

2023–2025 Progress Report Presentation

Olmsted County Housing, Health and Human Services Committee | June 2, 2026

Dave Beal, AFOC Coordinator, Family Service Rochester

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

I am here as coordinator of Age-Friendly Olmsted County, or AFOC, at Family Service Rochester. I want to begin by acknowledging FSR's role in providing a home for this work, and by thanking the public staff, community partners, older residents, and volunteers who have helped move AFOC from an idea into active community work.

I do not plan to walk through the progress report page by page. The report gives you the fuller record. What I want to do this morning is step back and talk about what this first cycle has shown us.

Age-Friendly Olmsted County has completed a successful first action cycle. It has shown that a community-based, cross-sector aging initiative can identify practical issues, build useful relationships, bring older adult experience into public decision-making, and strengthen the broader age-friendly work happening in Olmsted County.

AFOC began with a simple recognition: aging is not only a human services issue. It is connected to health care, caregiving, housing, nutrition, transportation, public spaces, emergency preparedness, civic participation, communication, and community design.

In other words, aging touches nearly every part of community life.

That is why age-friendly work is different from a single program or service. AFOC does not replace county services, city services, nonprofits, or health care systems. It helps those efforts see aging more clearly, connect more effectively, and respond more thoughtfully to the realities of longer lives.

We are part of a national and global age-friendly movement, but the work itself is local. It is grounded here in Olmsted County — in Rochester, in our smaller communities, and in the experiences of older adults, caregivers, families, volunteers, public staff, and community partners.

In this first action cycle, AFOC has worked less as a traditional program and more as a connector, translator, convener, and listening structure.

One of the challenges in aging work is that needs often show up in one system while the solutions sit in another. A caregiver may experience stress at home, but part of the answer may involve workplace flexibility, respite, transportation, or better navigation. An older resident may struggle with isolation, but the response may involve housing design, neighborhood connection, public spaces, volunteer opportunities, or access to information.

AFOC helps make those connections visible.

Let me give three examples.

The first is housing.

Housing is one of the clearest examples of why age-friendly work matters. We often talk about aging in place, and for good reason. Most people want to remain in familiar homes and familiar communities. But one of the lessons from AFOC's housing work is that aging in place should not be reduced to staying in the same house no matter what.

Sometimes the better question is not simply, "Can I stay where I am?" The better question may be, "Do I live in a place that still works for me?"

That was the point of the AFOC presentation to the Housing Alliance, "A House Is Not a Home." A house may be familiar, but it may no longer be safe, affordable, accessible, manageable, or socially connected. A home is the place that supports a person's life, independence, relationships, identity, and well-being.

AFOC's work with the Housing Coalition has helped bring that aging lens into broader housing conversations. It has raised questions about what older adults need from the housing market, how housing choices affect health and independence, and how transitions can be supported before they become crises.

That thinking has contributed to the development of HOME — Housing Outreach, Mentorship, and Empowerment — a senior housing transition pilot. HOME grows from a practical age-friendly insight: some older adults do not simply need a list of housing options. They need trusted support as they think through one of the most personal and consequential decisions of later life.

Housing transitions are not just real estate transactions. They are emotional, financial, relational, and practical decisions. They involve autonomy, family, affordability, safety, belonging, transportation, services, and the fear of making the wrong move.

This is exactly the kind of issue where AFOC adds value. It connects a broad community concern to a practical response. It helps move from observation to partnership, and from partnership to program development.

The second example is public space.

The park audit work may look like a small activity: older adults and community members walking through a public space, observing what works, what is difficult, and what could be improved.

But the larger value is that it brings lived experience into planning before decisions are final. It gives residents a constructive way to contribute. It gives public staff useful information. It builds relationships between older adults, community organizations, and city departments. And it reminds us that public spaces are part of health, mobility, independence, and belonging.

The Central Park audit is a good example. Central Park is a small, traditional downtown park near Charter House. It is familiar, historic, and well-used. But when older adults look at it carefully, they notice things that matter: how easy it is to enter, whether walking routes feel

safe, whether seating is usable, whether shade is available, whether the space supports rest and social connection, and whether it feels welcoming to people with different mobility needs.

That kind of feedback is practical. It is not abstract advocacy. It is not criticism for its own sake. It is a way of helping public spaces work better for the people who use them.

The third example is transportation and walkability.

Transportation is often discussed as a mobility issue. For older adults, it is also a health issue, a housing issue, a social connection issue, and an independence issue. If a person cannot safely get to a bus stop, clinic, grocery store, dining site, park, or community meeting, then the service may technically exist but not be practically available.

AFOC's walk audit and transportation-related work has helped connect the experience of older residents to streets, sidewalks, crossings, transit access, and public spaces. This does not replace the technical expertise of engineers, planners, or public works staff. It adds something different: the user experience of people who may move more slowly, use mobility aids, avoid ice, need benches, depend on safe crossings, or plan their day around whether a route feels manageable.

That is one of the strengths of age-friendly work. It does not say, "Design only for older adults." It says, "If we design for people across the life course, including those with changing mobility, vision, stamina, and confidence, we create places that work better for everyone."

Taken together, these examples show the larger value of AFOC.

Whether the topic is housing, parks, transportation, caregiving, communication, or planning, AFOC helps the community see the aging dimension of decisions already being made.

This is especially important for county government. The county is often where complex needs show up. It is where human services, public health, housing instability, caregiver strain, disability, transportation barriers, and economic vulnerability intersect.

But the county is also in a position to help shape upstream responses. The more we can identify issues earlier, connect partners sooner, and design systems with older adults in mind, the better the outcomes for residents and the more effective the use of public and community resources.

AFOC can be a useful community partner in that work. It can help surface information, organize resident input, align partners, and support practical age-friendly thinking across systems.

This is also why the idea of an age-friendly ecosystem matters.

An age-friendly ecosystem is not a single agency. It is the pattern of relationships, services, public decisions, community norms, and physical environments that shape whether people can age well, remain connected, contribute to community life, and get support when they need it.

AFOC's role is to strengthen that ecosystem by paying attention to the spaces between systems.

Who is not at the table? What are older adults experiencing that may not be visible in formal data? Where are public plans already underway that could be strengthened by an aging lens? Where can a small adjustment now prevent a larger problem later?

This first action cycle has shown several important things.

There is real community interest in this work. Older adults and partners want meaningful ways to contribute.

Public partners can benefit from this input. When feedback is organized, respectful, and practical, it becomes useful to staff and decision-makers.

The age-friendly framework helps connect issues that are too often treated separately. Housing, transportation, caregiving, parks, health, communication, and civic participation are not separate experiences in the life of an older adult. They are connected.

And AFOC is now at a point where continued work matters. The first cycle has demonstrated value. The next phase should build on it.

Looking forward, AFOC can continue to serve as a community listening and engagement structure around aging. It can bring an aging lens to public planning. It can support better coordination among partners. It can identify practical opportunities where modest improvements in design, communication, access, or coordination can make a meaningful difference. And it can help the county and community partners prepare for demographic change in a responsible and constructive way.

Aging is often discussed as a future issue, but it is already here. Older adults are already part of every community in Olmsted County. They are residents, taxpayers, volunteers, workers, caregivers, neighbors, family members, and civic contributors. Many are doing well. Some are struggling. Many are somewhere in between. A good age-friendly approach recognizes all of that.

The strength of AFOC is that it sits in that practical middle ground. It is positive but realistic. It is community-based but connected to public systems. It is grounded in resident experience but aligned with national and global age-friendly frameworks. It supports older adults while also supporting the institutions that serve them.

AFOC can help organize community voice, provide an aging lens, and support practical collaboration without placing all of that work on county departments alone.

Finally, this work fits naturally with FSR's mission and existing role in the community. AFOC benefits from being part of an organization that understands service delivery, community trust, and the everyday realities facing older adults and families.

So the conclusion I would leave you with is this.

Age-Friendly Olmsted County has had a successful first action cycle. It has shown that this work is needed, useful, and capable of producing value for residents, public staff, community partners, and decision-makers.

It has also shown that the right model for this work is a trusted community-based initiative, connected to public partners, informed by older adults, and aligned with the larger age-friendly ecosystem.

The work now is to build on what has started and continue helping Olmsted County become a place where longer lives are part of how we plan, serve, design, and strengthen community life.

The work before us is to connect the pieces. Not all at once. Not perfectly. But intentionally.

It means looking for the system behind the individual problem. It means treating older adults as co-designers, not only clients. It means building habits of collaboration across health care, housing, transportation, public space, social services, and civic life.

If we do that, we begin to move from reacting to aging toward designing for longevity.

And that is the invitation I want to leave with you: older adults are not outside the community. They are evidence of its success and a test of its design.

This goal is not heroic. It is deeply ordinary: that people can live safely, move freely, receive care, stay connected, and continue to matter in the places they call home.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this work.