A Community for People Midlife and Beyond

An opportunity for people to talk together and find ways to make our community a place where people midlife and beyond can live successfully.

by Ruth Freeman and Donna K. Donald

This issue guide was created with the help of the Issue Guide Exchange at www.Everyday-Democracy.org/Exchange.

July 22, 2011
Credits
Everyday Democracy provided the Word version of this template for use in developing the A Community for People Midlife and Beyond Study Circle Guide. 03/03/2011

Adaptation of A Community for All Generations – Teens and Adults Working Together, 2002 Study Circle Guide
   Lead Writer: Sarah vL. Campbell
   Editor: Molly Holme Barrett
   Contributing Writers/Editors: Carrie Boron, John Landesman, Amy Malick, Martha L. McCoy, Patrick Scully, Melissa Wade, Bianca Wulff
Introduction

People in communities across this country want to live in where they have the chance to thrive as they age. This is true in all kinds of places – small and large, rural and urban.

This discussion will help us talk about the kind of community we want to live in. No community is doing well where people midlife and beyond are not thriving. No community is thriving if ageism exists.

If people of all generations work together, we can have a better community. And, by working on making our community better, we can help individuals have a good life.

Some people may already be working on creating a community that embraces people midlife and beyond. But to move ahead, more of us need to be part of that work. In a study circle program, we can learn from each other and get more people involved.

This approach to community change brings together small, diverse groups of people. They meet several times to think, talk, and work together to address public issues. First they look at how the issue has touched their lives. Then they talk about why they believe this issue exists. Finally each study circle works on ideas for action which can take place at different levels.

When we work together this way, we can bring new life and ideas to existing efforts in our community. We can also learn about needs that have not been met. Together we can figure out how to do even more. The goal is change in the community.

Situation

- Nearly 15% of Iowans are age 65 and older; over 8% live in poverty. In 2030, over one in five of Iowans will be 65 years and older; 88 of Iowa’s 99 counties will have more than 20% of their populations comprised of people age 65 and older.
- Iowans are working and living longer. 77,537 Iowans age 65 years and older are in the labor force.
- 145,277 Iowan’s age 65 years and older have at least one disability (hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care and independent living difficulty), and one in three are widowed and live alone. Over one-third die from heart disease.
- Close to 300,000 Iowans care for family members or close friends. They provide over 300 million hours of care. Over 3.1 billion is spent annually in caregiving and its related costs. Typically the caregiver is a 49 year old woman, who is employed and married.
SESSION ONE

What is it like to be a person midlife and beyond in our community?

Goals for this session
- To create ground rules for discussion
- To get to know each other
- To think about what it is like to be a person midlife and beyond in our community

Welcome and introduction – 10 minutes
The facilitator will:
- Welcome participants.
- Explain the study circle process.
- Tell the group about the program.
- Talk about the role of the facilitator.
- Ask for a volunteer recorder. This person will keep track of the important ideas that come from the conversations.

* See Tips for Facilitators for information.

Introduction
Each of us has something important to offer our community. We are all responsible for making it a better place for everyone to live. Today, as we get to know each other, we will talk about what it is like to be a person midlife and beyond in our community. We will share some of our hopes and concerns. Sharing our stories and ideas will set the stage for the rest of our study circle.

Ground Rules – 10 minutes
To help our study circle work well, we need to agree on how we will talk with and listen to each other. Our facilitator will record on newsprint the guidelines we develop so we can refer to them every time we meet. We can use the ideas below as a starting point to develop our own list of ground rules.

1. Listen to one another. Treat each other with respect.
2. Each person gets a chance to talk.
3. One person talks at a time.
4. Speak for yourself and not as a representative of any group.
5. It is OK to disagree.
6. Stick to the issue. No name-calling.
7. If you talk about people who are not here, don’t say their names.
8. Some of the things we talk about will be very personal. We will not tell these stories to other people, unless we all say it is OK.
9. Help the facilitator keep things on track.

**Introductions – 20 minutes**

Working in pairs, answer the following questions:

- What is your name?
- How long have you lived in the community?
- How did you come to live here?
- Why did you want to join this group?

After 5 minutes, each person will introduce his or her partner to the group.

**Icebreaker – 25 minutes**

Break into small groups (2-4 people) to look over these questions and talk about your answers together. Think about what it is like – or may be like – to live and age in this community. Take a few minutes to answer these questions about yourself today.

1. The year is _________ and I am _________ years old.
2. I live in _________, population _________.
3. I go to _________.
4. I’m good at _________.
5. Signs of the times (social/political) include _________.
6. After work I hang out at _________.
7. My friends and I eat and drink _________.
8. Today I’m wearing _________.
9. For fun I _________.
10. The music I listen to is _________.
11. I’m worried about what will happen to me if _________.
12. My friends/children give me advice about _________.
13. I’m getting lots of pressure to _________.
14. One thing I really don’t understand is _________.
15. One thing I feel proud about is _________.
16. My plans for the future include _________.

Now answer the same questions looking ahead 10 years.

**Discussion questions – 45 minutes**

Talk about the following questions as a total group. You may not have time for all of them. Pick the questions that seem most relevant to the group.

- What’s good about being the age you are today? What’s difficult about it?
- What is our community like for older adults? What’s good about growing older here? What would you like to change?
• In this community, how do generations get along? Do you know people of
different generations who aren’t members of your family?
• What is your background? (Think about things like religion, family history,
etnicity, education.)
• What rights should an older person have? What responsibilities? How should
these rights and responsibilities be decided?

Wrap-up questions – 5 minutes
• Based on the discussion so far, what have you learned?
• What common themes did you notice?
• What are some differences?

Closing – 5 minutes
• Thank everyone for coming and sharing.
• Remind people that it is important to attend every session.
• Hand out the Fact Sheet on your community and ask people to look it over before
Session 2.

*Use the following for the fact sheets.
Population by Age Group and % of Total Population (county specific)

Older Iowans: 2010

Older Workers in Iowa
http://www.aging.iowa.gov/Documents/OlderWorkerBrochureStats06.pdf
SESSION TWO

How are people midlife and beyond doing in our community?

Goals for this session

- To look at our community from the viewpoint of a person midlife and beyond
- To get a picture of how people midlife and beyond are doing in this community
- To think about how to improve the community for people midlife and beyond

Review – 5 minutes

Review the ground rules.

- Does everyone still agree with the list?
- Do we need to add anything?

Since our last meeting, has anything happened that relates to this issue that you would like to share? Our facilitator will post the notes from Session One and sum up the main ideas from that discussion. This will help us to be ready for our work today.

Starting point – 10 minutes

Begin by having each person think about answers to these questions:

- When you think about people midlife and beyond in our community, what do you feel good about?
- What concerns you?

After a few minutes, ask everyone to share with the group. Record the ideas on newsprint. This will help the group start to build a picture of the community as it is now.

Fact sheet – 15 minutes

Keep these questions in mind as you review the Fact Sheet.

- When you look at the Fact Sheet, what stands out for you?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What trends or patterns do you see?
- What is going well for older people in our community?
- Where are the gaps between the needs and services provided?
- What does the data tell us about families and home life in our community?
- What does the data tell us about the standard of living – jobs, housing, income levels – in our community?
Discussion questions – 35 minutes
Use these questions to expand the conversation. You may not have time for all of them.

- What do you think are the main issues, problems, and challenges adults midlife and beyond in our community are facing? What is at the root of these problems?
- Are there people in the community who aren’t in this discussion who would know about other problems or concerns? What would they tell us?
- What activities in the community are making a positive difference for adults?
- What are older adults contributing to our community now? How can we all create other opportunities for them to get involved?
- What is happening in other communities that might work here?

Brainstorm exercise – 20 minutes
A brainstorming exercise will help the group create a vision for the future. Be sure to record the group’s ideas on newsprint.

It is the year 2020. This community is a wonderful place for people midlife and beyond to live and succeed.

- What is the community like? How does it work?
- How do people get along?
- How do people spend their time?
- What roles do older adults play in the community?

Discussion questions – 25 minutes
Look at the vision for the future and compare it to what’s going on today. Consider the following questions.

- In what ways is our “picture” of the community different from the way things are today?
- What would we like to change?
- What roles could older people play in changing the community?

Wrap-up questions – 5 minutes
Turn to your neighbor. Discuss the following:

- How did this session go?
- What views do we agree about? What are things we disagree about?
- What themes keep coming up in our discussion?

For next time: Think about these views. See if you hear them from others in the community. Look and listen for ideas about what we could do to improve the situation.
Closing – 5 minutes

- Encourage people to think about the role all of us can play in community life.
- Thank everyone for coming.
- Hand out the Viewpoints and ask people to look it over before Session 3.
SESSION THREE

How can we make this community a better place for people midlife and beyond?

Goals for this session
- To talk about what we want in our community
- To look at different ways to make our community a better place for people midlife and beyond

Review – 5 minutes
In session 2 we talked about our vision for what this community could be in 2020.
- What examples of our community vision did you find since our last meeting?
  What gave you hope? Why?
- What made you sad or upset? Why?

Introduction – 5 minutes
As we said in earlier sessions, aging adults today face new and different challenges. Families are under increased stress. Many people live with poverty and violence every day. Some places don’t feel safe. Movies, television, and the Internet send conflicting messages about what’s important in life. Families are scattered all across the country.

The good news is that people of all ages are finding ways to make communities better places to live. This session will help us look for new ways to work together.

Viewpoints – 80 minutes
We will use the following viewpoints to get our conversation started. Each view is written in the voice of a person who thinks it is an important idea. Some viewpoints that are important to you might not be on this list. Feel free to add other views.

To begin someone may read the viewpoints out loud. Then we will use the following questions to help us talk about them.
- What viewpoints are missing? What would you add?
- Does one of the viewpoints, or a combination of views, come close to your own? Why?
- What life experiences or values have shaped your views?
- What are you learning from others in your study circle?
View 1 – We need more services in the community to support aging adults. People who live in supportive communities do better. Our community should help aging adults by offering transportation, support groups, local health care, adult day care, care giving classes, and shopping services. We should work to reduce domestic or elder abuse. We can also make sure the community provides food, shelter, health care, financial assistance, or other services for people who need them.

View 2 – The future of the community depends on taking care of children and young families. Most of our resources should be focused on childcare and education. Employment opportunities for young adults must take priority so young families are able to stay in the community. Young families reflect a growing community rather than a community that’s just a place to retire.

View 3 – Aging people should have a real voice in this community. This is because all of us – young and old – should contribute to community decisions, especially about things that affect us directly. Also, we will all benefit if we make the most of aging people’s energy and talents in all kinds of community organizations and activities. When people midlife and beyond are involved in community life, everyone benefits.

View 4 – Individuals need to consider funding their own retirement which in some cases may last 30 years or more. Choices made today in how people spend their money impacts what is available for retirement. Aligning expectations with available resources often does not happen. We assume family, community, or government will take care of us as we age. There are limited resources and the government cannot take care of everyone.

View 5 – We should make sure there are plenty of activities for maturing adults. “There is nothing around here to do,” is something we say or hear a lot. Adults want to get involved in activities that are fun, such as sports and summer recreation, music and arts programs, and block parties. They enjoy spending time with people of other generations. Coffeehouses and community recreation centers are good places for aging adults to go and spend time. Local businesses should offer paying jobs and volunteer opportunities for people midlife and beyond to earn money, share experiences, and keep connected to the community.
View 6 – Most of our resources are spent caring for people in greatest need, while a small amount is spent on health prevention and wellness.
Federal and state reimbursement policies and continued budget shortfalls have focused the majority of public dollars on caring for the frailest and most dependent in our community. Not enough resources are directed toward other kinds of services and support for people who would like to prevent themselves from becoming at-risk. Many times with a little help or wellness education, older persons can maintain their independence in the community. Reimbursement policies are designed to pay for more expensive services like hospital care, nursing homes, and other expensive interventions.

Wrap-up questions – 25 minutes
To sum up this session and prepare for next week, consider these questions.

- What were the main themes in our discussion?
- What did people see differently? What ideas did they have in common?
- What are the biggest challenges we’re facing?
- What community strengths can we build on?
- How can we all work together to move our ideas forward?

Closing – 5 minutes

- Remind everyone that the next time we meet we will talk about what we want to do in our community.
- Thank everyone for coming.
- Hand out the Approaches and ask people to look it over before Session 4.
SESSION FOUR

Reaching our vision: How can we move from words to action?

Goals for this session
- To review and summarize earlier conversations
- To develop ideas for action

Introduction – 5 minutes
By participating in this study circle, we have already made our community a better place. When people share their hopes and concerns, and begin to understand each other, the community gets stronger.

This project is also intended to help us make a difference in other ways. Session 4 is designed to help us sum up and prioritize our ideas and discuss possible actions.

Approaches to Change – 70 minutes
We’ve talked about how our community is doing. Now, we will explore some ways to improve things. What approaches will work well? What will help us create a community of vision for people midlife and beyond?

The following is a list of ways to change a community. We will talk about each one, and come up with our own ideas. Someone will read each approach out loud. Use these questions to think about the different approaches:
1. Have we already tried any of these approaches? If so, what happened?
2. Which approaches do you like best? Why?
3. What other approaches can you think of?
4. Which approaches address the aging population in different types of institutions (government, businesses, schools, nonprofits, etc.)?
5. What approaches won’t work? Why?
We will write down our action ideas as we come up with them.

Approach 1 – Focus on people midlife and beyond
A person who supports this approach might say: People midlife and beyond make up a large portion of this community’s population. Our community should make it a priority to invest in this population segment. We need to put funding for needs of the aging population on the same level or even ahead of funding for a young population. Being fair in distributing resources is the right thing to do.
Approach 2 – Invest in basic community resources.
A person who supports this approach might say: Some communities lack basic resources to serve people midlife and beyond. We need good roads and transportation options, reliable utilities, affordable and attractive housing, local medical care, and retail options. We also need more people who can be community leaders. If we develop these resources, then everyone in the community will be better off.

Approach 3 – Recognize the desire of Baby Boomers to combine work and retirement.
A person who supports this approach might say: Not everyone can, or wants to retire at 62 or 65. While this was once thought of as retirement age, people midlife and beyond are looking for ways to combine personal and work lives. We need employment options that allow for phased retirement or part-time work. The community needs to value the contributions and experience of older employees. Everyone benefits from a capable workforce.

Approach 4 – Join with others to make changes.
A person who supports this approach might say: Some people in the community don’t want to work together. We need to find ways to bring people of several generations together to deal with conflict and to face hard issues. We need to find more ways for people to unite and work for new, fair policies. People must understand the value of approaching challenges as a united community. If we do this, we will be better off.

Approach 5 – Increase leisure and recreational opportunities.
A person who supports this approach might say: People midlife and beyond are interested in wellness. We need to maintain active lifestyles to keep us in good physical health. We want to be able to continue enjoying recreational opportunities as we age. This means having access to fitness facilities, golf courses, swimming pools, hiking and biking trails, camping sites, etc. People want to live where they can have fun.

Approach 6 – Build assets and hold onto them.
A person who supports this approach might say: Assets can be people or skills. They can also be money and things we own. We can use assets to help ourselves and each other. We need to support local businesses, organizations, and foundations. Some assets can be handed down in families or from group to group. A community rich in individual and group assets will thrive.

Approach 7 – Fight ageism.
A person who supports this approach might say: Ageism hurts everyone and keeps some people from contributing to the good of the community. People, as they age, face
Ageism frequently. Sometimes it is obvious and other times the unfairness is subtle. We need to be respected and valued by other generations. We must end the practice of ageism, by people and by institutions.

Next, let us think about action ideas generated from our conversation about approaches.

- Did we agree on any approaches that could help our community make progress? If so, what are they?
- What good things are we already doing? How can we build on these?
- What else will help us make progress? What problems will we face?
- What action ideas should be recorded?

**Action ideas – 30 minutes**

Think about the approaches. Try to come up with specific actions that fit with these approaches. How many different ideas can we come up with?

Make a list of action ideas in the following categories:

- Individual actions – “On our own, we can ...”
- Small group actions – “With our neighbors, or in small groups, we can ...”
- Whole community actions – “As a community, or with government, we can ...”

Let’s review the action ideas we thought of in earlier sessions, and list them on the sheets under the appropriate heading. Is there interest in taking action on any of the ideas we’ve just listed? If so, let’s talk about how we could get started.

**Wrap-up questions – 10 minutes**

Share your thoughts about these questions.

What has surprised you?

- Has your thinking changed about these issues? If so, how?
- Is there anything you will do differently because of this dialogue?
- How will you stay involved in creating a viable community for people midlife and beyond?

**Closing – 5 minutes**

There are many ways to begin. One person can take action. Different people and groups can work together. Sometimes the entire community should take the lead. All of these steps can fit together to create change.

You have a vested interest in helping this community become a place where people midlife and beyond can thrive. Remember – you can make a difference.

Thank everyone for taking part in this study circle.
Tips for Facilitators

Understand the role of the facilitator.
In a study circle, the facilitator:

- Manages the discussion
- Helps the group set its own ground rules
- Does not have to be an expert on the issue
- Helps the group examine the issue from many points of view
- Helps the group talk respectfully and productively
- Does not join the conversation or offer an opinion
- Helps the group develop ideas for moving to action

A study circle facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed. But the facilitator should be the person best prepared for the discussion. This means:

- Understand the goals of the study circle.
- Be familiar with the subject.
- Think ahead of time about how the discussion might go.
- Prepare questions to help the group consider the subject.

If you are well prepared, it will make it easier for you to give your full attention to how the group is acting and interacting, and to what individuals in the group are saying. Here are a few more tips:

Stay neutral.
The most important thing to remember is that, as a facilitator, you should not share your personal views or try to push your own agenda on the issue. You are there to serve the discussion, not to join it.

- Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.
- Well-placed humor is usually appreciated. But, make sure you do not offend anyone or make hurtful jokes.

Explain the purpose of the study circle, and help the group set ground rules.
At the beginning of the study circle, remind everyone that the purpose of the study circle is to work with one another to look at the issue in a democratic way. Remind them your role is to remain neutral, keep the discussion focused, and guide the conversation according to the ground rules. Start with the basic ground rules listed in Session One. Then ask participants to add their own ideas.
Stay aware of and assist the group process.

- Remember, your main role is to help the group stay focused on the subject.
- Help the discussion flow by keeping track of how the participants are communicating with each other—who has spoken, who hasn’t spoken, and who needs more time to make a point. Make sure everyone gets a fair hearing.
- Consider splitting up into smaller groups. This will help put people at ease.
- Only interfere with the discussion if you have to. Don’t allow the group to turn to you for answers.
- Resist the urge to speak after each comment or answer every question. Let participants respond directly to each other. Always be thinking about how to move the discussion forward.
- Once in a while, ask participants to sum up the most important points that have come out in the discussion.
- Remember that some people are uncomfortable reading out loud. Don’t go "around the circle" reading passages; instead, ask for volunteers.
- Don’t be afraid of silence! People sometimes need time to think before they respond. Try counting silently to 10 before you rephrase the question. This will give people time to collect their thoughts.
- Don’t let anyone take over the conversation; try to involve everyone.
- Remember that a study circle is not a debate. It’s a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don’t hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.
- Keep track of time!

Help the group look at various points of view.

- Make it clear to participants that you will never take sides on the issue; your role as a facilitator is to be fair and act neutral.
- Use the discussion guide to help participants consider a wide range of views. You might ask participants to consider a point of view that hasn’t come up in the discussion. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.
- Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs.
- Help participants identify common ground, but don’t try to force agreement.

Ask open-ended questions that don’t lead to easy answers.

Open-ended questions are questions that can’t be answered with a quick "yes" or "no." They push people to think about why they believe what they do. Open-ended questions also encourage people to look for connections between different ideas.
Get familiar with the following questions. They are a great resource during any study circle.

**General questions:**
- What seems to be the key point here?
- Do you agree with that? Why?
- What do other people think of this idea?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What experiences with this can you share with the group?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- How might others see this issue?
- Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- How does this make you feel?

**Questions to use when there is disagreement:**
- What do you think s/he is saying?
- What bothers you most about this?
- What is at the heart of the disagreement?
- How does this make you feel?
- What experiences or beliefs might lead a reasonable person to support that point of view?
- What do you think is really important to people who hold that opinion?
- What is blocking the discussion?
- What might you be willing to give up to come to some agreement?
- What don’t you agree with?
- What do you find most convincing about that point of view?
- What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?
- Could you say more about what you think?
- What makes this so hard?
- What have we missed that we need to talk about?

**Questions to use when people are feeling hopeless:**
- Say a little about how that makes you feel.
- Is there any hope?
- Can the problems that you are talking about be solved in any way? How?
Close with a summary of the discussion and set the stage for the next meeting. When the circle is over, be sure to provide time for evaluation.

- Give people a chance to talk about the most important thing they got out of the discussion. You might ask them to share new ideas or thoughts they’ve had as a result of the discussion. Ask:
  - What are the key points of agreement and disagreement about today’s session?
  - What have you heard today that has made you think, or has touched you in some way?
- If you will be meeting again, remind the group of the readings and subject for the next session.
- If the groups are meeting because they hope to have an impact on community decision making, be sure to document what happens in the discussions. In many study circles, participants record common concerns and points of agreement and disagreement, as well as ideas for action steps.
- After the last session, provide some time for the group to fill out a written evaluation. This allows participants to comment on the process and give feedback to the facilitator.

Thank everyone for their contributions!