AGE FRIENDLY
minnesota

Age-Friendly Minnesota Regional Exchanges 2025

Statewide Summary: Community Priorities and Perspectives

Overview

Age-Friendly Minnesota (AFMN) and partners across the state co-hosted six Regional Exchanges in fall 2025. This was AFMN's second set of Regional Exchanges, the first being in 2023.

More than 330 cross-sector attendees gathered at the Exchanges to learn and share about age-friendly work happening in each region and the state, and to explore opportunities ahead. In addition to many from the aging sector, attendees included community members and representatives from healthcare systems, foundations, counties, regional development agencies, state agencies, Chambers of Commerce, libraries, and other fields and organizations.

The Exchanges and their hosts and locations included:

Central Minnesota Exchange
Oct. 21, 2025 – Sartell
Regional Host: Central Minnesota Council on Aging

Southeastern Minnesota Exchange
Oct, 29, 2025 – Owatonna
Regional Host: AARP Minnesota, Family Service Rochester

Arrowhead Regional Exchange
Nov. 3, 2025 – Chisholm
Regional Host: Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging

Metro Region Exchange
Nov. 5, 2025 – Saint Paul
Regional Host: University of St. Thomas

Southwest Minnesota Exchange
Nov. 12, 2025 – Willmar
Regional Hosts: Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, Bethesda, AARP Minnesota, City of Willmar

Northwest Minnesota Exchange
Nov. 13, 2025 – Park Rapids
Regional Host: Dancing Sky Area Agency on Aging

At each Exchange, attendees participated in small- and large-group discussion about current priorities and ideas related to making our communities and regions better places to grow older. **This summary presents a statewide look at themes that emerged from those discussions across all six Regional Exchanges**. (Region-specific summaries are available at the Age-Friendly Minnesota website.) This analysis aims to help attendees, other regional partners and community members can see key takeaways from the event, and use them to help guide and inspire age-friendly work moving forward.

Pulse Check: What We Heard from the Community

Each Exchange included a presentation from the Age-Friendly Minnesota Council about its big areas of work, including the grants program and the Multisector Blueprint for Aging, and new developments over the past year.

Later, attendees discussed a provided question in small groups and with the full room as part of a "Pulse Check" conversation. The question varied slightly across Exchanges but was typically:

> *For all Minnesotans to live well as we age in community, what are some potential realistic solutions? What progress has been made on key issues and gaps?*

The Pulse Check was a critical part of the Exchange. It created an opportunity for reflection and discussion among attendees, who could then share their ideas and insights with each other, with regional leaders, and with Age-Friendly Minnesota. AFMN captured this input and is sharing it back to the community through this document.

Below is a summary of the most frequently mentioned topics, as well as ideas and issues related to finding solutions. These are far from exhaustive; instead, a glimpse into priority issues and possibilities. Issues with an asterisk (*) reflect those most commonly raised across the six events.

Community Opportunities: Challenges and Solutions

- **Built Environment**
  - ***Invest in walkable communities:**
    - **Prioritize sidewalks**—build them, maintain them, and keep them clear of snow and ice. Conduct walking audits to assess safety and location.
    - **Improve crosswalk safety**—through things like bump-outs and flashing lights
    - **More benches** are needed in nearly all public places.
  - ***Use universal design for all public spaces**—both indoor and outdoor—to be convenient and accessible to all users.

- **Service Access**
  - ***Increase utilization of existing services.** Available services are often underutilized for various reasons – namely stigma associated with using services, lack of awareness of the services, the feeling that services are for "other people." There is also a concern that if services aren't utilized, funding that provides them will be cut.
    - o Minnesota Aging Pathways (formerly Senior LinkAge Line) was mentioned numerous times.
  - ***Step up support for service navigation.** Many people struggle to navigate the fragmented web of services. High-potential models to consider:
    - o Community Health Workers, care coordinators, appointment helpers.
    - o In Moorhead, the police department has a staff person who provides service navigation support.
    - o *Elevate*, a grant-based resource at Perham Health, is a multi-purpose resource that offers a wide range of services.
  - ***Build a more robust Elderly Waiver program** so that more providers can be licensed to deliver waivered services, and more people can receive those services. (Elderly Waiver helps Minnesotans 65-plus who are Medical Assistance get services at home that allow them remain living in the community.)
  - ***Food security**: This is an urgent need, as funding is being cut everywhere. Possible approaches in addition to current services:
    - o Delivery from food shelves to homes, such as in Renville County
    - o Mobile food markets
    - o Teaching older adults to use digital platforms to order grocery delivery
    - o Increased use of frozen meal delivery, such as "Mom's Meals," an alternative to home-delivered meals.
  - **Explore promising models**, such as Raymond Ambulance Service (in southwest MN) which does spot-checks on older residents
  - **Make services like chore and homemaker available to caregivers,** not just care recipients.
  - **Mental health** is a growing concern. Suggestions include:
    - o **Educate people about mental health to normalize challenges** and needing help
    - o **Raise awareness** about mental health resources.
    - o **Train emergency responders** to deal with mental health issues.

- **Transportation**
  - ***Collaborate and remove policy barriers to expand the reach of transportation services**: Particularly in Greater Minnesota, service area boundaries can prevent an existing service from taking people where they need to go, even if it's nearby. For example, one city's or county's transportation service often can't cross municipal lines. Some counties have created inter-county agreements to address this.

- ***Strengthen/expand volunteer driver programs,** which are very important sources of transportation but suffer due to policy/reimbursement issues and challenges in volunteer recruitment.
- **Expand or replicate promising models**, such as:
  - On-demand options and circulator buses, such as NewTrax in White Bear Lake
  - Rideshare Support Program in Kandiyohi County, which provides stipends for Uber/Lyft drivers to provide services, especially in off hours.

- ## Housing
  - ***Increase investment in home modifications** to help people remain living in the community. Explore partnering with big hardware stores for resources.
  - ***Promote use of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)** (a smaller living space on the same property as a main house) to create more housing options
  - **Explore innovative models**, such as:
    - **Create tax rebates/credits for developers in rural MN**, as is done for film industry.
    - **Empower local residents to be developers in their own communities—** lending, financing, etc.
    - **Coalition for Rochester Area Housing** is funding a two-year pilot program that provides mentorship to older adults to help them transition into suitable housing before they reach a crisis.

- ## Connection, Communication, and Inclusion
  - ***Ensure continued use of no-tech communications,** such as targeted postcard mailings – while there is a cost, this has proven more consistent and effective than digital communications.
  - ***Continue to focus on social connection.** Potential tactics:
    - Invest in community centers as important places to gather and visit.
    - Ensure ongoing availability of volunteer opportunities and meaningful work.
    - Innovative solutions such as mobile community centers being used in Kanabec County.
  - **Create more opportunities for intergenerational connection,** including places to gather and programs that bring people together.
  - **Address isolation in a culturally-responsive way**, using preferred language and connection with others from a common culture.
  - **Increase access to technology through training and devices** to help older adults connect to information, resources and other people.

- ## Partnerships and Collaboration:
  - ***Engage more people, organizations and sectors in the work**.

- o **Payers, funders, and cities** are key groups to bring in.
- o Strategies include:
  - Bring aging conversations to other networking organizations
  - Join other coalitions as a voice in aging
  - Create and deliver media training on ageism.

This input, along with community input gathered through the other Regional Exchange events, is being shared back to communities and will be integrated into Multisector Blueprint work as it continues to evolve.

Regional Showcases of Age-Friendly Projects

AFMN is proud to have invested nearly $6 million in more than 125 Community Grants since 2023. Twenty-five of those grantees, along with a few additional organizations, attended and presented at the Exchanges, highlighting the broad range of efforts that are helping to advance the goals of Minnesota's Multisector Blueprint for Aging.

More information about grantees who presented at the Exchanges is available in the region-specific summaries, as well as more information AFMN Grants more broadly, is available at the AFMN website.

Age-Friendly Panel: Elected Officials and Regional Leaders Discuss Opportunities and Current Environment

Each Regional Exchange featured a panel discussion of elected officials and other regional leaders. A total of twenty panelists (see last page for list) included legislators, county commissioners, city administrators, and representatives from state agencies, healthcare systems, foundations, regional development agencies, and Community Action Partnerships.

Panelists shared many valuable insights from their various vantage points. Several themes that emerged from across the discussions included: the need for greater collaboration to make progress; the importance of personal stories when engaging with decision makers; building relationships with elected officials by inviting and including them; presenting age-friendly as a way to advance existing goals (vs. being perceived as "one more thing"); understanding what can be done within existing parameters, given limited resources; and the importance of finding a champion within an institution.

What's Next?

- **Integrating community feedback**: The Age-Friendly Minnesota Council is using input shared at the Regional Exchanges to inform ongoing Blueprint work. The Blueprint is an iterative document, grounded in community voices. Input from Exchange attendees

affirmed many of existing priorities and added important depth and detail to the issues. It also produced ideas for new solutions and approaches, and helped us understand how policy changes and funding cuts over the past year are impacting Minnesotans across the state.

- **Regional Exchanges 2026**: The AFMN Council has begun planning Regional Exchanges 2026. Building on lessons from our previous sets of Exchanges, we hope to maximize the impact and potential of these gatherings – for all of us to learn, build relationships, and advance a collective vision for aging in Minnesota.

Learn more and get connected!

This work hinges on collaboration. We encourage you to reach out with questions, concerns, and ideas.

Age-Friendly Minnesota:

- Website: [Age-Friendly Minnesota](#)
- Email: mn.dhs.AgeFriendlyMN@state.mn.us

Led by the Age-Friendly Minnesota Council, AFMN champions vibrant communities where we thrive as we age. We do this through collaborative partnerships, community engagement, and innovative strategies. Age-Friendly Minnesota creates and nurtures systems that include and value all Minnesotans as we grow older.

Panelists at Regional Exchanges 2025

Central Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Gina Heyer**, Community Health Manager, Crow Wing County
- **Michelle Hodge**, Vice President of Quality, M Health Fairview
- **George Schoephoerster**, Age-Flourishing St. Cloud and retired geriatrician

Southeastern Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Rep. Luke Frederick**, Dist. 18B, Minnesota House of Representatives (DFL)
- **Galen Malecha**, Commissioner, Rice County

Arrowhead Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Grace Grinager**, Cook County Public Health Supervisor
- **Rep. Spencer Igo** (R), Dist. 07A, Minnesota House of Representatives
- **Stephanie Skraba**, City Administrator, City of Chisholm

Metro Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Sen. Jim Abeler** (R), Dist. 16, MN Senate
- **Tara Jebens-Singh**, District 1, Ramsey County Commissioner
- **Rep. Ginny Klevorn** (DFL), Dist. 42B, MN House of Representatives
- **Kate Mertz**, Director of Planning, Minnesota Management and Budget

Southwest Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Rep. Dave Baker** (R), Dist. 16B, MN House of Representatives
- **Corky Berg**, Commissioner, Kandiyohi County
- **Nancy Fasching**, Vice President for Community Impact, Southwest Initiative Foundation
- **Michelle Kiefer**, Community Health Specialist, CentraCare

Northwest Age-Friendly Exchange

- **Paige Carlson**, Aging Well and Assets Development Director, West Central MN Communities Action
- **Dave Ebinger**, District 5 Commissioner, Clay County
- **D'Anne Johnson**, Senior Program Manager, Northwest Minnesota Foundation
- **James Retka**, Community Development Director, Northwest Regional Development Commission