

Allow us to introduce our mission

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CIB Contributors

A group of community leaders, with support from the Center on Health, Aging and Disability (CHAD) in the College of Applied Health Sciences (AHS) at the University of Illinois, has headed the Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana initiative. This group works toward the goals of fighting ageism, sharing information relevant to older adults, their families, and aging services providers, and working with older adults as an advocate.

Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana began with a presentation at a conference in Boston in 2015. Retired University of Illinois administrator and founding Director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Illinois, Kathleen Holden, was intrigued at the annual Leading Age Conference where she first heard about the WHO and AARP program designed to prepare communities for upcoming demographic shifts.

“I was excited to learn how the private and public sectors in this country and around the world are working together to improve communities for all ages,” she said.

Upon her return from the conference, Kathleen approached Tanya Gallagher, then dean of AHS, about the possibility of partnering to make the Champaign-Urbana community more livable for residents of all ages with a specific focus on older adults. She was referred to Dr. Jeff Woods, a self-described “lab and bench guy” and director of CHAD and associate dean for research. He was intrigued by the idea and eager to grow collaborations with the community to benefit both residents and university research. He concluded CHAD was an ideal partner for Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana “because the mission of the center and its home college (AHS) is to support health and wellness across the lifespan and Age-Friendly also aligns with the broader university land grant mission of providing support to the people of the state of Illinois.”

CHAD has been the logistical home of Age-Friendly since 2016 and is now integrated into the research, education and outreach missions of AHS.

In 2020, AHS won the Chancellor’s Award for Public

Engagement, highlighting what can be accomplished when university departments and community members work together.

Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana, while housed at CHAD, is led by a steering committee of community leaders: representatives from cities and governments, park districts, transportation providers, local health systems, real estate professionals, social and aging services providers, nonprofit organizations and — most importantly — older adults.

Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana has supported many different projects and events during the past five years and moving forward, it has chosen to make fighting ageism, sharing information, and advocacy work its primary focus.

As the COVID-19 crisis disproportionately continues to affect older adults, the group has been heartened by organizations, neighbors, businesses and individuals who have made the safety and health of older adults a priority. However, there is still much work to be done to educate the public about the value of older adults in our community and to work with older adults on these efforts.

There are many pervasive stereotypes about older adults and aging. Often older adults are considered based solely on their chronological age without regard to their racial and ethnic background, gender identity, sexual orientation, income and education levels, occupational background, health and abilities.

There is diversity with respect to all these attributes in our community, and this should be a place where residents of all ages and backgrounds can thrive.

College towns can be attractive destinations for retirees, many of whom have substantial buying power and who look for both housing and amenity options. There are many attributes of this community that make it appealing to older adults, and businesses should consider this.

However, 9.2% of adults in Champaign County over the age of 60 live below the poverty level.

There must be a range of affordable resources and services for individuals at all income levels.

Age-Friendly Champaign-Urbana envisions a future for our community where residents of all ages can feel safe, included and flourish.

In the coming year, in a regular feature in Central Illinois Business Magazine, we will continue to highlight existing services, business and organizations focused on older adults, and talk about visions for how Champaign-Urbana can commit to an Age-Friendly future.

We welcome ideas from the community.

The authors are part of the Age-Friendly steering committee. For information, please contact Wendy Bartlo at wbartlo@illinois.edu.