme of the need for more information was clearly prevalent, in a survey completed in Red Feather, an alternative argument was clearly laid out by one participant that warrants attention. In their own words: "It is a myth, a cultural lie, that people just need more education and access to information in order to retain independence. This puts the blame on individuals rather than on systems that have created inequities. Be part of the fight to change this lie; don't just keep throwing more resources and education and I&R without considering the systemic matters. For example, Red Feather doesn't need a website of resources for older adults- those resources don't exist in the community!"

The survey also included a series of questions asking participants to respond to statements regarding LCOA efforts in different areas. Table 3 on the next page summarizes the results. One thing the data clearly shows is that many respondents did not feel they had enough information to answer, as "Do not know" was the most frequent answer for all of the statements except for the final question regarding aging in place. "No opinion" also received significant votes for many of the questions. For those that did express an opinion, they were generally split rather evenly across the options from strongly agree to strongly disagree for most of the statements. The statement regarding mental health garnered more disagreement (34% disagreed or disagreed strongly compared to 18% agreeing), and the statement regarding aging in place earned more agreement (45% agreed or strongly agreed compared to 13% disagreeing).

Table 3: Survey results concerning various OOA efforts

		Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know	Total
Currently, there are sufficient supports & services for older adults who are LGBTQ+	#	3	11	23	11	5	62	115
	%	3%	8%	21%	8%	5%	56%	
Currently, there are sufficient supports & services for grandparents who are raising grandchildren.	#	2	15	25	15	6	60	123
	%	2%	12%	20%	12%	5%	49%	
Currently, there are sufficient supports & services for older adults regarding mental health.	#	3	20	16	30	12	44	125
	%	2%	16%	13%	24%	10%	35%	
Currently, there are sufficient supports & services for caregivers of older adults.	#	2	23	18	23	8	33	107
	%	2%	21%	17%	21%	7%	31%	
The current support and services available to me are helping me to age in place in my home.	#	9	37	28	10	3	15	102
	%	9%	36%	27%	10%	3%	15%	

In summary, the need for improved communication was clearly a significant theme throughout the data. As other answers show, many of the participants were unaware of programs connected to the LCOA and made numerous suggestions for improvements. One of the complicated issues is the role of technology, which in some ways is a critical information tool but it is also clear many older residents are not comfortable with the internet.

Key Theme 2: Improving transportation

The second most common theme across the small group discussions focused on the importance of improving transportation options. In many cases, numerous participants simply mentioned transportation as a critical issue without much additional commentary. It was identified as a "huge need" and a "massive gap." The importance of quality transportation to avoid social isolation and public health were particularly emphasized. The need for improved communication between communities (such as between Estes Park and Fort Collins, and to Boulder and Denver) and at night were mentioned often. Community resources such as VIA, SAINT, and Dial-a-ride were mentioned positively, but overall felt the need for more options. It may be worth noting that there was no mention of ride sharing services like Uber and Lyft. It isn't clear if that

was because such services are limited in some of Larimer County's communities, if there is a technology gap, or if participants were simply unaware.

The first two themes were clearly connected as well. As one participant in Fort Collins captured, "It is a three legged stool - you have to have the programs, the communication, transportation; if one of those three things goes away, the stool topples; if you don't consider them all, then it doesn't happen."

Key Theme 3: The critical need for and role of caregivers

The first discussion question focused on assisting caregivers, which explains in part why the topic was addressed quite often in the discussions. The comments on caregiving were wide ranging. Overall, participants were clear about the growing importance of caregivers and caregiver support, especially for in-home care. Comments expressed concern about the ability to connect with caregivers, the need to improve the training of caregivers, and hopes about connecting with younger generations in the work. Several participants also had experience as caregivers, and discussed the need for more assistance such as support groups, respite care, and self-care. This was emphasized in particular for dementia and alzheimers patients. It should be noted that on Table 3 above, when asked whether there was sufficient support for caregivers, the answers were quite mixed. Almost a third chose "did not know," while 23% either agreed or strongly agreed there was sufficient support, and 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Key Theme 4: The importance of senior centers

The role of senior centers was clear across the discussions. The community discussions were held at senior centers in all 5 communities, though one of those (Berthoud) has since had to close since the meeting). Senior Centers were identified by some as the most important hub for information and activity. Discussions linked the senior centers to many of the key topics in this report, such as access to information, connection and addressing isolation, health care and exercise, and transportation.

Perhaps the most passionate comments during the discussions were made in Estes Park and Berthoud, where both communities are working to address significant changes that have negatively impacted their senior centers. In Estes Park, their senior center was forced to move to a new location -- one without a commercial kitchen that is also smaller and less accessible -- which has significantly limited their programming. In Berthoud, the senior center has been located at the fire station, but must vacate as the space is needed by the fire department. In both communities, it was clear in the discussions the importance that the senior centers have played for their older residents. Both communities expressed frustration with the local government in their lack of support for the senior centers, and called on the LCOA for assistance. Similarly, participants at the Wellington Senior Center expressed need for additional support as well, in part due to the loss of funding that has happened recently. Fort Collins and Loveland both benefit from past significant investment by the cities in their senior centers. One final point to note here is for some, the senior center was avoided because they didn't see them as

"their place to belong" or "they don't think of themselves as old." As one resident in Wellington explained, "people assume that people at the senior center are really old and they think they are not old enough to come in." Some preferred to visit rec centers or other facilities that were not specifically designated for older residents, while others preferred the "comfortable space" the senior centers provide.

Key Theme 5: Addressing social isolation

Social isolation was also a topic prompted by one of the four discussion questions, and when participants were asked for the most important issue, it was mentioned often. It was also mentioned in conjunction with other key themes (such as the lack of information and transportation options). Some argued there are plenty of opportunities, people just need to know about them and then participate. Others argued that some people prefer to be isolated, but then may run into issues as they age. The critical role of friends and the "buddy system" to encourage engagement arose a few times.

Many also connected social isolation to volunteerism, both in terms of older residents serving as volunteers, and volunteers helping keep seniors connected. Not surprisingly, transportation was seen as a key barrier, leading to arguments on the importance of bringing activities or visitors to seniors and not always expecting them to be able to travel to the activities.

Participants discussed how Covid made a huge impact on social isolation, and some are still slowly returning to normal. Zoom was seen as helpful, but not always sufficient for the necessary connection and many were not comfortable using Zoom.

One tension that was identified here is between the strong preference many older residents have for aging in place and growing concerns regarding social isolation. Aging in place, particularly when a spouse has passed and transportation options become limited, can certainly increase the likelihood of isolation.

Key Theme 6: Call for respect

The final discussion question asked participants "What is the most important thing you want us to understand about older adults living in Larimer County?" While the question generally was written as a final chance to capture what issue was most important to them, it is clear from the discussion that many connected the question more to how older residents should be viewed by the broader community. The comments and discussions here were particularly heartfelt and powerful. Several participants talked about how the broader community doesn't care about older residents. Specific word choices here included disregarded, ignored, overlooked, dismissed, invisible, and forgotten. Others talked about the need to be seen, visible, appreciated, valued, and deserving of dignity and, most importantly, respect. Participants explained that older residents can still contribute, have a lot to offer, and represent valuable "untapped talent and wisdom.' As expressed by one participant in Fort Collins: "The older generation would like to help too! We aren't just sitting around waiting. Give us a chance. Value our

life experiences and what we can give to the community." Another argued they have "knowledge and skills" that "is going to go away one day and it might not be passed down in our current situation." They explained that there are many of "us," and that the group was growing.

Key Theme 7: The Role of Technology

One of the answer options in the survey question concerning the key obstacles asked if programs and services used technology that participants did not have or did not know how to use. A quarter of the respondents marked that answer, making it the second most popular answer. Clearly technology is a critical tool to pass on information and keep people connected -- particularly during Covid lockdowns -- but for older residents it was clear in the discussions that significant barriers exist on the use of technology. One participant estimated that 50% of older residents are not comfortable using technology, and many participants expressed their preference to not rely on technology. Even those that considered themselves more tech savvy explained how quickly things could change. As one participant in Fort Collins explained, "I thought I was doing well; but at an event this past weekend - I don't do Venmo, Paypal, QR codes and I realize I don't want to. And you shouldn't have to." Another added, "I do not like how computer focused everything has become. Things happen so fast and I can't keep up with them all."

Several participants called for more computer training options and noted helpful computer classes or programs they have participated in, and at times exchanged information about them. However, there was an overall sense from many that computer training would not work for many, and that alternatives to relying on technology will always still need to be considered and supported.

Key theme 8: Additional programs and services discussed

A survey question asked participants what services they saw themselves needing over the next five years to remain in their homes. Table 4 on the next page shows the results, sorted by frequency.

A final open ended question on the surveys also asked "What recommendations do you have for additional older adults and/or caregiver services that don't exist that you'd like to see?" Unfortunately, most of the surveys did not provide an answer to this question. Using the data from these two questions, as well as the small group discussions when they mentioned specific programs or services. From these data points, an overall sense of recommendations was developed. Addressing social isolation, transportation, and technology has already been discussed as key themes.

Table 4: What services/assistance do you see yourself needing over the next five years to remain in your home as you age? (circle all that apply)

Chore support outside of the home (ex. lawn care or snow removal)	66	50%
Remaining socially connected	53	40%
Ordinary housework (ex. cleaning, laundry)	49	37%
Transportation	40	30%
Technology/Support in how to use technology	39	30%
Personal care assistance (ex. bathing, dressing)	19	14%
Managing paperwork (ex. bills, finance/mail)	19	14%
Health care needs (such as medication management)	19	14%
Home delivered meals	17	13%

Beyond those already discussed, some of the other key requests mentioned in the discussions or written answers included (organized roughly by frequency of mention):

- Small chore assistance
  - A wide variety of specifics mentioned, including groceries, laundry, house cleaning, yard work, shoveling, odd jobs, hygiene help, safety changes like handrails and bathroom refurbishments,   Existing programs such as the chore vouches from LCOA and A Little Help were mentioned as options with which to connect.
- Respite care
  - There was some significant discussion of the importance of respite care, particularly for caregivers taking care of spouses or parents with dementia or alzheimers. Connected to their need for rest and connection with others.
- Programs to support aging in place
- Friendly visitor programs
- Money management assistance
- Additional social activities (movies, music, outdoor activities, etc.)
- Assistance with Medicare Plan decisions
- Educational programming and workshops
- Programs to help with housing
- Advisory councils
- Support groups
- Improvements in case management

- - Calls for not only more access to case management, but more comprehensive case management (beyond information and referrals).
  - Assistance with diet or nutrition
  - Mental health support

It should also be noted that in a couple tables, participants encouraged more discussions like the ones they were having, and more often than every four years.

Secondary Themes from the Data

The following themes garnered less discussion than the key themes discussed above, but still enough to warrant some summary here.

Pride in self-sufficiency

In several of the conversations, arguments were made about the importance of self-sufficiency and the reluctance of many seniors to ask for or receive help. A sampling of some of these comments include:

- "We were raised to be independent, it's very difficult to ask for help and generally we won't." Another responded to that saying, "we will do without and do for ourselves until we die." (Berthoud)
- "Almost all of us are struggling financially, most of us wouldn't think of taking money from the government." (Berthoud)
- "People who live up here are very independent and want to remain so" (Estes Park)
- "The problem that happens to a lot of people in this group is that they are hesitant to seek help in this case" (Fort Collins)
- "We do have these opportunities but there is a barrier that people have too much pride to reach out. How do we help these people? Peer to peer - if someone else is doing it then they will too...They asked what they had to do for it. They didn't want charity. It isn't charity, it is help....Everyone needs help. Needed to talk themselves into a surgery. (Fort Collins)
- "An intermediary would be helpful to ease someone into accepting help." (Fort Collins)
- "Not interested, I have my own support of family and friends." (online response)
- "Social isolation is up to the individual person." (Wellington)

Such beliefs certainly reveal another tension to this work. Programs not only need to be available, accessible, and affordable, but recipients of the services not only need to be identified, but at times need to be convinced that it is appropriate to participate.

The Prevalence of Helpful Organizations

Throughout the discussions, numerous organizations were mentioned as impactful to the quality of life of older residents. To highlight them, they included: the senior centers and libraries in all the communities (these two clearly mentioned the most often), museums, the VA office, rec centers, hospitals, newspapers, the YMCA, churches, Kiwanis, newcomers groups, the Aspen Club, UCHealth, CSU, SAVA, the Office on Aging, Matthews House, grandparents organizations, and others.

Intergenerational connections

A few of the conversations focused on the need for more intergenerational connections and "shared spaces" (which may have been prompted in part by the fact that the conversations were all facilitated by CSU students). Such opportunities were labeled as mutually beneficial" events that would "break barriers" and " lessen the stigma of aging." There was confidence that having younger people interact with older residents would help bring them together. There were some more negative comments about younger generations as well, seeing them as "so busy" and not having time to go out and help people.

Importance of volunteerism

The issue of volunteerism was raised in several conversations. Generally, there was concern about the lack of needed volunteers and the need for improved training of volunteers. These discussions connected with the intergenerational discussions, as both high school and college students were seen as potential volunteers, and CSU as a potential source for needed training. Others actually pointed to the lack of volunteer opportunities, and the role volunteerism can play in keeping older residents connected and "worthy." One participant called older residents a "vibrant untapped resource." Some participants shared that they already volunteer with multiple organizations.

Concerns about ageism and elder abuse

A few of the participants shared stories or concerns about age discrimination or predatory practices of people trying to take advantage of "vulnerable" older residents. Comments were made such as "people look to deceive seniors, we need vetted tradesmen who won't rip us off" and "seniors are very trusting, people look to exploit that." Ageism, particularly in the workforce, was mentioned. One Wellington participant explained, "we need to remove the stigma about aging and seniors, some seniors are still very active and have great quality of life, age shouldn't matter."

Community Specific Themes

This section will share some particular points about the various communities drawn primarily from the conversations in each community. There were only a few representatives from each community, so these results should not be assumed to represent the communities broadly.

Estes Park - A significant focus on the senior center, and the fairness of the loss of the past center and the limits of the current center. Many participants mentioned the recent loss of an assisted living facility and the memory care unit at the hospital, and generally the limited resources in the town for older residents. These limitations require significant transportation and raise concerns about the viability of remaining in Estes. Particular frustration with town leadership was expressed. Of the different communities, by far the most conversation focused specifically

Berthoud - Similar to Estes Park, a significant focus on the loss of their space for the senior center and the need for assistance with developing a replacement.

Loveland - Unfortunately, the engagement in Loveland was very limited. We were able to gather some surveys from individuals visiting the senior center, but there were not sufficient conversations to report specific themes.

Wellington - Participants mentioned how the community is growing quickly and changing. There was pride and support for the senior center, but calls for more support for the center and concerns about space. Transportation needs were emphasized, and the call for the town to focus more on the needs of seniors.

Fort Collins - There was more discussion about the need to connect better with marginalized audiences and reach out to the Spanish speaking community in Fort Collins. Otherwise, there was less Fort Collins focused discussion during these conversations.

Final Thoughts

One of the forms of analysis that the CPD often focuses on involves identifying and engaging inherent tensions that arise in difficult issues. Using the frame of "wicked problems," we like to focus on the inherent tensions between positive values, and believe that identifying those tensions and working together to find the best way to balance, prioritize, or transcend those tensions can lead to better processes and programs.

The CPD has worked for years with the Larimer County Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities, so we are quite familiar with many of the challenges and tensions that arose in the discussion we hosted. Below are some of the key tensions that we believe warrant more attention and focus.

A general overall tension with this work concerns the capability and needs of seniors. Some focus on the growing needs, and the reality that older residents will likely need more support in terms of health, transportation, and other services. Such arguments, however, may unduly victimize or stigmatize older residents, framing them too much as a burden. When such assumptions are combined, as we saw in the discussions, with the pride that many older residents have in their self-sufficiency, clearly problems will arise. The pushback on this narrative focuses on the self-sufficiency and vitality of older residents, at times even calling to dismiss a focus on aging as a critical factor. Inherently, organizations and programs focused on aging must recognize this tension and realize they will not be able to simply resolve it. The best way forward, we argue, is to be explicit about the tension and work to find the best ways to navigate it. Seniors are both vulnerable and capable, and narratives that over-emphasize either end of that polarity can be problematic.

A more specific tension that clearly arose in the discussions revolved around technology. As mentioned in the analysis, technology has multiple competing facets. For some, it is a critical resource that helps address many of the concerns of growing older, allowing them to stay connected and access information. Indeed, technology is obviously very relevant to address many of the concerns highlighted in the various key themes of this report. For others, however, technology is a primary barrier, and often something that sparks frustration and drains confidence. Technology training programs are clearly important, and warrant more attention, but a significant portion of this population will likely continue to avoid technology, and should not be forgotten.

Another specific tension focused on the strong preference of many to age in place, both in terms of their home and their community. But as they age, and potentially lose mobility options or ability to maintain their homes, tensions clearly arise. Aging in place may be critical for some needs, but also inherently work to exacerbate others. Supporting preferences for aging in place will require more support for alternative transportation options, more chore assistance, and more assistance to manage social isolation. As the population ages, this will be a critical challenge, especially for the smaller communities in Larimer County with less infrastructure. As we saw clearly in the Estes Park discussions as well as the survey responses in Red Feather, the more isolated communities have fewer resources and growing needs. Connecting them better to the resources in Fort Collins and Loveland or building up their local resources will be important.