You’re only as old as you feel!
The global pandemic of 2020-2021 has impacted all aspects of our lives, but people ages 65 years and older were adversely affected with more severe illness and higher death rates. The library wanted to learn the unique needs of this at-risk population and embarked on a study in fall of 2020. We defined the scope of this project as people aged 65 years and older living in Canton Township. About 13,000 people fit this category or 14 percent of Canton’s total population. The question we asked was, “how do we safely meet the short-term needs of Canton seniors?”
Numbers only tell part of the story. By connecting the statistics to people, we gain insights into what is important to seniors and how to better serve them.

We learned that 25% of people aged 65-69 and 24% of those age 70-74 are still in the workforce. Our seniors are well educated: 34% have a bachelor’s degree or higher. They are active and engaged, have a sense of purpose, and need ease and convenience in their lives.

Of the 13,000 seniors in Canton, 2,300 live alone, mostly in private residences, and 77% live with a spouse or family member. Seniors reside in about 8,250 Canton households. They have a need for companionship and a safe space to gather with friends to pursue common interests and activities.

How do we know what we know?
The CPL team conducted extensive research, using information from the Pew Research Center, Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, American Community Survey, Canton Township Community Survey, Census projections, library cardholder surveys and one-on-one interviews with community experts to get a thorough understanding of our seniors. If you’d like to learn more about our data, we are happy to share.
Key outcomes

Three themes emerged

The library’s researchers discovered three main areas where we, and other community partners, can help seniors.

**Maintain control: independence and autonomy**

Seniors miss their freedom. Keeping them safe and protected from the virus also meant keeping them cooped up and without the ability to do things, both routine and spontaneous.

In helping seniors maintain their freedom, we learned that seniors need the ability to age in place, and to mitigate aging in general. They require things that are easy and convenient, and they need to be able to receive help without feeling like a burden, in most cases this means receiving help without having to ask for it.

**Feel relevant: purpose and usefulness**

Seniors want to feel like they are leading a meaningful life but it is difficult to stay relevant and in touch in an ever-changing world. Once out of the workforce, it becomes harder to be aware of and adapt to new things.

Seniors could use help navigating the speed in which their world changes. They desire to be valued and cared for through human connection. Our seniors want to make an impact and give back. Many are thinking about the legacy that they will leave, and want to preserve memories, reflect on their lives, share experiences in meaningful ways, and focus on the next generation.

**Find Joy: inspiration and enjoyment**

The pandemic has been especially hard on seniors, who feel the need to make the most of the time they have. It is hard to watch grains of time sift through the hourglass, and feel that precious months are passing by in isolation.

We can help seniors maximize their time by staying occupied in enjoyable ways and helping them find inspiration to lead meaningful lives. They are looking for magical experiences that allow them to express themselves and be fulfilled. Seniors also want to enjoy their life as it is, and maintain their physical and mental wellbeing. “Use it or lose it” is a relevant sentiment for this group.
Meet our seniors
We identified 5 profiles that represent the needs of seniors in our community.

Meet George
George falls into the age range of 65-74 years old. He’s active, with a “can and will” attitude and feels free to explore and participate in the world. He has a positive mindset and many social connections, including a key group of friends and family. He loves his golf outings and is a master on the grill. George participates frequently in recreational and hobby activities, seeks opportunities to give back, and has been involved in a service club and worship volunteerism. For George, his legacy is a purposeful, well-lived life.

Fundamental needs
Personal control
Self-expression
To feel useful and productive
Ease and convenience

Hurdles
COVID Restrictions and lack of freedom
Rapid technology changes
Finite time on earth
Meet Penny

Penny falls into the age range of 65-74 years old. Penny has a small circle of connections, including a couple close friends and her family, with whom she enjoys spending quality time. She enjoys reading, watching the Hallmark channel and HGTV. Penny is worried about health and safety, and her overall health maintenance can be challenging. It’s been hard for her to stay positive during mandated stay-at-home restrictions and she doesn’t want to be a bother. Penny wants to stay in her home as long as possible, and prefers one-on-one help and quiet activities.

Fundamental needs
Something positive to occupy her time
Interacting in engaging ways
Ease and convenience
Situational tech help

Hurdles
Health issues restrict her activities
Mandated COVID restrictions
Accepting help without feeling like a burden
Using technology, like patient portals, to manage health issues
Meet Robert

Robert falls into the age range of 75-84 years old. Faith and spirituality are important to him, and he appreciates everyday things, like the birds that come to his feeder. Robert enjoys watching History Channel shows and reading his favorite authors. He has a core group of close friends, family and caretakers and still likes to go out for a drive, even though it makes his family nervous. He wants to stay in his home and has to find new safe ways to do the things he’s used to doing.

Fundamental needs
Something positive to occupy his time
Personal control
Ease and convenience
Dignity

Hurdles
Lack of freedom and control
Loneliness
Finite time on earth
Meet Betty

Betty falls into the age range of 75-84 years old. She likes to be up and about, have the freedom to socialize, reserves trips on the senior bus to the Fox Theater with friends, and hits the mall for walking exercise and shopping. Betty feels amazing for her age, and she wants to make the most of it while she still can. She loves to spend time with family and friends and appreciates the freedoms that she has.

Fundamental needs
Social connection
Self-expression
Receiving help without feeling like a burden
Making the most of time

Hurdles
COVID isolation and restrictions
Missing hobbies and activities
Declining abilities
Meet Dot
Dot falls into the age range of 85+ years old. She’s appreciative of everyday things, like watching the kids walk past her house on the way to school. She feels cherished by her family and enjoys spending time with them, often the center of attention at family gatherings. Dot is somewhat reliant on caregivers, mostly her grown children, yet has a desire to remain as independent as she can. Faith and spirituality have become more personal as she ages. Dot doesn’t get out as much as she used to but still enjoys a trip to the Dollar Store.

Fundamental needs
Something positive to occupy her time
Basic needs are already met
Social connection
Feeling valued and cared for
Dignity

Hurdles
Declining abilities
Loneliness
Lack of freedom
Opportunities

How might we develop services, programs and partnerships to serve our seniors?

Through our research, identification of core physical and emotional needs, and ideation sessions, we have been inspired to create opportunity prototypes that can be put into action to better the lives of seniors in our community.

Some of the topics we’re exploring include:

**Stealthy support**
How might we help seniors maintain independence by making their path smoother and easier to navigate? Let’s find new ways to do old things, connect seniors and caregivers with resources, and make living on your own easier with safer home management and direct-to-door services.

**Answers before questions**
How do we help seniors handle the hiccups and speed bumps of life, like tracking down a COVID vaccination appointment or reading a book on an iPad, without feeling like a burden? Let’s anticipate seniors’ needs and look at how we can provide answers before they have questions, so they don’t have to ask for help.

**Make magic happen**
In what ways can we connect seniors to help make every day experiences more enjoyable? How might we create something magical for seniors to look forward to? How can we help them stay connected with their grandchildren? Let’s create opportunities for people to come together in a safe space to socialize and enjoy common interests and hobbies. These opportunities are just some of the ideas we are exploring. We welcome your thoughts and ideas to come up with and implement life-enhancing services and programs for seniors in our community.
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