

A Community Report for  
**THE CITY OF PASCAGOULA**



**SMART AGING**   
HEALTHY FUTURES

## INTRODUCTION

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

Based upon that need, the *Smart Aging: Healthy Futures* project was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities foster the healthy aging of their senior populations. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, the project was originally conducted in Oktibbeha, Clay, Copiah, and Lincoln counties. In Copiah and Lincoln counties, the project was directed in cooperation with Copiah-Lincoln Community College. The project's initial success led to its expansion to the City of Pascagoula.

As part of this effort, a series of **Forums on Healthy Aging** were held to involve the community in a dialogue focused on identifying the resources—and the challenges—relative to healthy aging within Pascagoula. From that dialogue, a number of community action groups were formed to begin developing community solutions to concerns relevant to the health and health care of seniors.

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





## OBJECTIVES

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

- Identify community resources and deficits relative to supporting the health and health care needs of its rural elderly population
- Engage the community in a grassroots effort to improve the health and health care accessibility of its rural elderly population

## PROCESS

In March 2009, two public forums were held, one with seniors themselves and another with individuals or organizations concerned about the health-related needs of seniors (loosely defined as 60 and older). The intent of the forums was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support seniors' ability to age in a healthy manner.

Having identified many of the issues and concerns related to healthy aging, a third public forum was scheduled in April 2009 to chart a path forward. Given the opinions expressed in the first two forums, what, if anything, did the community want to do? Participants from the first two forums and other seniors and resource individuals were asked to attend.

The forums were conducted using a modified "World Café" format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in initiating table discussions of between six and eight individuals, and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. This process helps identify a group's collective knowledge and enables people to join together to pursue common aims. The format aids communities in better understanding, relative to the health and health care of their aging population, what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute or relinquish for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems, as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

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



# FINDINGS

## WHAT'S WORKING

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

### General Health and Fitness

- Hospital
- Singing River educational and rehabilitative services
- Extension Service, high school, and community college health programs
- Hospital transportation
- Walking trails

### Social Interaction and Support

- Senior prom
- Church programs
- Senior Center volunteer programs
- Operation Good Morning
- Seniors' Mardi Gras Parade
- AARP
- Dancing programs at Senior Center
- Fishing pier
- New center at high school – computer, art, and craft classes
- Cultural events
- Good civic groups – churches, VFW



## Social Services

- Senior Center
- Public library – computers
- Jackson County Civic Action Committee programs
- Home health
- Hospice
- Senior Companion Volunteers
- Taylor Heights – new affordable housing
- Our Daily Bread, The Lord is My Helper programs
- Planning and Development District funded transportation – free for seniors 60 and older on weekdays, \$6 for others

## Other

- Employment opportunities for seniors 55 and older
- Support of local, city, and county officials for senior programs
- Funding for programs

This is not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of healthy aging within Pascagoula, but it is representative and does indicate that the city starts from a position of strength in addressing the needs of its senior residents.

## THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY

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

- Caregiver assistance – respite care
- Handbook listing all services and contact person
- Indoor water aerobics – adults only
- Adult daycare facilities
- Senior referral service
- Short-term care after procedures – take patient home, etc.
- Enlarge walking and bicycle track
- More volunteers for Senior Volunteer Companion program
- More transportation
- Expanded Senior Center
- Volunteers – help with house and yard work
- Help with financial advice
- Handyman services
- Income-neutral programs
- YMCA – for heated pool
- Need for more shopping facilities – grocery stores
- More exercise videos at Senior Center
- Programs to increase knowledge about nutrition
- Healthy cooking tips
- More programs at Civic Center and new gym for older citizens and handicapped
- More intergenerational activities – adopt-a-grandparent program and seniors mentoring children
- Newsletter for senior citizens to educate entire county
- More volunteer visitors to nursing homes
- More entertainment opportunities – dinner theater and other theaters
- Spiral-bound books – “how-to” books and recipe books

- TRIAD – safety, house light program
- Expand rehab services
- Expand home-bound meal program
- Service animals, companion animals
- New affordable housing
- Senior advocate and referral services
- Funding to maintain and expand current services
- Mississippi 211 – expand its content and usefulness
- System to barter for services – for example, trade a cake for fixing a leaky faucet

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

## HOW TO ACCESS WHAT'S THERE

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

- TV, newspaper
- Central location for information – keep book at Senior Center and library
- Chamber of Commerce – Welcome Wagon program
- Senior fairs
- Senior advocates
- Neighborhood Watch program
- Calling tree program
- Resource information at Welcome Center
- Bi-monthly/weekly Senior Corner in newspaper
- Monthly health and wellness FORUM for seniors
- Thad Anderson Resource Directory
- Social gatherings



- Partnerships
- Feeder bands, PSAs
- Retail establishments
- Senior resource guides
- Church announcements
- Senior centers
- Newsletters
- Fraternities and sororities
- Ads on moving vehicles
- Hands-on education in corporate settings
- Libraries
- Employees of cap agencies to help navigate system
- Community leaders or other people serving as contacts in key positions in community
- WIN Job Center
- High School Interactive Technology Center

Frequently, help and information are needed when people are least able to deal with complicated searches and stumbling blocks. Ease of access to information and person-to-person assistance when needed were considered hallmarks of usefulness.

## CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

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

- People who suffer in silence rather than seeking help or advocating for themselves
- Social isolation
- Seniors have not healed since Katrina – loss of homes, financial impact, increased vulnerability, grief
- Home restoration needs – conflict between rebuilding and restoring
- Food stamp limitation for seniors
- Need to address needs of Hispanic and Vietnamese populations
- Cost of medicines
- Fear
- Inactivity – lack of interest
- Finances
- Seniors as victims
- Affordable homes for seniors
- Lack of retirement villa for seniors
- May need help in grieving loss of a child
- Seniors returning to work need help completing their taxes
- Home insurance (in general, as well as wind pool trap) and property taxes
- Geographically dispersed families limits available support
- Caregiver burnout can lead to abuse
- Inappropriate choice of individual to be the caregiver
- Limited transportation to appointments, outings, and for errands; lack of evening transportation
- Political: re-education or learning curve will be needed for new city council
- Limited funding for programs for seniors – home-delivered meals, homemaker services, services to help seniors live independently
- Restrictions on use of funds

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



## COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

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

- **Establish an informational resource guide identifying services and resources in support of seniors’ healthy aging in the community**
- **Determine and address seniors’ educational programming needs related to healthy aging**
- **Establish a volunteer organization to assist seniors with small house and yard work needs**

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

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

The workshop was conducted in June and the three action groups are well on their way to success. The groups met that day, began planning their next steps, talked about contacting other folks that might help move the process along, and considered additional resources that might be needed.



## NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you are a senior, we encourage you to visit the Senior Center and take advantage of the planned activities and programs, or just stop in, sit down, and visit for a while. The center and its staff have been very supportive of this process and, more importantly, provide an array of opportunities beneficial to healthy aging.

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action teams formed around only a small number of those ideas, we hope the remainder will not be lost. **Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations, and government leaders can review the “three wishes” list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the healthy aging of the senior population.** The list is far from exhaustive, and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the quality of life of older residents might envision other possibilities. An elementary school or Sunday school class might consider “adopting” a group of seniors and enjoy hearing stories of earlier times. A civic organization might initiate a “Caring for Caregivers” program and volunteer to stay with a frail or otherwise limited senior for an afternoon to give a family member or friend serving as a caregiver some time off. Seemingly small efforts can have a major impact on the quality of life of our seniors.

Pascagoula has many fine attributes that benefit its seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve the quality of life of older adults, and that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. We hope you will join in the effort to make Pascagoula a place of *Smart Aging and Healthy Futures*.

## PASCAGOULA FACTS AND FIGURES

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005–2007 American Community Survey:

- 16.8% of Pascagoula’s population was estimated to be 60 and older.
- 40.5% of those 65 and older in the city were estimated to be male and 59.5% to be female.
  - Nationally, 76% of males 65 and older live with spouses; 19% live alone.
  - Nationally, 42% of women 65 and older live with spouses; 39% live alone.
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Pascagoula was estimated to be:

60–64	22.1% (811)
65–74	44.4% (1,630)
75–84	19.7% (725)
85 and over	13.8% (506)

***Smart Aging: Healthy Futures A Community Report for the City of Pascagoula*** was prepared in the summer of 2009 by the following ***Smart Aging: Healthy Futures*** team members:

**Bonnie Carew**

Mississippi State University Extension Service  
*Rural Health Program Leader*

**Ann Sansing**

Mississippi State University Extension Service  
*Community Health Coordinator*

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

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