

A Community Report for
MARION COUNTY



SMART AGING ↗
HEALTHY FUTURES

INTRODUCTION

Fifty-two percent of older Mississippians live in rural areas, and more than 80 percent of elderly Mississippians live in their own family homes. **The challenge for Mississippi is finding ways to maintain and improve the health of our seniors while ensuring them the freedom of residing in their own homes.** This is especially true for rural areas with less formal support for seniors' health and well-being.

Based upon that need, the *Smart Aging: Healthy Futures* project was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities foster the healthy aging of their senior populations (loosely defined as 60 and older). Originally conducted in Oktibbeha, Clay, Copiah, Itawamba, and Lincoln Counties as well as the city of Pascagoula, the project was begun in Marion County in early 2013.

As part of this effort, a series of **Forums on Healthy Aging** were held to involve the community in a discussion focused on identifying the resources, and the challenges, for healthy aging within Marion County. From that dialogue, two community action groups were formed to begin developing community solutions to concerns related to the health and well-being of seniors.

This report has been developed to give voice to the findings of those forums and the concerned, committed residents of Marion County that participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action. It is hoped that others reading this report will see it as more than an informational document. **Civic organizations, churches, businesses, schools, public officials, and others may discover opportunities in these findings to improve the quality of life of our seniors**—and realize they are a significant asset to the community.



OBJECTIVES

To meet the goal of assisting communities in their efforts to foster the healthy aging of their senior populations, the following objectives were established:

- Identify community resources and deficits relative to supporting the health and health care needs of its senior population
- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to improve the health and health care accessibility of its senior population
- Initiate various health promotion activities and educational programs focusing on aging populations within the community and their families and support systems



PROCESS

In late January 2013, a public forum was held with older residents of the county and individuals or representatives of organizations concerned about the health-related needs of seniors. The intent of the forum was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support local seniors' ability to age in a healthy manner. Twenty individuals participated in this event.

Having identified many of the issues and concerns related to healthy aging, a second public forum was scheduled in February to chart a path forward. Given the opinions expressed at the first forum what, if anything, did the community want to do? Participants from the first forum and other seniors and resource individuals were asked to attend. Approximately 15 participants attended this forum.

The forums were conducted using a modified "World Café" format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in prompting table discussions between six and eight individuals, and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. This process helps identify a group's combined knowledge and enables people to join together to pursue common aims.

The format aids communities in better understanding, relative to the health and health care of their aging population, what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute, or give up, for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems, as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

- **What are the programs, services, and resources that encourage and support healthy aging in Marion County?**
- **If you had three wishes, which programs or services currently lacking are worth pursuing?**
- **What should be done to help seniors "navigate" the system?**
- **What are the main challenges to supporting the goal of healthy aging?**



WHAT'S WORKING?

When participants were asked to consider what was working in Marion County to promote seniors' ability to age in a healthy manner, numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into three major categories: (1) general health and fitness; (2) social interaction and support; (3) social services. Examples for each category are listed below:

General Health and Fitness

- The renovated Marion County General Hospital
- City Park walking area
- City, Water, and Duckworth Parks for recreational use and activities
- Walking trail at Marion County Activity Center
- Lake Columbia and Lake Bill Waller
- Health department offers various classes and services on health and nutrition

Social Interaction and Support

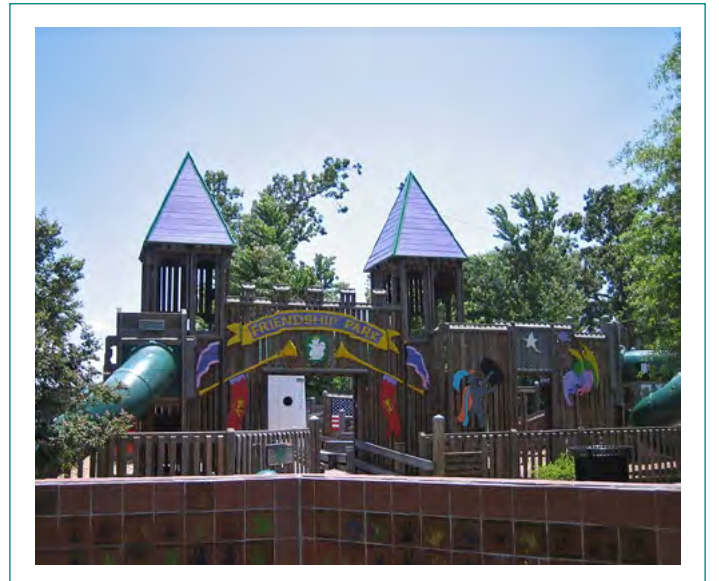
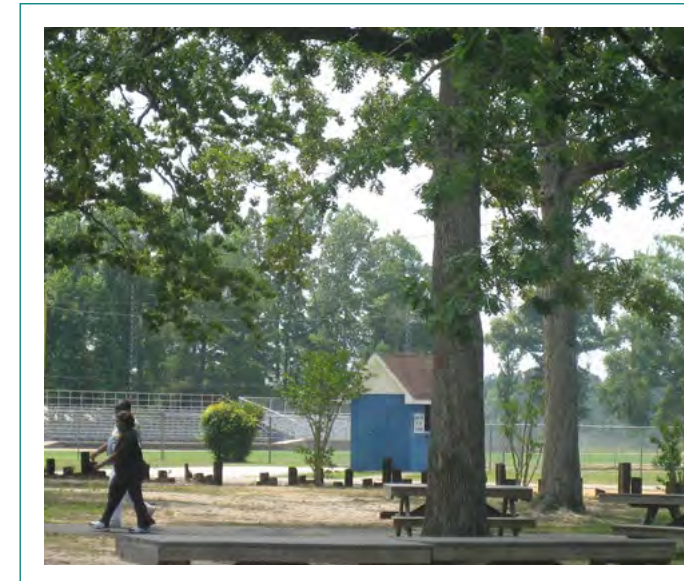
- Games played at activity center
- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) senior project
- VFW socializing activities
- AARP chapter
- Renovated movie theater
- Festivals (Oktoberfest and others)
- Marion County Activity Center available for groups

- 3-mile train ride
- City, Water, and Duckworth Parks for recreational use
- Lake Columbia and Lake Bill Waller
- Library has meeting rooms for groups and books, magazines, and newspapers

Social Services

- Pearl River Valley Opportunity (PRVO) feeding program
- Churches have feeding programs
- Personal care services
- Home health
- Care at Residents Service (CARS) homemaker services
- Area Agency on Aging services
- Five-County Transportation—takes people to feeding program, doctors, shopping
- Food pantry
- Sunrise Ministry distributes hot plate lunches and food bags
- Salvation Army and Goodwill thrift stores
- PRVO helps with utility bills
- Habitat for Humanity builds houses
- Library has computers for public use
- PRVO does some home repairs

This is not a complete list of the assets supportive of healthy aging within Marion County, but it is representative and indicates that the county starts from a position of strength in addressing the needs of its senior residents.



THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY

Having identified what was working in the county, forum participants were asked to consider what else was important and worth pursuing. If they had three wishes, what would they like to see added to the county? Following is a summary of the group's suggestions:

- Better communication of related local resources and events
- Health classes
- Program to help grandparents raising grandchildren
- Fitness program with a facility and complete equipment
- Weather radios with batteries and instructions on how to use them
- Pedometers for seniors
- Adult day care center
- Classes about eating right—for young and old
- Increased social activities
- Senior prom
- Swap meet for seniors once a month—baked and canned goods
- Intergenerational activities
- Better networking between groups
- Volunteers to go into senior homes to make a computerized list of medicines to take to doctors
- Smoke and carbon dioxide detectors
- Improve Meals on Wheels program—more than one meal per day
- Roommate finder service for seniors
- Buddy system for seniors; senior call-in daily check system
- More personalized transportation—someone to visit doctors with seniors and record information
- Home repair help services; could be minor services
- Senior bulletin service—large print, simple language
- Help to convert personal homes for handicap accessibility
- Collection point for reading materials
- Involve more males and increase their socialization—provide what may be of interest to them (sports, card playing, food)
- Exercise instructor for seniors—focus on people not hurting themselves and walking
- Volunteers at doctor's office to prepare a list of medicines; provide list back to senior
- Senior prom—using youth and/or military for dance partners for singles (females and males)
- Easy access information

The “wishes” are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing. In the Community Action Group section below, we will discuss how the participants set priorities and began to focus on developing goals and action plans.

HOW TO ACCESS WHAT'S THERE

Throughout the forum process, we continuously discovered that resources often existed that people were unaware of and did not know how to access. A common dialogue would be a participant at Table A saying, “What we really need is X,” and a participant at Table B saying, “I think X is available if you call such and such.” Often the issue becomes one of knowing what is available and how to “navigate” the system. Finding the needed information or service can be a complex and difficult task that may require more knowledge and more persistence than the average person possesses. When asked where seniors would most likely turn for information, the following suggestions were offered:

- Church announcements, newspaper listings, flyers in high-traffic places, bulletin boards in Walmart, etc.
- Brochures explaining services in large print

- Highlight services on radio
- Word of mouth about services—church, civic groups, etc.
- Telephone trees to relay information—tell 10 people/call 10 people
- Key information board at high-traffic areas (very large writing)
- Provide an economic incentive for relaying information
- MississippiGetHelp—distribute more flyers
- Information at doctors' offices and other medical offices
- Public service announcements (PSAs) for radio and TV
- Call Area Agency on Aging
- Develop senior t-shirts to heighten awareness through visual awareness
- Buddy system
- Bulletin board outside activity center

Frequently, help and information are needed when people are least able to deal with complicated searches and stumbling blocks. Ease of access to information and person-to-person assistance when needed were considered key aspects of usefulness. Additionally, it was considered important to promote a sense of urgency about things important to do as people grow older.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

With a view toward addressing some of the negatives identified by the forum participants, we asked that they identify some challenges to improving the prospects for healthy aging within the county. Following are the obstacles cited:

- Money
- Shame factor if one does not have as much as others
- Peer group gossip
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of knowledge of what is available
- Red tape
- Lack of grant-writing knowledge; need resources to help
- Burden on small businesses of regulations/requirements
- Not knowing what is available
- Lack of purpose
- Feel like life is moving ahead of oneself
- Self-imposed segregation—based on learned behavior and dysfunctional belief system
- Can be difficult for resource organizations to gain an audience for their programs—problem with a place, amount of time, how to get people to attend
- Never impose an amount for a donation—creates shame, obligation—people will deny needing help
- People want to live and die at home, but many people do not have family members and need help
- People may not have resources to maintain a quality of life to stay at home
- A lot of seniors do not have anyone to talk to—particularly face-to-face
- A paradigm shift—need to change our thinking about aging and the aged

Understanding and addressing potential roadblocks can help pave the way for a healthier future.

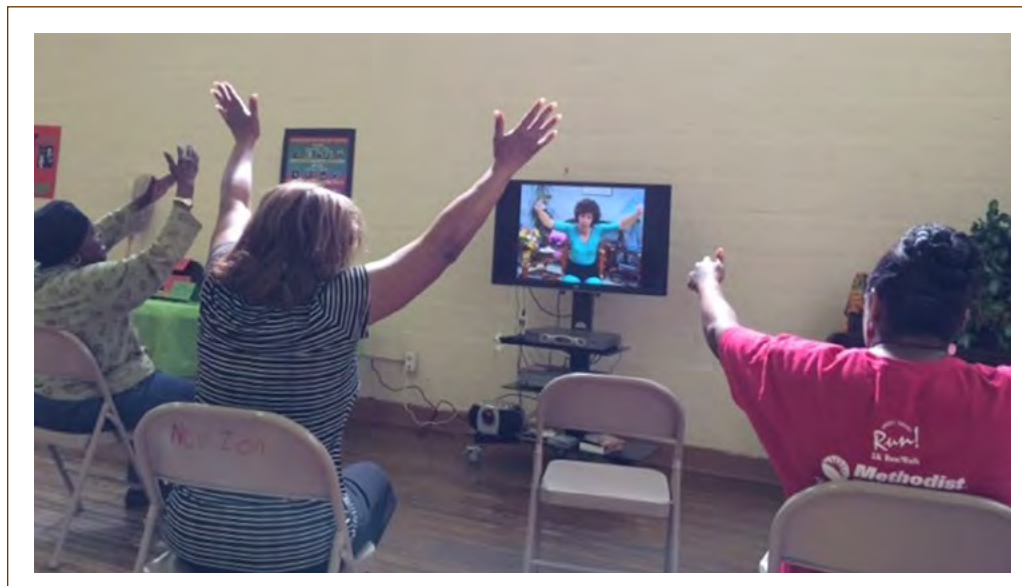
COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the second and final forum, we asked participants to consider the “three wishes” identified at the earlier forum and determine two or three projects that the community could and should accomplish. From the priorities established in this discussion, we would form community action groups (CAGs) to tackle the identified projects. Forum participants identified the following two areas as their top priorities:

- Establish a health and fitness center for the seniors of Marion County
- Initiate an annual “Senior Prom” for the county’s 50 and older residents

Throughout the process that led to the establishment of CAGs, we stressed that success would only come if the community took responsibility for and leadership of any potential projects. The projects would not be university-driven; our intent was to begin a process, engage the community, and offer guidance when possible. Day-to-day development and long-term sustainability would only come through community ownership.

To that end, we conducted a “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop after the establishment of the CAGs. The workshop brought interested individuals together and aided each group in setting goals and action plans.



EARLY SUCCESSES

Significant initial accomplishments by both community action groups (CAGs) have been made to promote a healthier future for Marion County's seniors.

The group focusing on establishing a fitness center for the seniors of the county has secured a location at the New Zion Activity Center. The center is owned by the United Methodist Church but is open to all people and is being publicly promoted. CAG members were able to make a connection with the Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District through the Smart Aging project. The connection led to the Planning and Development District funding the purchase of two stationary bicycles and three treadmills for the center. Though just recently opened, the center already is attracting 15–18 individuals exercising each day Monday through Thursday. The approximate age range of those using the fitness equipment is 70–85 years. In addition to the equipment, a number of individuals perform upper-body exercises while seated and watching exercise videos. The CAG also plans on adding a health education element to the center, and senior health and well-being classes will be taught by an MSU Extension Service agent.

For the future, the CAG has considered working to build a walking track around a playground next to the center. Earlier discussions included the possibility of attempting to establish a larger, more centrally located facility within the county in addition to the newly established center. The new center is a major achievement; its experiences and successes may serve as a model and impetus to an expanded facility over time.

Social activities and interactions have been shown to be a key ingredient of healthy aging. With that idea in mind, another community action group decided to initiate a "Senior Prom" for the county's 50 and older residents. On November 30, 2013, Marion County's inaugural "Senior Prom" was held at the New Zion Activity Center. The location was chosen to help promote use of the fitness center, as well. Approximately 50 individuals attended the prom, and a Mr. and Mrs. Smart Aging were chosen, along with a Prom Queen and King. Line dancing, the slide, and other group dances provided the evening's exercise and entertainment.

From the beginning, the CAG had planned to make the prom an annual event, assuming its initial success. The success, and interest, has been so large that they are planning a formal Senior Prom for next October and are considering initiating dinner-and-a-movie nights for county seniors, as well.

NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you or members of your organization are interested in participating in any of the efforts discussed above, we encourage you to contact the Marion County Extension office at (601) 736-8251 for information on how you can join one of the community action groups. Their activities are ongoing, and the greater the level of community participation, the better the final outcomes.

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action groups formed around only a couple of those ideas, we hope the remainder will not be lost. **Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations, and government leaders can review the "three wishes" list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the healthy aging of Marion County's senior population.** The list is far from complete, and the interests and talents

of those considering working to impact the quality of life of the county's older residents might see other possibilities. An elementary school or Sunday school class might consider "adopting" a group of seniors and enjoy hearing stories of earlier times. A civic organization might initiate a Simple Help for Seniors Volunteer Day. This event could coordinate help for seniors, such as changing ceiling light bulbs or performing other tasks that may be difficult for older residents yet too basic to hire a handyman. It is not infrequent for the quality of life of seniors to be impacted by what may seem like the simplest of things.

Marion County has many fine attributes that benefit its seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve their quality of life, and thereby that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. **We hope you will join in the effort to make Marion County a place of smart aging and healthy futures.**



MARION COUNTY FACTS AND FIGURES

According to the 2010 U.S. Census:

- 14.7% of Marion County's population was estimated to be 65 and older as compared to 12.8% of Mississippi's population.
- 41% of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 59% to be female.
- 18.4% of Marion County's 65 and over male population live alone.
- 33.4% of Marion County's 65 and over female population live alone.
- The age distribution of those 65 and older within Marion County was estimated to be approximately:

65-69	28.9% (1,149)
70-74	23.8% (947)
75-79	19.8% (789)
80-84	14.3% (567)
85 and over	13.2% (525)



Smart Aging: Healthy Futures A Community Report for Marion County was prepared in early 2014 by the following Mississippi State University Extension Service *Smart Aging: Healthy Futures* team members:

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Throughout the preparation of this report, no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants' involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voices will be a stimulus to additional actions that support the smart aging and healthy futures of Marion County's seniors.



Any conclusions or recommendations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of Mississippi State University. Neither do the findings necessarily reflect the opinion of Mississippi State University; they are a reporting of the expressed views of the Marion County project participants.

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