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Assets and Needs Assessment of Senior Residents in the West Bloomington Neighborhood

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West Bloomington Task Force

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Photo Credit: Teska Associates, West Bloomington Task Force

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APPLIED COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The experience and process of aging has become a prominent topic of discussion nationwide and Central Illinois is no exception, due to the rapid growth within the senior population in the area. The 60 and over population of Illinois is projected to grow by 87% during the next 30 years (The Maturing of Illinois). An initiative has been developed to evaluate how prepared local communities are for older adults by conducting needs assessments, which can also serve as vital tools for those who plan and provide human services in communities. Often community leaders will form policies and allocate limited resources based on assumptions about the needs of the senior population and outdated information (Parsons and Higley 1995). This report is part of a larger needs assessment that will serve as a resource for community leaders to use in future policies and projects that will involve senior West Bloomington residents. This report examines needs of the senior population of West Bloomington as well as how organizations provide for those needs as evaluated by the senior population themselves. Based on our findings and recognizing the limitations of the study, we make recommendations for action and future research.

INTRODUCTION

The population of 60 years or more is growing at a faster pace than any other population in our society (Developing a Livable Community 2007). The table below provides a breakdown of the aging population in the West Bloomington neighborhood according to the data collected by the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging. Longer lifespan due to improved medical technology and the aging of the baby boomer generation mean that, across the nation, senior citizens are becoming a more significant proportion of the communities in which they live (Developing a Livable Community 2007). To maintain a healthy and well-functioning society in the midst of this transition, it is necessary that communities become aware of the issues affecting senior citizens, realizing that many residents, young and old, share similar concerns about the space they inhabit (Applied Social Research Unit 2000, East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging et al 2008, Developing a Livable Community 2007, Rans and Green 2005). The ability of older adults to remain active is increased by improved health care and the change in attitudes about what it means to be "elderly." Therefore, it is also essential that the assets of senior residents be incorporated into the life and work of their communities.

Table 1: Aging Population of West Bloomington

Variables	Census Block 50	Census Block 51	Census Block 52	Census Block 53	Census Block 54
Total Population over 50	220	301	262	332	83
Total Population over 60	115	144	237	235	29
Total Population over 75	34	44	122	107	0
Total Population over 65 living alone	26	35	186	100	5
Total Population over 65 with disabilities	79	98	213	197	5
Total Population over 65 below poverty level	0	11	74	20	0
African American Population	258	192	49	228	187
Hispanic Population	134	165	114	36	56

Despite the many natural connections between seniors and other portions of the population, other forces tend to increase a sense of alienation for older individuals. For example, needs assessments and other demographic studies often focus solely on the senior population and isolate the issues that face them (Developing a Livable Community 2007, Rans and Green 2005). Retirement communities, whether designed or occurring naturally, serve to segregate a population based on age (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Spaces such as schools or the workplace are often void of older adults, increasing the sense senior citizens do not make up a part of the larger community.

Many of the issues facing seniors are the same issues facing the rest of the population; affordable housing, accessible shopping centers, and functional, accommodating transportation systems are all matters of concern for all members of the community, particularly those with limited incomes. Additionally, finding solutions to these problems involves coordinated action

on the part of all members of the community including, but not limited to: community development organizations, service providers, real-estate agencies, local governments, and the senior population itself. The very process of collective action has an immediate impact that reduces the alienation of the senior population (Developing a Livable Community 2007).

Research questions that have guided this study include: How are senior residents in West Bloomington involved in their neighborhood? Do senior residents in West Bloomington perceive any physical, social, or other barriers to access of their home? Do they perceive barriers to access of their community? What is the level of knowledge among senior residents in West Bloomington about neighborhood resources, specifically the West Bloomington Task Force and the Area Agency on Aging?

A review of the pertinent literature will explore the various issues affecting the empowerment of seniors and their integration into the broader community. A conceptual description of the study will explain the framework of this project and the methodology employed to gather data regarding the experiences of West Bloomington seniors. A review of the findings will follow, detailing these experiences. Based on our findings and recognizing the limitations of the study, we make recommendations for action and future research.

It is our hope that this project will offer the West Bloomington Task Force more insight into the lives of senior residents, their assets and needs, and their experiences and vision for the future of their neighborhood. We also hope that this study serves as an avenue of sustained dialogue between the Task Force and senior residents focused on the quality of life in West Bloomington.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A community-based organization that wishes to empower local residents must focus on two interrelated goals: first, eradicating the barriers that prevent individuals from leading independent lives and, second, engaging these individuals in the process, utilizing the assets and resources that they possess (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Many of these barriers are physical features of the urban and suburban environment, and addressing them requires the cooperation of local governments and city planners. Social or psychological barriers may also prevent residents from leading empowered lives. Community-based organizations can reduce the effects of these barriers by providing opportunities for active participation in community life (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Residents should be engaged in the community development process to voice their intimate awareness of the needs of the neighborhood. Residents may also be employed to implement changes, where feasible, in a manner that would increase a sense of pride in the neighborhood.

Physical barriers affecting the independence of senior residents include issues related to housing, planning and zoning, transportation, and health and human services (Developing a Livable Community 2007). These issues are interrelated in many circumstances, and thus, effective plans to increase the independence of seniors must avoid considering the issues in isolation.

Housing

The affordability and accessibility of housing are two issues facing seniors. Affordable housing options are limited for seniors, and rising property taxes may make it difficult or seniors to afford to stay in a home, even when they already own it (Developing a Livable Community

2007). Adding to these difficulties, many seniors who qualify are not accessing federal housing funds (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). Current research recommends property tax relief programs and limiting of assessed home values to allow senior residents to remain in their homes and their communities (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Non-profit housing organizations are also necessary so that federal funds can be channeled to those residents needing assistance (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990).

Home design is often tailored to a narrower range of physical abilities. Research has shown that grab-bars, zero-step entrances, bathrooms on the main floor, and improved lighting would allow less mobile senior residents full access to their homes. A universal design is advocated so that homes do not have to be modified after they are built in order to be livable, as well as to allow all residents the social freedom of visiting their neighbors (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Studies suggest partnerships between local governments, the real estate sector, property owners, banks, and construction companies are useful in creating housing policy that encourages universal design of accessible homes (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). Research cites further collaboration between housing authorities, community development organizations, and service providers would allow caseworkers that have relationships with individual residents to help them make necessary modifications to their homes. Services and housing could also be located in the same building if zoning regulations permitted such an arrangement (Developing a Livable Community). Lois Baron finds that housing linked to health, support, and employment services leads to an increase in rates for retaining homes among senior residents and other marginalized populations. She also finds these supportive housing solutions decrease the use of emergency and more expensive social services (Baron 2003).

Housing situations can also directly affect senior residents' integration into their

communities. Shared housing arrangements, compact housing, and apartments are often effective and low-cost ways of integrating seniors into good neighborhoods (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub). However, these living arrangements are often restricted by zoning regulations (Developing a Livable Community).

Zoning

Zoning regulations can impact the design of communities as walkable, livable spaces. 'Livable communities' have been used to describe places where residents can choose to live within walking distance of basic amenities, such as health facilities, drug stores, supermarkets, and banks (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Zoning codes can encourage businesses and residences in close proximity, as well as enabling intergenerational and mixed-income communities. This type of diversity is valuable to the community at large and benefits seniors specifically by reducing their sense of isolation from other groups (Kam 1996).

Zoning can also restrict the creation of a broad range of housing options. While seniors may wish to live in smaller housing units, which would certainly be more affordable, minimum lot size restrictions discourage the construction of these types of homes (Developing a Livable Community). Accessory dwelling units, a type of shared house arrangement, can allow seniors to rent affordable spaces from other residents, or allow seniors to lease units out of their own homes and earn a source of income, but these units are often prohibited by zoning codes (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). Current research suggests changes in these zoning codes would require significant public support and local leadership, but would assist seniors in finding affordable and appropriate housing and encourage a diverse environment benefiting the entire community.

Transportation

Transportation services for the aging population are not free of barriers, which has consequently prevented this population from actively participating in the community and from living independently (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). In McLean County, most senior residents rely on household automobiles as their primary source of transportation (ASRU 2000). Many older drivers experience specific difficulties related to the driving environment including navigating intersections and seeing and comprehending signage (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Research indicates one way to improve driving conditions for the aging population is to make 2-way stop intersections into 4-way stop intersections and to make signage brighter and more visible (Developing a Livable Community 2007). Safety programs and refresher courses are also cited as beneficial to older drivers. However, as ability to drive diminishes because of physical mobility, vision or mental state there needs to be a viable alternative means of transportation.

Many older adults would benefit from but cannot use current transportation services due to physical barriers. This does not reflect a disability on the part of these individuals, but rather the lack of implementation of existing technology, for instance, lifts on buses to assist passengers of limited mobility with getting on and off buses (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). Local government needs to implement technology for public resources as it becomes available to assist people with limited mobility in transportation and all areas of public life.

The lack of sidewalks, curb cuts, and bus shelters are three of the most cited reasons for why the senior population does not make use of public transportation systems (ASRU 2000). Without utilizing public transportation some seniors may not be able go to hospitals and doctors' offices, which may have a negative affect on their health (Developing a Livable Community

2007). By improving or constructing sidewalks, curb cuts, and bus shelters seniors and others will have greater access to resources and community activities. Seniors might not take full advantage of available services because of the lack of coordination between different facets of services, for example, access to medical facilities could be improved through the coordination of the public, hospital, and senior advocate resources (Developing a Livable Community 2007).

Another transportation barrier for this population is the fear of crime. Seniors may avoid public transportation as a result of fear, negatively affecting their ability to live independently and be involved in the community. Statistics do not show that this population is more victimized by crime, however, "their perception of their own vulnerability creates a fear that inhibits their social and economic involvement in society" (Gilderbloom and Rosentraub 1990). Involvement in community policing and neighborhood watch programs could help the senior population to feel more secure and more involved in the community (ASRU 2000).

"Developing a Livable Community," offers a blueprint to help communities determine whether or not they are meeting the needs of the senior population. In regards to transportation, it is recommended that a community determine whether there are different types of community transportation available to and from resources like hospitals, grocery stores, and pharmacies. It is also recommended that while waiting for public transportation residents should have access to posted timetables, seating, and shelter. A community might also take in to consideration "travel training programs, route and service adjustments, low-floor buses and discounted fares," to increase rider-ship of public transportation by older adults (Developing a Livable Community 2007).

Services

Seniors are an extremely diverse population incorporating a wide range of resources, interests, opinions, and needs (ASRU 2000). The overarching goal is to help seniors maintain independence and empower them to become involved in their communities. One approach toward empowerment is to address the health needs of this population. Research on health indicates four determining factors: individual behavior, social relationships, the physical environment, and economic status (McKnight 2003). The senior population has been traditionally treated as "service receivers" (Kam 1996), especially in relation to health issues. Traditional social services for the senior population remain focused on the level of service delivery, providing activities for leisure time, and providing medical and emotional care (Kam 1996). Empowerment among this population has generally been overlooked, which affects not only their individual behavior, but also their social relationships in the community. Focusing on institutional service providers creates a "social map of systems and clients" (McKnight 2003), especially among the senior population who tend to assume more passive roles that may further isolate them from the community (Kam 1996).

Seniors require health support that can range in levels of aid from, getting to and from medical appointments, assisted living, or residential nursing care (ASRU 2000). Many home-based services are not provided in a coordinated manner, which may prevent some seniors from receiving all the services they require (Developing a Livable Community 2007). General awareness about services could be improved by creating a "One-Stop Shop for Senior Citizens," as was done in Quincy, Illinois (ASRU 2000). Including a social service directory in the telephone book or on city websites could also improve the information gap (ASRU 2000).

In McLean County, many seniors continue to be employed into their mid- seventies. In

addition, a large percent of seniors volunteer with local religious organizations including Service

Corps of Retired Executives and Retired Senior Volunteer Program (ASRU 2000). Some seniors

have lived in their communities for many years and, therefore, have witnessed the changes and

challenges of the community (Kam 1996). Even those who recently moved to the community

have many years of life experiences that could benefit community organizations in a variety of

ways. The senior population in general has more free time than the working population (Kam

1996). Community organizations could utilize this resource to include the senior population into

the community rather than focusing on senior-centered leisure activities. Enhancing the

recruitment and management of volunteer activities for the senior population would provide a

valuable avenue to inclusion in the community (ASRU 1996).

RESEARCH METHODS

Conceptual Description of the Study

The research questions guiding this study involved a number of concepts that need defining in order to clarify exactly what is being studied. After reviewing literature on the topic, the researchers worked together to define key concepts.

In defining the study population, the first question was perhaps the easiest to answer, if only for pragmatic reasons. The subjects of our study were defined as those persons 65 years of age or older. The U.S. government uses this age as a demarcation of eligibility for various programs and entitlements. This was important because our initial population sample for focus groups would be coming from a property tax exemption available only to those 65 and older. Originally, we decided on the term *elderly* to identify this age group. However, this term is loaded with different meanings for different people and was soon deemed problematic. At times researchers used other terms to identify this age group such as *seniors*, *senior citizens*, or *older adults*, all of which also come with their own connotations. Through this paper, we will use the term participant for those who were interviewed and who joined our focus groups.

Research was conducted to inform the West Bloomington Neighborhood Task Force about key senior stakeholders in the area. For this reason, the preexisting borders chosen by the Task Force for the neighborhood define our geographic area of study. The West Bloomington neighborhood is the area between Taylor Street and Locust Street from south to north, and Morris Street to Lee Street from west to east. Only individuals living within this area were included in the study.[1]

Our main area of interest was to examine different barriers senior residents may be

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[1] With the exception of two participants who formerly lived in West Bloomington.

encountering in their daily lives. A *barrier* is that which impedes access or limits use. It is important to note that barriers are not limited to the physical. Our conceptualization subdivided barriers into five types. The first two focus on the home and the second two focuses on the community. *Physical-home barriers* are structural objects that impede access or limit the use of one's home, for example stairs, lack of railings, or poor lighting. *Social-home barriers* are negative social relationships, or the lack of social relationships that limit an individual to their home. *Physical-community barriers* are defined as poor infrastructure or the lack of infrastructure that impede access or limits the use of one's community. *Social-community barriers* are negative social relationships, or the lack of social relationships that limit an individual from interacting with their community. To avoid disregarding other barriers that might be encountered, a fifth type, *other barriers*, was defined as barriers other than social or physical that impede access or limits the use of one's home or community, for example, environmental or financial impediments, or mental and physical health.

This research strives to investigate the participants' knowledge of resources in the area. For this purpose, we defined *neighborhood resource* as anything that enhances capital for residents within the West Bloomington neighborhood and *capital* as anything capable of producing other resources. Capital is categorized as physical, social, cultural, financial, human, environmental, or political. Physical capital refers to buildings (houses, retail stores, factories) and infrastructure (roads, water, sewers). Social capital refers to relationships and networks of invested time and energy, which individuals can tap into when necessary. Cultural capital is a community's cultural resources, such as historic buildings, archaeological sites, museums, farmers' markets, and ethnic festivals. Financial Capital is the potential to make monetary investments in a community. Human Capital includes the skills of individuals, such as

leadership skills, general education background, artistic development and appreciation, health, and other skills and experiences. Environmental capital includes several aspects of a community's base of natural resources: air, water, land, flora, and fauna. Political capital is access to decision-making or the power to make those decisions (Green & Haynes)

Methods: Interviews

In order to collect our initial data, seven key informant interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. These key informant interviews were conducted by teams of two to three interviewers. In the interview, one person led the discussion using a semi-structured protocol of 10 questions (not including demographic questions) (See Appendix 1). The other interviewer(s) took notes on the interview and collected observations of the home environment (interior and exterior). Each participant was given and signed an informed consent form (Appendix 2) before the interview was conducted.

Participants for the key informant interviews were selected using a non-probability, convenience-sampling frame obtained from the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging (ECIAAA). The ECIAAA gave researchers a list of 23 seniors being assisted by caseworkers of local service providers. Of those 23 residents, 17 were clients of the organization Providing Access To Help (PATH). Five residents out of the 17 agreed to be interviewed. Nine residents were ineligible due to not living in the neighborhood or having mental disabilities that would not be conducive to the interview and three additional residents declined to participate. All five PATH clients that agreed to be interviewed were interviewed. One PATH participant invited two friends to participate in the interview.

Six clients of Community Care Systems were also contacted to be interview. Of these

six, residents three agreed to be interviewed. Two residents were ineligible due to not living in the neighborhood or having mental disabilities that would not be conducive to the interview and one declined to participate. Of the three residents that agreed to be interviewed, no interviews were conducted either because researchers were unable to make arrangements, unable to contact them or because we could not finalize an interview time.

Snowball sampling was used to obtain more participants for the key informant interviews. Snowball sampling is asking participants if they could recommend other people who may be willing to participate in the same study. In order to interviews for our study, at the end of each interview the question was asked, "Do you know of any other elderly residents within this neighborhood that might be willing to talk with us?" Through this method, two additional interviews were conducted.

The method of conducting key informant interviews was chosen in order to get a better understanding of the study population. Interviews provide rich data, which are not easily captured by other methods such as surveys. Although labor intensive, interviews grant a view of the complex contexts of participants' lives. Researchers chose to use the list of residents with PATH and CCS caseworkers as our sampling frame due the convenience it provided, as our time frame for conducting research was limited. The advantage to using this sampling method is that time and money were saved with pre-existing relationships. Interviewing those with caseworkers also guaranteed that we would be interviewing members of the target population. Caseworkers were invaluable to the research by introducing the study and the research team to their senior clients. Their credibility with their clients granted researchers the access and trust needed successfully to conduct interviews with the sample.

Limitations

While this sampling method has its advantages, it has its limitations as well. One such limitation was that since the sample was obtained through convenience sampling the conclusions drawn could not be generalized to the senior population at large. This is because without a true random sample there is no guarantee that the sample we collected was representative of the population at large since they were chosen specifically for their commonality. This limitation was accepted because the intent of the study was not to generalize to a larger population.

Methods: Focus Groups

Researchers compiled and examined the results of interviews to identify key themes. These themes allowed researchers to create focus group questions relevant to the lives of the sample. This method allowed researchers to gain a further understanding of the senior population in West Bloomington. Researchers conducted two separate focus groups held at Mount Pisgah Baptist Church. Seven senior residents participated in the first focus group on Thursday, October 16th, 2008 and four seniors participated in the second focus group held on Friday, October 24th. We initially scheduled four focus group interviews however, the first group scheduled for Monday, October 13th, 2008, was canceled due to lack of confirmation of attendance and the third scheduled focus group on Thursday, October 23rd, was not conducted because no participants attended.

The focus groups were conducted by two facilitators using a semi-structured protocol and notes were taken by at least three other researchers on the discussion. Lunch was provided at the beginning of each focus group. Before the focus groups officially began, representatives from East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, the City of Bloomington, and the West

Bloomington Neighborhood Task Force[2] spoke on the resources they have to offer elderly

residents. Each participant was given and signed an informed consent (Appendix 3).

Potential focus group participants were identified from a list of addresses provided by the

City of Bloomington tax office. The list contained 77 addresses of residents in West

Bloomington that qualified for the senior tax exemption for the 2007 tax year. After

crosschecking the list of qualified tax exemptions with the list of residents with caseworkers,

seven of which were duplicates, a final count of 70 residents were found to be eligible for our

focus groups.

In preparation for our four planned focus groups, we split these 70 residencies into four

different groups based on location. For the focus group to be held on the 13th of October the 17

elderly residents living between Taylor and Grove Streets were invited. For the focus group to

be held on October 16th, the 15 elderly residents living between Grove and Washington Streets

were invited. For the focus group to be held on October 23rd, the 21 elderly residents living

between Washington and Monroe Streets were. In addition, for the fourth and final group, to be

held on October 24th, the 17 elderly residents living between Monroe and Locust Streets were

invited.

Potential participants were initially invited through a personalized letter sent out to each

resident's home on the tax-exempt list and then through door to door canvassing. Transportation

services were offered to potential respondents. If a resident was either not home or declined to

participate a flyer was left with them or at their residence. There were many reasons given for

why a resident declined to participate in the focus groups. Some residents claimed that they did

not wish to participate because they disproved of the Task Force for personal reasons, some did

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[2] A task force representative did not attend the second focus group.

not wish to spend the time, and some did not seem to trust the process of college students going door to door recruiting. There were some residents, however, that wished to participate but could not because they could not make the time and date that was set for the focus group because of a job or other commitments. In a large number of cases, there was no one home at the residence on our list and some homes were vacant.

After the lack of interest in our first focus group, we looked into other ways of recruiting. We contacted the two neighborhood associations that serve West Bloomington residents. The Gridley Allen Pricket Neighborhood Association agreed to insert a flier into their newsletter inviting elderly residents in their association to their choice of either of the remaining two focus groups. The Olde Towne Neighborhood Association sent a letter inviting the elderly residents in their association that live in West Bloomington to either of the remaining two focus groups. Researchers also attended a neighborhood wide Task Force summit and distributed fliers to those in attendance announcing the third and fourth focus groups.

Limitations

As with the key information interviews, one limitation is that our sample for the focus group was a convenience sample and, therefore, it cannot be generalized outside of our sample population. Another limitation of the focus group method is that our sampling frame was based off the tax exemption list for the 2007 tax year, which did not include those who did not qualify or apply for the tax exemption or those who had since moved from the neighborhood. It also excluded renters, as the exemption is only for property owners. Our focus groups had seven and four participants respectively and ideally a focus group should have 12 to 15 people (Babbie, 2005).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

"I love my neighborhood…it is as much as you can ask for in this day and age."

(Female, 75, resident in West Bloomington for 19 years)

"The west side is not that important to anyone, so no one listens to us."

(Female, 67, lived in West Bloomington for 20 years before feeling forced to leave)

Demographics

Demographic information about the sample discussed below (key informant interviews and focus groups) can be found in Appendix 4.

Key Informant Interviews with Senior Residents

The following conclusions are drawn from seven key informant interviews with senior residents living in West Bloomington, Illinois.[3] Researchers conducted the seven interviews in respondents' homes during October 2008. Ten West Bloomington residents were interviewed either individually, in couples, and in one case, as a small group of three neighbors. In the researchers' opinions each of the participants were coherent and engaged during the interview process. Upon telephone contact, several potential respondents refused to be interviewed as a result of discomfort or of their negative perceptions of this project being affiliated with local government and/or the West Bloomington Neighborhood Task Force.

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[3] See methods section for more information about how potential interviewees were identified.

Common Themes from Interviews

General Feelings about the Neighborhood:

'As long as we have our health there is no reason to move elsewhere.'

(Couple – husband, 78 and wife, 62, residents of West Bloomington for 25 years)

In general, interview respondents spoke favorably about their neighborhood. They like the neighborhood, enjoy their neighbors, and feel generally comfortable in their homes. Respondents, despite any problems with the area they may have mentioned throughout their interviews, planned to maintain their residencies in the neighborhood and made no indications of having the desire to leave. For example, one female resident (61), who has lived as a renter in West Bloomington for 16 years, has never been able to buy a home, but if she could find a way, she would purchase property in West Bloomington. Respondents generally gave the impression that they have positive relationships with their neighbors.

Relationships with neighbors described by respondents were a mix of casual acquaintances and very close relationships. One respondent (female, 65, resident in West Bloomington for 16 years), commented, "I know 'em to speak to 'em and talk to 'em, but that's it." Another respondent (male, 67, resident in West Bloomington for 37 years) commented, "we watch out for each other, people notice if someone isn't seen for awhile." Most respondents cited their positive relationships with neighbors among their favorite qualities of the neighborhood. Several respondents cited friendships with other neighborhood seniors as sources of support and assistance.

Overall, respondents indicated willingness to create community ties; they expressed desires for more frequent neighborhood socializing and positive engagement with community

youth. Respondents claimed they want to be able to distinguish fellow residents from someone who is just passing through the neighborhood. Some respondents mentioned a desire to revive the neighborhood "mom and pop" businesses, or at least feel comfortable going to the ones that currently exist.

Interview respondents indicated an awareness of the stereotypes placed on their neighborhood as a "bad" area of the city, but were also quick to defend their neighborhood's status. Many respondents claimed that the problems in their neighborhood are no different from problems found in other communities in Bloomington and elsewhere. In general, newer residents, who have lived in the neighborhood for ten years or less, seemed to be more critical of the area's problems and also claimed to feel less safe than residents who have lived in the neighborhood for longer periods of time.

Crime & Safety

"It is convenient and safe as anywhere."

(Female, 62, resident in West Bloomington for 25 years)

Several respondents mentioned that the neighborhood has a recent history of drug activity (i.e. "crack houses"), prostitution, and gang activity, but the majority of residents also claimed they feel very safe in their homes and neighborhood; some even mentioned that they feel safe enough that they often do not lock their doors. A shared response of respondents was that the specific problems found in West Bloomington are not just exclusive to that neighborhood; similar problems are widespread throughout the city of Bloomington and in neighborhoods elsewhere. Respondents additionally claimed the neighborhood has seen improvements over the

last several years; crime has been reduced via increased police presence, many abandoned properties in the area are being bought and fixed up, and overall cleanliness of the neighborhood has improved. In general, respondents claimed there is nowhere they feel like they cannot go due to safety or accessibility issues. However, there were a few exceptions, including being fearful of leaving home after dark and discomfort going to the local grocery, "Pops." There was a common uneasiness among respondents concerning large groups of youth hanging out in the streets, specifically after dark. Respondents felt generally threatened by groups of youth and expressed hesitation to report problems to the police because they fear the possibility of retaliation. For example, respondents mentioned a fear of young people vandalizing their property or threatening their personal safety.

Personal Needs

Respondents most often claimed a desire for help with household tasks such as lifting heavy objects, yard work, and painting.[4] Interviews revealed that respondents receive a significant amount of personal assistance and help from their family members.[5] Other resources for help and assistance mentioned by respondents included a local police officer, calling other senior residents, or other neighbors, for help. Several respondents also mentioned they worked with PATH, benefited from government assistance programs (e.g. circuit breaker program, energy assistance, free bus pass, etc.), and received social security benefits.

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[4] During the interviews respondents were directly asked, "What do you consider your greatest needs at the moment?" To this question, all respondents initially responded that they had no immediate needs for which they required or requested, "help" however, needs and areas of life where respondents received or desired "help" were included elsewhere in interview dialog. In the researchers' opinions use of the specific word "help," although some respondents may receive or need it, has a negative association for the respondents because by admitting they need "help" they may reveal a certain level of vulnerability, discomfort, and inferiority.

[5] Many of the respondents who did cite family networks as a means of support, also expressed knowledge and concern for other senior residents who do not have this type of support network; claiming that those others may have additional problems and difficulties on a daily basis.

Respondents revealed that information about social programs is often difficult to find and, when it can be found, is often very difficult to obtain. Disqualification from programs and services was most often due to income level or receipt of other resources. For example, one couple interviewed (husband, 73 and wife, 78, residents of West Bloomington for 25 years) had difficultly receiving financial help and social program assistance because their income is slightly higher than then the income level qualification limits for many social programs (they annually generate $2.00 over the welfare recipient income limit).

In general, interview respondents did not express transportation needs and most claimed they own and drive personal vehicles that allow them to get around easily.[6] Only one senior resident interviewed (female, 61) used public transportation on a daily basis, which she felt was an accessible resource for her. No participants indicated there were places they felt they could not go due to transportation or accessibility issues.

Housing

"I love living in my home."

(Female, 75, resident in West Bloomington for 19 years)

"It feels good living in this house."

(Male, 78, resident in West Bloomington for 25 years)

Most home improvement projects recently completed by respondents, or that were expressed as desired to be completed, related to infrastructures of homes including new roofing,

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[6] Similar to the issue of family support networks, many of the respondents who did not express having personal difficulties with transportation, also expressed knowledge and concern for other senior residents who do not have the ability to drive themselves around or receive transportation assistance from family members; claiming that those others may have additional problems and difficulties on a daily basis.

basement walls, new windows, porches, wiring, insulation, etc. Many respondents revealed a desire to complete home improvement projects, but often faced difficulty due to lack of information, time, money, and helping resources (e.g. affordable labor, information about making informed decisions about contractors, simply had not gotten around to it yet). For example, one senior resident (male, 67), who has lived in his West Bloomington home for 37 years, knows his house is in disrepair and does want to make necessary updates, but cannot receive any assistance to complete his projects because he makes slightly too much money to qualify for the assistance programs he is aware of. Only one renter from the neighborhood was interviewed. This resident (female, 61) complained that her landlord does not adequately address her apartment's maintenance needs.

While interviewing residents in their homes researchers observed that most respondents lived in well-kept homes. One respondent's home was in obvious need of painting and new windows. Several respondents had well maintained lawns and gardens. Most homes appeared to be internally and externally accessible, with the exception of a few homes that had cluttered interiors.

Neighborhood & Community Needs

Larger needs expressed by respondents included having more of a police presence in the neighborhood to address groups of kids hanging out on streets and in alleys late at night. Several respondents mentioned potential infrastructure improvements for the neighborhood, such as installation of more streetlamps, benches installed by bus stops for long waits, sidewalk maintenance (in some cases installation since sidewalks are not everywhere in the neighborhood), and a major water/sewage replacement project that respondents claim was

"promised" by the city several years ago, but never actually happened. Several respondents also cited their displeasure with the illegal dumping and messy yards that exist in some areas of the West Bloomington neighborhood. Lack of community communication was a central problem expressed by respondents. Difficulty finding ways to meet and socialize with other seniors, activities to participate in, and suitable volunteer opportunities were community communication gaps described by some respondents.

Civic Engagement/Activities

There was a mix of participation in civic engagement activities revealed by interview respondents. Many cited active membership in several nearby churches, attending activities at the Western Avenue Community Center, use of the public library, and use of Constitution Trail. Many respondents indicated they are very active in a variety of volunteer activities, some of which engage youth, such as Parks and Recreation programs, YWCA, and the Boys and Girls Club. Some respondents talked about working part-time jobs. Other respondents expressed that they enjoy working outdoors and gardening as an extra-curricular activity.

Less than half of respondents were aware of, or actively participate in, the West Bloomington Task Force and neighborhood summits. Less than half of respondents were active participants in neighborhood associations. Most residents had not heard of the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging (ECIAAA). Most respondents who were aware of the Task Force and neighborhood summits seemed unimpressed with the work being done; they were not personally invested with these projects and only a few had attended community summits. Several respondents mentioned having past involvement with neighborhood watch associations, which have since become inactive. Some respondents mentioned having no current interest in

being civically involved because they have simply lost interest in socializing with others.

Overall from Interviews

This interview set revealed a preliminary asset and needs assessment of the senior population in West Bloomington. The most significant findings include a need for community communication and access to information about resources. Other prominent needs appear to involve the infrastructure of the neighborhood itself including sidewalk maintenance, bus stop accessibility, installation of streetlamps, and updates to water systems. Some of the interviewees cited personal limitations due to health problems, but for the most part, the basic needs of interviewed residents seemed to be met. The exceptions to this are those respondents living on an income that does not adequately support basic needs (i.e. health and home repair), but also does not allow them to receive formal assistance.

From the perspective of those interviewed, the Task Force does not have a positive reputation with the senior population of the neighborhood, if they have a reputation at all. There is a communication and utilization disconnect within the community between assets of senior residents, social resources, and community involvement opportunities. For example, several respondents claim they have interest in working outdoors and gardening, while others have the desire and need for someone to take care of these things for them, but these residents are simply not connected with each other. In some cases, respondents seem fairly networked among each other, but these networks are limited to specific houses or street blocks.

Focus Groups with Senior Residents

The followings conclusions are drawn from two focus groups with senior residents living

in West Bloomington, Illinois. Both focus groups were conducted during the month of October in a small room on the bottom floor of Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church in Bloomington. Total attendance for both focus groups included 12 senior residents of the West Bloomington neighborhood.[7] Transportation to three of the four originally planned focus groups was available to all potential participants; however, only one participant utilized the provided transportation. Although transportation was not specifically offered for the second focus group, of those residents who did RSVP, no transportation needs were expressed.

To solicit participants, researchers recruited focus group participants from the West Bloomington neighborhood on various days of the week, at various times of the day. Over the course of two weeks, 70 residential houses were approached. [8] Each potential participant was provided with a flyer advertising a community "lunch and learn" event. Due to lack of participation by residents, only two of the originally planned four focus groups were held. Many of the residents approached expressed that they did not want to participate a due to general lack of interest, conflict of the event's time with a work schedule, or because of a negative reaction to the events being associated with local government and/or the Task Force. A small number of residents cited not being able to participate due to health and mobility limitations.

It is worth mentioning that the two focus groups displayed a drastic contrast in atmosphere. In the researchers' opinions, this difference was the result of the participant group responding to the city representative who made a short presentation about housing assistance in the beginning of the meeting, to serve as the "learn" segment of the "lunch and learn." The first

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[7] At the second focus group one participant left before signing the consent form as a result of feeling extremely uncomfortable having these findings presented to the Task Force and employees/elected officials of the city of Bloomington. The participant was reminded and reassured of confidentiality, but still declined participation.
[8] Overall, researchers canvassing the neighborhood to recruit participants did not feel uncomfortable or have negative impressions of the neighborhood or the residents. The only notable observation was that many of the neighborhood's houses were for sale. See methods section for more detail about how senior households were identified.

focus group was receptive to the city representative and the second focus group was not. The

receptivity of the groups of participants to the city housing presentation set two very different

tones for each of the focus groups.

Common Themes from Focus Groups

General Feelings about the Neighborhood:

"You've got good people and bad people everywhere."

(Female, age unknown, resident in West Bloomington for 26 years)

"I've got no kick about it."

(Male, 66, resident in West Bloomington for 40 years)

Most focus group participants revealed generally positive feelings about their

neighborhood. Connections and friendships with neighbors were common and ranged from

casual acquaintances to close friendships. In most cases, respondents revealed a mutual

connection among senior residents in West Bloomington, but also expressed desire to establish

more connections within the community.

Focus group participants revealed general negativity about rental properties in their

neighborhood.[9] Many participants blame local renters and bad landlords for many of the

neighborhood's problems with poorly maintained properties, crime, drug activity, and

vandalism.[10] Some participants of the focus groups expressed that, in recent years, several

positive changes have occurred in the neighborhood. Although most participants also had

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[9] Subtle evidence of racial tension arose in some focus group participants' commentary in reference to renters in West Bloomington who are perceived to be moving from Chicago to the community. Researchers also became aware of this subtle racial tension toward renters who are "moving from the big city" during informal conversations with potential participants while recruiting for the focus groups.

[10] All participants from both focus groups were homeowners. Senior residents who rent property in West Bloomington are not adequately represented in this sample.

several negative complaints about the current condition of the neighborhood, all expressed pride

for their homes and indicated no desire to leave the area. Participants also claimed that many

problems in West Bloomington are not exclusive to the neighborhood, but are common

neighborhood problems in other areas of the city and in other communities.

Many participants made the claim that, as residents of West Bloomington, they feel

unimportant in the eyes of city officials. Some participants felt that their neighborhood has been

historically over looked by the city. Ultimately, some participants blame the city for not

responding earlier to problems and letting the neighborhood get so bad. Many respondents from

the second focus group expressed feeling harassed by city officials, specifically in relation to

house inspections. A great deal of discussion occurred about home inspections and that residents

felt harassed when the city required them to make updates to meet codes and then either never

came back to follow up, or followed up excessively. Overall, participants from the second focus

group expressed disapproval of the city's "selective enforcement" of property codes, most

frequently in reference to rental properties in the neighborhood.

Crime & Safety

"I am not afraid, I refuse to be terrorized, I feel perfectly safe."

(Female, age unknown, resident in West Bloomington for 26 years)

"I feel like I'm in jail."

(Female, 86, resident in West Bloomington for 63 years)

Participants referenced several sources that contribute to crime in the West Bloomington

neighborhood. Cited problems included drug and gang activity, vandalism to property, theft, and

house robberies. Many participants described hearing gunshots in the neighborhood and witnessing drug activity. One respondent (male, age unknown, resident of West Bloomington for 30 years) shared a story about being held at gunpoint in his driveway. One female resident (age unknown), who is a lifelong resident of West Bloomington, comments, "I don't feel like the police do anything to help us."

Several participants expressed a fear of going out of their homes after dark because they felt intimidated by large groups of youth gathered outside and due to a general lack of street lighting. In general, participants revealed a lack of trust and confidence in police. It was discussed that police patrolling has been more visible in recent years, however participants were not impressed with the slow response time of the local police. During conversation in both focus groups, participants referenced a policy that the community worked to change a few years ago to prevent the police from going to the home of someone who may call in a complaint. This change was encouraged in order to protect the resident's identity and reduce the likelihood and fear of potential retaliation. All participants spoke favorably about the change of this policy.

Personal Needs

"I sold my house because I couldn't manage it anymore as a disabled person. My daughter

moved away and it was just too much. Once my maintenance person moved away,

I just couldn't do it. I hated moving…it took years to get over it."

(Female, 67, lived in West Bloomington for 20 years before feeling forced to leave)

Focus group participants revealed their primary source of personal assistance as their family networks. Families helped the participants with yard work, seasonal housework (i.e.

raking leaves, winterizing, snow removal), interior cleaning, and in some cases transportation.[11]

Many participants cited helping relationships with other senior friends or neighbors in the area. In the researchers' opinions, a strong family support network that provides seniors with the assistance they may need could be a significant reason people are able to live independently and stay in their homes as they age. Though many of the participants received help from family members, many shared the problems they have encountered trying to find affordable and trustworthy hired help to assist with outdoor work, housecleaning, home repair, renovation, and car repair. Participants expressed a need and desire for a source of community communication and made suggestions of starting a community publication or holding regular community meetings where seniors could share knowledge about trustworthy contractors, service providers, housecleaners, etc.

With the exception of one disabled participant, there were no problems or concerns cited in the focus group discussions about transportation issues. In the case of the disabled resident (female, 61), she shared a story about calling a taxi to take her to the train station, forewarning the company about her wheelchair, and when the cab driver came to pick her up at home, he refused to transport her.[12]

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[11] Similar to key informant interviews, participants who cited support from family networks expressed awareness of, and concern for, fellow seniors who do not have this type of support.

[12] Only a few focus group participants had visible disabilities, and from these residents there was little discussion of other accessibility issues similar to the one discussed above. However, because there were so few participants with these conditions, the researchers point out that this portion of the senior population may not be adequately represented in this sample.

Housing

> *"It's home, no one knows how hard I've had to work to have it."*
>
> *(Female, 86, resident in West Bloomington for 63 years)*

All focus group participants expressed a great deal of pride for, and attachment to, their West Bloomington homes. Most were proud to be West Bloomington residents and were determined to stay in their homes. Most participants who mentioned making recent home improvements described infrastructure projects such as a new roof, chimney repair, basement updating, and window installation. Some participants mentioned they used city assistance programs to help them improve and update their homes. One participant (female, 79, resident of West Bloomington for 20 years) claims she stopped maintaining her home when she felt it was no longer worth anything, but after learning about programs that could assist her; she began to take advantage of the programs and has since begun to refurbish her house. This same participant provided an explanation for the negative feelings toward the city among participants that have been previously described in these findings. She claimed that senior residents are afraid of city officials becoming involved with their properties because they are fearful of losing their homes. In the researchers' opinions, there was validity to this participant's explanation because other participants mentioned a fear of the city being involved with property because they believed that city would put financial leans on their homes and eventually force them out.

There was a great deal of disapproval toward renters and landlords of West Bloomington expressed by focus group participants. Participants specifically cited renters as the main cause of crime in the neighborhood in several conversational contexts. The disapproval of local landlords reigns back to the perception among participants, mainly from the second focus group, that there is a "selective enforcement" of property codes specifically in reference to landlords (see previous

Housing section).

Neighborhood/Community Needs

"There used to be a bakery, grocery, and laundromat, they are all gone."

(Female, 67, resident of West Bloomington for 40 years)

"Why don't they put anything in the paper anymore?"

(Male, age unknown, resident of West Bloomington for 30 years)

Focus group participants cited a variety of community needs, some in the form of complaint, others in the form of suggestions. Participants cited several infrastructure problems that exist in their community including drainage problems, litter in the neighborhood from traffic on Constitution Trail and other residents, inadequate street lighting, and poor maintenance of sidewalks. Also mentioned by participants concerning the needs of their community included pet control, revival of a quality local radio station, a community newsletter, revival of local businesses, and constructive activities to engage youth so they are not loitering in the streets. Having a community newsletter, holding frequent community meetings and the possibility of starting a phone tree between senior residents of West Bloomington to allow them to "check up on each other" were the most supported suggestions for neighborhood improvement in both focus groups.

In general, focus group participants expressed a great deal of concern for the quality of their neighborhood. Many participants shared their experiences concerning involvement with neighborhood associations and neighborhood watch groups that have since become inactive. Most participants were not aware of the Task Force and of the few that were aware their

impressions were generally negative. Reasons cited by participants for dislike of the Task Force

included having not enough communication with residents and the feeling nothing is getting

accomplished.

Civic Engagement/Activities

> *"I worked like a dog [on the community group], it never worked."*
>
> *(Female, 86, resident of West Bloomington for 63 years)*

Focus group participants cited a variety of activities they are involved in; some of these

include board memberships, local church affiliation, crafting groups, book clubs, volunteering

with youth, and neighborhood association involvement. Overall, as previously mentioned,

participants revealed little evidence of involvement with the West Bloomington Neighborhood

Task Force or neighborhood summits; many participants were not even aware of these

community activities. There were several cases where participants described how they used to

be more enthusiastically involved with neighborhood associations and neighborhood watches

that currently either do not exist or are not as strong as they used to be.

Overall from Focus Groups

> *"I don't trust anymore."*
>
> *(Female, 67, resident in West Bloomington for 20 years)*

Several conclusions can be drawn from the two focus groups conducted in West

Bloomington. There seemed to be a significant lack of trust for city officials, service providers,

and strangers in general. This may in part be due to a lack of community communication.

Residents reported in both focus groups that they did not have sufficient information about

community activities and services available to them. The participants made several

recommendations to remedy this problem that included a community newsletter, regular small

group meetings with community residents, and starting a senior resident phone tree.

The importance of family support structures is another general theme that can be drawn

from the focus group data. Many of the participants stated that their families were a primary

source of support and seemed concerned for those senior residents that do not have a family

structure to rely on regularly. The participants of both focus groups seemed to have a personal

history of community involvement. Most participants had a strong desire to help make positive

changes in their community and establish stronger connections with their neighbors.

Summary of Findings

The findings from key interviews and focus groups allow the researchers to draw several

conclusions. In regards to the research method, at-home interviews were more successful than

focus groups. Senior residents seemed to be more receptive to having an interviewer come to

their home to conduct an interview than to attending a focus group. In the future, it may be

advantageous to use the interview method to gather data with this population.

In the interviews and focus groups, residents reported a strong reliance on family support

structures. In the West Bloomington neighborhood, family support seemed ultimately to give

respondents "staying power." Family support networks allow respondents to live independently

and stay in the neighborhood longer. Most residents enjoy their community and have a strong

desire to stay in their West Bloomington homes.

According to research participants, there is a general trend of personal desire for civic engagement. Many of the participants volunteer on a formal or informal basis within their neighborhoods and have a desire for more involvement in this area. Several residents also reported a certain amount of discouragement because past attempts at community involvement have failed. For example, several respondents mentioned attempts to start neighborhood watch programs that were ultimately unsustainable.

In general, there seemed to be miscommunications, or gaps in communication, about community activities, services, and organizations in and around West Bloomington. Many participants reported that they did not know about the Task Force and were unaware of many of the services available to them. There is a need and a desire to have a better system of communication among West Bloomington residents and with service providers.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study encountered a number of obstacles and had some important limitations to identify, in order to better interpret the researchers' findings and recommendations. However, there were also some important successes and strengths to be highlighted. In terms of limitations, the sample of respondents could not be generalized, we faced significant time constraints, potential bias was introduced from participant reactions to the connection with the West Bloomington Task Force (WBTF) and City of Bloomington (COB), and some inconsistencies in data recording occurred. In terms of strengths, we can look to the consistent and effective support of State Farm Insurance®, the WBTF, East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging (ECIAAA), and the COB, well-developed research questions, interview and focus group protocols, and findings representative of a collection of diverse attitudes.

The support the study received from State Farm®, the WBTF, ECIAAA, and COB entailed many benefits. These agencies were instrumental in gaining the assistance of other community organizations, such as Mt. Pisgah Church for focus group meeting space, Community Care Systems (CCS) and Providing Access to Help (PATH) to gain access to the sampling frame for key informant interviews, and Peace Meals for focus group lunches. The direct link of the current study to these organizations also provided incentive for some to participate, as they could procure information on city resources for home rehabilitation. Beyond this, State Farm®, the WBTF, ECIAAA, and COB directly provided resources to the study, including provision of the sampling frame for the key informant interviews (ECIAAA), the purchase of focus group meals (State Farm®), provision of transportation for those participants in need (COB), and supplying critical background information on the community, residents and the current as well as past development efforts in the area (WBTF, ECIAAA, and COB).

Other major strengths are the well developed research questions and interview/focus group protocols. Utilizing the information from the WBTF, ECIAAA, and COB, combined with additional research, the research team took the time necessary to produce clearly conceptualized and targeted research questions to guide the process of the study. This led to generally well received, understood, and answered protocols for the interviews and focus groups. These successes assisted the research team in collecting a wide diversity of attitudes and opinions on the topics addressed, from the sample.

The most important limitation to acknowledge is that the sample included had a low level of generalizability. Though there is a measure of representation, the sample frames for both key informant interviews and focus groups effectively excluded renters. This is especially true for the focus groups, as potential respondents were identified through City records of homes with senior tax exemption status, which requires the senior to own the property. This also excluded those seniors without such a tax exemption on their home and those living with family and not utilizing the exemption. Additionally, seniors with a vested interest in the West Bloomington neighborhood, but not technically residing within it were not included. Finally, a poor participation rate for the focus groups could have introduced further bias into the study, as of the seventy potential respondents in the sample frame, only ten participated, (and one participant was from outside the West Bloomington neighborhood).

Part of the difficulty in recruiting participants, for both interviews and focus groups, can be attributed to negative perceptions and/or past experiences of the participants with the COB, the WBTF, or other outwardly similar projects. Some of these attitudes can be attributed to a lack of knowledge/misconceptions of those organizations. In this way, connection of the study to some of the sponsoring agencies may have impeded participation. Another limitation of those

connections, specifically for the focus group portion of the study is that bias may have been

introduced into the findings from the presentation given by the agencies prior to conducting the

sessions. These presentations generally centered on topics relating to housing and the specific

services of the agencies. This may have led the participants to focus on or neglect issues they

would not have without the tone set by the presentations. This limitation is especially salient for

the second focus group, wherein the presence of a COB staff member led to agitation of a

number of participants and subsequent deviation from the protocol of the session. The

participants took over control of the process, discussing personal complaints about the COB and

WBTF, and ignoring the attempts of the focus group leaders to guide the discussion. Due to this,

the group did not address all areas of the focus group protocol.

A further limitation is the inconsistency of interviewer notes. A strict format was not

established for how notes were to be compiled and as a consequence, information for certain

questions was not always readily identifiable. More importantly, the majority of interview notes

fail to address at least one pre-determined, probing follow-up question, if not more. As a result,

the ability of the study to comment on those issues, for which data is not available in all cases, is

restricted.

The last limitation that will be acknowledged is that of time constraints. As the study is

part of a semester long course and not capable of being extended, all portions had to be

compressed to fit a rigid schedule. By doing so, the research team was unable to extend either

the key informant interview process or the focus group process to increase the number of

participants to more favorable amounts. Limits of time also impacted the methods for

development of sampling frames. Given adequate time, more representative sampling frames

from the area could likely be developed. Having acknowledged the strengths and weakness of

the current study, attention will now be turned to researchers' recommendations for future

development efforts and research, based on the research findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we would like to present an outline of recommendations that have been identified through our formal research methods, as well as general observations. Our intention in offering these recommendations is not only to provide specific items or projects to solve target problems, but to assist in the overarching challenge of building and implementing a comprehensive and productive community development strategy. In addition, although our findings draw from a limited sample, we feel that these recommendations are a good representation of their concerns.

Certain ideas and techniques are central to community development. The importance of inclusive participation in the decision-making and implementation process, local asset assessment and utilization, and the strength of stakeholder relationships are factors that we feel are invaluable characteristics of a successful community development strategy.

In addition to these recommendations, we have also included project ideas that can both assist in implementing our general suggestions, as well as meet the needs identified through our discussions.

Inclusion

Many participants emphasized that they did not feel included in local decision making, especially on the city level. The integration of all stakeholder groups in every phase of the development process ensures complete representation and broader insight. We think of this as bottom up organizing and it is a fantastic method for allowing every party in the community a voice.

Actively seeking out local seniors to participate in town meetings, on subcommittee

groups, or other organized events not only presents them with the opportunity to give, but also to start voicing their concerns. We feel that inclusion of a few individuals on this level will overtime aid in the strengthening, and in some cases re-building, of a positive association between the local senior population, the city and other active organizations.

The WBTF has a senior sub-committee on their Neighborhood Plan development team. We suggest that more practices such as this one are implemented, especially on the local government level relating to sectors such as housing and social support services.

Asset Focused Development

Focusing on the assets of a community and its stakeholder groups is an effective tool for empowerment, inclusion, and encouraging participation. Highlighting a community's strengths is an underutilized force in addressing its weaknesses.

We were not surprised to find a wealth of human capital in those we contacted. Most of the individuals were still working, recently retired, or still active in their church and other local organizations. It is easy to overlook these experiences and connections as un-usable, or too disconnected from the individuals or needs they could possibly serve, but this is not and should not be the case. Enabling someone's skills is an excellent move towards increased civic engagement and a tool for connecting people who otherwise would have no reason to interact.

The City's acknowledgement of strength like the West Side Community Garden, which they currently sponsor, is a great example of this type of development. There are other individuals and groups that have the potential to blossom just like the West Side Community Garden, if found and allowed to connect.

To assess social capital and assets, we suggest looking at ways in which elderly

community members have been and are currently productively involved, and what types of common skill sets they possess. Acknowledgement of these assets not only allows for an underutilized population to lend potentially more to the re-development efforts, but also empowers and lends to the building of stronger supportive relationships.

Perception/Relationship Building

Through our research, we have identified senior individuals' negative perceptions and weak relationships with the WBTF, ECIAAA, and City as the greatest barrier to progress. By reaching out to the local senior population in a new way, one supported by our prior recommendations of inclusion and asset building, we feel a new path can be cleared for the future. Much of the time bonding as a group and community is the productive outcome, and when tended properly, will lead to the desired 'problem-solving' out comes. Events and activities are not only a success when there is a tangible end result.

The initiatives and intentions of the WBTF, ECIAAA, and the City of Bloomington are not unsatisfactory or inadequate, just misunderstood and underutilized. With an understanding of, and focus on, the relationships with the senior community we know that these residents can become a major benefactor and supporter of agency and city efforts.

Specific projects

<u>Leadership Group</u>

The development and support of a "Golden" leadership group, in the image of local 'young professional' groups, is a way to allow this demographic to organize as a cohesive unit. An independent group like this allows those involved to network internally and kick-start the use

of their naturally occurring informal communication networks for productive means. There are no means identified by respondents to allow residents to network with each other on a larger scale although, it would be beneficial to this senior population to have networking opportunities. The following projects are good starter initiatives for a group like this.

Simple and inclusive events

Encourage and hold events such a community clean-ups, block party, or trainings in fields of interest. Activities like these not only produce a tangible outcome, but also offer a chance for networking, bonding, and the realization of assets.

Starting with something simple and easily achievable allows a group to rally around a success. Building off of small successes produces a sense of empowerment and motivation that can propel them towards larger tasks that are more challenging in the future. Additional event suggestions include:

- "Lunch and Learn" – focusing on local topics like Lincoln Sites that support a sense of connection to ones community

- "Senior Sit-down with the Mayor" – a roundtable discussion with local officials to openly make suggestions and have questions answered

Information sharing

A newsletter or radio/TV programs allow people to work together and address one of the main concerns voiced by our sample, the lack of available information. People were interested and excited by the services offered by local groups but many were hearing about them for the first time.

Encouraging a group to take the lead on a project like this allows them to focus on their

needs while supporting the mission of local organization. We feel that this is a major

opportunity for mutual benefit.

<u>"Community Development Crash Course"</u>

A community development course or workshop could take a number of forms for

different audiences while addressing some of the general strategy concepts we have been

highlighting. The length of the course could be variable and there could be different levels of

"City Certification" that go along with them. Getting people exposed and trained in basic

community development skills is capacity building as well as an actionable resource for local

groups.

Seniors could take the course, as any other group, or they could be trained to teach the

course. The second option allows for a more sustainable resource as well as a great opportunity

for age group integration.

<u>Yard Clean-up Crew</u>

One of the main concerns seniors voiced throughout our process was the need for some

help with outdoor chores. This is a great opportunity for younger generations, possibly those 'at-

risk' or in need of community service hours, to lend a hand to their senior neighbors.

We suggest that this effort be lead by a trusted local official, both for credibility and as

another way for the City or support organization to reach out to the older community. The

possibilities for a private 'spin-off' service are certainly there for any ambitious young people

involved, as their clientele will surely be growing in the future.

<u>Mini-grants</u>

This program should be focused on small community projects. It's hard to get an idea started sometimes, but a bit of equity not only allows a group to purchase unaffordable items it can provide a sense of recognition.

This is the most complicated and long-term of our recommendations, but by starting small and ensuring transparency through a comprehensive application and reporting process, it is very possible.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Results from our process indicate that it may be necessary to get a better understanding of community perceptions and attitudes. Efforts should not just focus on how seniors perceive the community, but also the community's perceptions of senior residents. While there is some advocacy work being done by ECIAAA on behalf of seniors, there is a lack of information about what actual community members' desire of their neighborhood. This information is crucial in developing a community that is livable for residents of all ages. It would be helpful to know where seniors feel the most comfortable and welcomed in West Bloomington as the Task Force moves forward in their plans to recruit more senior participation.

A specific research area to target is how senior residents are engaged and spending their time in the community. Several of our respondents indicated some level of volunteering within the West Bloomington neighborhood. Information about where they are involved in, how often they participate, and the reasons they donate their time to these programs and activities could prove beneficial. This research can include formal organizations and associations as well as informal social networks. Knowing where senior residents have current social commitments could help the community development efforts in getting more senior residents involved and active in the revitalization process.

In addition, expanding the population would be another area to pursue. Our current sample included only those seniors with PATH caseworkers and those using the tax exemption, which left some groups completely unrepresented. This expansion of the population would helpful in creating more representative data and lead to results that can be generalized.

There are a few ways this expansion can be done. First, the sample's age requirement could be to 55 years old. To ensure a plan that is sustainable, it should incorporate the needs of

future senior residents. A second way is to expand the neighborhood boundaries to include more physical area. This would bring more seniors into the population, as well as those who spend time in the area but do not live within the original street boundaries. This outlying population could have assets and opinions that aid the development process. Moreover, an in-depth assessment of people living on the brink of poverty, but not able to sufficiently support themselves, would be beneficial for future social programs that address the needs of seniors. Due to the way we formed our sample, our population excluded renters and seniors not taking advantage of the tax exemption.

Due to the limitations of our small sample and time constraint, one avenue to pursue would be utilizing some of the tools developed to reach more senior residents in the community. Our limited amount of time restricted the number of residents we were able to collect information from. Additional key informant interviews and focus groups are necessary in obtaining a wider variety of opinions and feelings about the current development efforts and the neighborhood in general.

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APPENDICES: TABLE OF CONTENTS

West Bloomington Neighborhood Plan: Assessing the Needs and Assets of the Elderly Residents

September 18, 2008

Dear Resident,

In collaboration with the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, a group of graduate students at Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development are working on an assessment of the needs and assets of elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood. In particular, we are trying to understand how the housing and safety needs of elderly residents are being met in the West Bloomington neighborhood, and what you envision for the future of your neighborhood.   The first phase of this project involves speaking directly with elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood to understand their views on these issues. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the needs and assets specific to the elderly residents within this neighborhood.

We would like to schedule a time for a team of 2-3 graduate students to come to your home to speak with you about your needs, how you are involved in your community, and what is most important to you for the future of your neighborhood. Your voice and perspectives are very important to the development of a sustainable neighborhood plan that meets the needs of all residents, regardless of their age. The interview will last between 30-45 minutes. A graduate student will be calling you within the next few days to schedule a time for the interview that is convenient for you.

Results from this project will be provided to the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging to inform their broader needs assessment and to allow them to develop specific strategies to address any needs or concerns that were raised as part of this research. Your participation is completely voluntary and all information will remain confidential. If you do not wish to participate, you may decline at the time that the graduate student calls you. Participation does not involve any specific risks or benefits and if you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. You may also contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.

Regards,

Dr. Joan M. Brehm, Assistant Professor of Sociology

Interview Protocol Questions

*Date/Time:*_____   *First Name:*_____

*Age:*_____   *Gender:*_____   *Ethnicity (observe):*_____

*Other Household Members*_____

*Length of Residence in WB*_____   *Own/Rent:*_____

*Occupation/Former Occupation:*_____

How do you feel about living in this neighborhood?
        What do you enjoy most about your neighborhood?
        Least?

What do you see as your greatest needs at the moment?
        Top three? Housing, transportation, accessibility, etc…

When you need assistance, what resources do you call upon?
        How did you come to know them?
        Where did you look for them?
        Are you aware of any neighborhood associations or other resources? *If so what?*
        Do you belong to any organizations/associations? *If so, which ones? What is your role in those organizations?*
        Do you feel that you have an asset/skill that is not utilized?
        ECIAAA, WBTask Force…

How well do you know your neighbors?
        In what ways do you assist and interact with your neighbors?
        How often?
        If not, why?

What activities do you participate in outside of your home?
        Daily routine?
        Time of day?
        How do you get there?
        Where do you go?
        Poistive and negative experiences?

Is there anywhere you feel you can't go?
        Why?

How do you feel about living in your home?
        Safety?
        Access?
        Interior vs. Exterior?
        Why/Why not?

Have you made any modifications to your home in the past several years? *(if rental, not applicable)*
    If so, what? How did you go about it? Use an agency, contractor, etc..? Were you satisfied?
    If not, are there modifications you plan to make?
    Are there modifications you want to make but are not able? Why?

Is there anything, from way the neighborhood used to be, that you wish would come again?
    What were/are your favorite local social events in the past/present?
    How often to you go?

Do you know of any other elderly residents within this neighborhood that might be willing to talk with us?

General observations about condition of home, level of comfort with interview, etc…

Key Informant Interview Consent Form

In collaboration with the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, a group of graduate students at Illinois State University are working on an assessment of the needs and assets of elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood. In particular, we are first trying to understand how the housing and safety needs of elderly residents are being met in the West Bloomington neighborhood, and what you envision for the future of your neighborhood. The first phase of this project involves speaking to elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood to understand their views on these issues. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the needs and assets specific to the elderly residents within this community.

The interview will last between 30-45 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of how elderly residents perceive issues related to housing needs, safety, and their future vision for their community. Results from this project will be provided to the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging to inform their broader needs assessment and to allow them to develop specific strategies to address any needs or concerns that were raised as part of this research.

Your participation is completely voluntary and all information will remain confidential. Participation does not involve any specific individual risks or benefits and if you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. You may also contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.
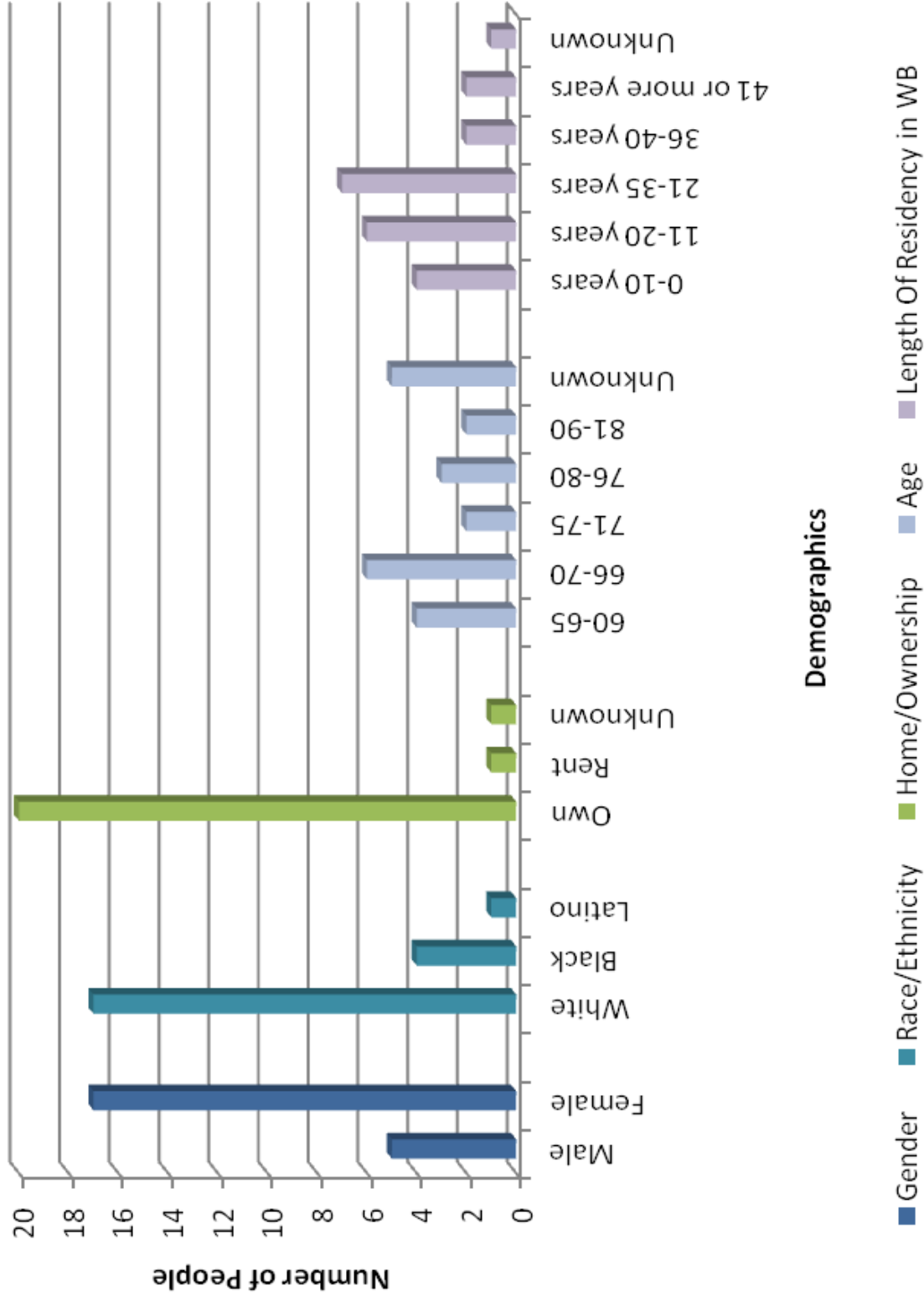
Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and know that my responses will remain confidential. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Thank you for your time and participation.

Summary of Participant Demographics

Number of People (y-axis): 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20

Demographics (x-axis categories):

Gender: Male, Female
Race/Ethnicity: White, Black, Latino
Home/Ownership: Own, Rent, Unknown
Age: 60-65, 66-70, 71-75, 76-80, 81-90, Unknown
Length Of Residency in WB: 0-10 years, 11-20 years, 21-35 years, 36-40 years, 41 or more years, Unknown

Legend: Gender ■ Race/Ethnicity ■ Home/Ownership ■ Age ■ Length Of Residency in WB ■

Lunch and Learn: Assessing the Needs and Assets of the Senior Residents in West Bloomington
October 1, 2008
Dear Resident,

In collaboration with the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, a group of graduate students at Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development are working on an assessment of the needs and assets of elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood. In particular, we are trying to understand how the housing and safety needs of elderly residents are being met in the West Bloomington neighborhood, and what you envision for the future of your neighborhood.   The first phase of this project involves speaking directly with elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood to understand their views on these issues. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the needs and assets specific to the elderly residents within this neighborhood.

What: Lunch and Learn: Assessing the needs of Senior Residents in West Bloomington
   Transportation can be provided free of charge (via the City of Bloomington Parks and Recreation bus)
   Graduate students from the Stevenson Center for Community and Economic Development will be coming by your home the week of October 6, 2008 to verify your participation and to also confirm whether or not you will need transportation to the event.

Where: First Christian Church, 401 West Jefferson Street, Bloomington

When: Monday, October 13, 2008, 11:30am – 1:00pm

Event Details:
   Brief overview of the West Bloomington Neighborhood Initiative.
   Discussion to ask you about your needs, how you are involved in your community, and what is most important to you for the future of your neighborhood.
   Sharing information on the City of Bloomington's program that provides rehabilitation loans to eligible low/moderate income families to correct major or minor, health/safety deficiencies, and for the preservation of the house, such as roof replacement, siding, windows, furnace, water heaters, etc.
   Lunch will be provided to all participants.

Your participation is completely voluntary and all information will remain confidential. If you do not wish to participate, you may decline at the time that the graduate student visits your home. Participation does not involve any specific risks or benefits and if you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact Dr. Joan Brehm, Illinois State University, tel: 309-438-7177, email: jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. You may also contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.

Regards,

Dr. Joan M. Brehm, Assistant Professor of Sociology

You're Invited...
To A West Bloomington
Neighborhood "Lunch & Learn" for
Senior Residents

Want to know more about the West Bloomington Neighborhood Initiative and what it means to YOU as a senior resident?

Graduate students from Illinois State University's Stevenson Center for Community & Economic Development, in collaboration with the West Bloomington Neighborhood Initiative, are hosting a community "Lunch & Learn" for senior residents living in West Bloomington.

<u>Where</u>: Mt. Pisgah Baptist Church (801 W Market St.)

<u>When</u>: Thurs, October 23rd <u>OR</u> Fri., October 24th (11:30-1:00)

<u>Why</u>: To hear what <u>YOU</u> have to say about your neighborhood, to share information about the West Bloomington Neighborhood Initiative, and to share information about opportunities for home improvements from the City of Bloomington.

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<u>FREE</u> lunch & door-to-door transportation (transportation available for October 23rd ONLY) is being provided for anyone interested in joining the Lunch & Learn discussion!!!
In order to plan for the lunch, we need your RSVP. Please call (309) 438-7745 to RSVP, to arrange transportation, or if you have any questions about the event.

(Observers: note ethnicity, gender, disabilities within the group)

Introduction (2 minutes)
> Introduce each student, any members from the Task Force, City, or ECIAAA
> Welcome seniors, thanks for their participation.
> Make sure everyone has lunch.

Purpose of project – (2 minutes)
> Working on an assessment of the needs and assets of elderly residents in the West
> > Bloomington neighborhood.
> Trying to understand how the housing and safety needs of elderly residents are being
> > met in the West Bloomington neighborhood, and what you envision for the future
> > of your neighborhood.
> Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the
> > needs and assets specific to the elderly residents within this neighborhood.

Brief overview of West Bloomington Neighborhood Initiative, City of Bloomington Senior programs for housing – then ask them to leave. (15 minutes)

READ informed consent form to participants and have them sign and collect our copy.   (2 minutes)
> Remind them that all information is **confidential.**
> Ask them to complete brief demographics sheet (age, gender, length of residence in WB, own/rent)

Guidelines and Roles (2 minutes)
> Your role this afternoon is to share your thoughts and opinions and to listen to others'. In this focus group, there are no right or wrong answers. We invite ideas that may differ from what others have said. The success of this process depends on your willingness to think creatively, voice your ideas, and maintain an open mind.
> As the facilitator, my role will be to direct the flow of conversation and make sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate. My assistants will be taking notes throughout the discussion, jotting down responses on the flipchart or whiteboard.

Focus Group Discussion Questions (60 minutes)

Please tell us your name, how long you have lived in West Bloomington, and what do you like MOST about living in this neighborhood? *(round robin discussion, write responses on white board)*

How do you feel about living in this neighborhood? (open discussion – write responses on board)
> Enjoy Most?
> Least?
> Do you know your neighbors?

What activities do you participate in outside of your home?
> Are you aware of any neighborhood associations or other resources? *If so what?*
> Do you belong to any organizations/associations? *If so, which ones? What is your role in those organizations?*
> *Do you feel that you have an asset/skill that is not utilized?*

What do you see as your greatest needs at the moment? (round robin, write responses on board)
> Top three? Housing, transportation, accessibility, etc…

When you need assistance, what resources do you call upon?
        How did you come to know them?
        Where did you look for them?
        Have you had difficulty finding the resources or accessing them?

How do you feel about living in your home?
        Safety?
        Access?
        Interior vs. Exterior?
        Why/Why not?

(rental vs. homeowner) What, if any, home modifications have you made in the past several years?
        If not, why?
        Are there modifications you want to make, but are not able?   Why?
        What would be helpful for you to make these modifications?

Is there anything else that you want to share or add to the discussion? (round robin)

Hand out sheet – anything else you wanted to share with us but did not say in the focus group?

Focus Group Consent Form

In collaboration with the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging, a group of graduate students at Illinois State University are working on an assessment of the needs and assets of elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood. In particular, we are first trying to understand how the housing and safety needs of elderly residents are being met in the West Bloomington neighborhood, and what you envision for the future of your neighborhood. The first phase of this project involves speaking to elderly residents in the West Bloomington neighborhood to understand their views on these issues. Your contribution and perspectives are vital to helping us to better understand the needs and assets specific to the elderly residents within this community.

The focus group interview will last between 45-60 minutes. The questions will focus on getting a better understanding of how elderly residents perceive issues related to housing needs, safety, and their future vision for their community. Results from this project will be provided to the West Bloomington Task Force and the East Central Illinois Area Agency on Aging to inform their broader needs assessment and to allow them to develop specific strategies to address any needs or concerns that were raised as part of this research.

Your participation in completely voluntary and all reasonable efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality. Since the focus group session takes place in a group setting and others are privy to your responses, I cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. However, you name will not be associated with the data collected and only group data will be reported. Only those directly involved with the project will have access to focus group notes. Participation does not involve any specific risks other than perhaps some discomfort when revealing personal feelings in the focus group setting. Participation does not involve any individual benefits other than helping to improve the sustainability and well-being of your neighborhood. If you choose not to participate or choose to discontinue your participation, there will be no penalty. If you remain for the discussion, this indicates your consent to participate in the study. If you have any questions or if we can be of any assistance, please feel free to call Joan M. Brehm (project director) at (309) 438-7177, or email her at jmbrehm@ilstu.edu. You may also contact Illinois State University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office at (309) 438-8451.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. My questions about the project have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the project and understand that others will be present during the focus group session. I understand a copy of this form will be made available to me.

Signature:_____ Date:_____

Thank you for your time and participation.