AGE FRIENDLY
minnesota

Southwest Minnesota Age-Friendly Exchange

November 12, 2025

Community Priorities and Perspectives

Overview

Age-Friendly Minnesota (AFMN) partnered with Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging, Bethesda, City of Willmar and AARP Minnesota to host a Southwest Minnesota Age-Friendly Exchange on November 12, 2025. This was one of six Regional Exchanges held across the state in fall 2025.

Forty cross-sector attendees from around the region gathered at Bethesda Grand in Willmar to learn and share about age-friendly work happening in the region and the state, and to explore opportunities ahead.

This summary presents themes and highlights from the event so that attendees and 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

The event 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 the following question in small groups and with the full room as part of a "Pulse Check" conversation:

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.

Community Opportunities: Challenges and Solutions

- **Built Environment:**
  - **Active Transportation**: All cities should institute a Complete Streets ordinance
  - **Improve infrastructure**:
    - **Explore changes to improve pedestrian safety** – e.g., bump-outs that help slow traffic and shorten the distances of crosswalks
    - **Use sidewalk audits as a community tool** to assess sidewalk safety in all communities and neighborhoods
    - **Design all public spaces to be convenient and accessible to all users,** ensuring that city planning considers all ages and abilities

- **Service Access:**
  - **Address food security through new approaches,** for example:
    - Delivery from food shelves to homes; such as in Renville County
    - Teach older adults how to use digital platforms like UberEats, Instacart, Walmart delivery, etc. to order food and groceries.
  - **Explore or replicate strong models,** such as:
    - Raymond Ambulance Service, which spot-checks older residents
    - Living at Home Network; Atwater Area Help for Seniors has successfully used this model for many years.
  - **Explore creating system that matches volunteers with people who need a service** provided (such as lawn mowing); older adults can both provide and receive services.

- **Housing:**
  - **Promote Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs),** a small secondary living space on the property of a primary home, including by reducing zoning barriers.
  - **Expand availability and use of home safety assessments** that provide recommendations for making a person's home safer.

- **Transportation**
  - **Explore or expand promising models,** such as the Rideshare Support Program in Kandiyohi County, where two Uber/Lyft drivers get a stipend on top of passenger fare to offer service in the community; this is especially important in the evenings and on weekends, when other services don't operate.
  - **Expand existing services to cover social events,** not just medical transportation

- **Connection, Communication, and Inclusion:**
  - **Build intergenerational knowledge and connection:**
    - Connect older landowners with emerging farmers and gardeners to learn how to garden and share resources; pass on knowledge and encourage sustainability
    - Create program where older adults teach hobbies and skills to younger people
  - **Create intergenerational spaces** for people of all ages to gather and connect
  - **Utilize AFMN Grants work to build connections through nature and art,** such as Nature As We Age work by Joelle Hoeft and theatre produced by older adults through Theatre 55.

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 Age-Friendly Projects

AFMN is proud to have invested more than $377,000 in Southwest Minnesota-based projects through 12 Community Grants since 2023. These grants are advancing goals of Minnesota's [Multisector Blueprint for Aging](#), which is grounded in community voices and is addressing many of the issues that emerged from the community at the Central Age-Friendly Exchange.

Four grantees and another area organizations attended the Exchange to share information about their age-friendly efforts and the impact of that work:

- ***Joelle Hoeft's [Nature as We Age](#)** work aims to support and expand older adults' access to nature.
- ***[VINE Faith in Action](#)** convened community leaders in Mankato and North Mankato in an effort that led to both cities joining the AARP Age-Friendly Network of States and Communities.
- ***[Theatre 55](#)**, the only Minnesota theater dedicated to work done by people 55-plus, created videos that address the loneliness epidemic, specific to the LGBTQ and BIPOC elder community.
- [Madison Mercantile](#) — a multipurpose space for community, art and innovation—houses a coffee shop, stage for live music, business offices, community meeting space, youth hangout space, a woodworking shop and more in this rural community.
- **Connected Communities**, an effort led by Bethesda and funded through a Connected Communities grant from Leading Age Minnesota, is working to build bridges across geography and cultures— in rural places, plus with those who speak Spanish, Somali, or Karen—to improve access to, understanding of, and support for aging and caregiving.

Indicates Age-Friendly Minnesota grant-funded projects

Learn more!

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

Age-Friendly Minnesota:

- Website: mn.gov/dhs/age-friendly-mn/
- 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.

Minnesota River Area Agency on Aging (MNRAAA)

- Website: mnraaa.org
- Phone: (507) 387-1256

As the designated area agency on aging for 27 counties in southwest Minnesota, MNRAAA is a catalyst in building communities where older adults live with dignity, mutual respect and shared responsibilities across generations and cultures.

AGE FRIENDLY
minnesota