CAFE: The Center for Age-Friendly Excellence
Advancing Livable Communities for all Generations

**Summary and Collated Notes
Focus Groups with Older Adult Residents (55+)
Standing Committee and Task Force
Regarding Unmet Needs of Atherton Older Adult Residents**

Dates of Zoom Focus Group Discussions: August 21 and 23, September 13, 2023

Total # In-Person Focus Group and 1:1 participants: 27 (17F / 10 M)

CAFE Staff Facilitator: Cynthia Nakayama

Video- and Audio-recorded using Altis.io (rough draft summary)

Report reviewed and finalized by Pauline DeLange Martinez, Senior Research Associate, CAFE

Background

The goal of this project is to identify the unmet needs of older adults and recommend programs that may be implemented to assist older people in the Town of Atherton, California. Older adults often are overlooked during city planning and government programming. We intend to both understand their needs, and to design programs that will enable them to flourish. This will change and evolve depending on their age. For example someone who is age 55 or 65 will have different needs from an older adult who is 85 and older. The Town of Atherton will need to consider these differences at some point. We already know that older adults have different needs and limitations regarding housing, transportation, and the use of outside spaces and buildings. We know they may have different or more need for social interaction and respect. We don't know how to best reach them, communicate with them, or promote their civic participation. We don't know what additional community support, information, classes, programs or health services the Town should provide, and are looking to produce insights that will guide our decision making. We're ultimately looking for ideas for how we might support our older adult residents through governmental programs or community projects.

Transportation & Mobility: Unmet Needs

Public Transportation

There is a clear need for a dedicated transportation service tailored to the unique needs of older adults, particularly for those who cannot drive and are not able to afford or access on-demand transportation using technology. Transportation is essential to access healthcare, shopping, social activities, and more.

Currently, Atherton residents rarely use mass transit. They may not be able to use technology such as Uber and have no family to drive them. People who live alone may be particularly isolated.

As people get older, there is a greater mistrust of strangers so there is a need for a trusted service they can call. There is Uber for kids (transportation to school) so parents are confident that it's a safe driver; we need something similar for older adults.

Finally, there's a need to communicate information regarding available accessible transportation for those who do not drive. Currently, there is no publicizing of transportation services although we probably have almost all the services we need.

Mobility, Walkability

Participants emphasized a need for sidewalks or protected walking lanes on the main thoroughfares in Atherton. The community has grown substantially, there are many bikers, and it does not feel safe.

Here are some participant quotes regarding traffic safety and walkability:

"It's a death trap. I'm waiting for accidents to happen there; the sides of the road are very uneven for walking, biking, or stroller. You're in the middle of the road."

"There are no sidewalks – this may be a need now."

"Many walk in the middle of the street; one older person uses her walker and walks 5 miles per day. Sometimes she walks close to the middle (of the road)."

"Although the walking paths in the park have been widened and people in wheelchairs can also use them, safe walking paths are needed in town."

Safer traffic conditions are necessary to ensure that older adults can comfortably navigate their town, whether it be on foot, by bicycle, or vehicle. Currently, participants noted many drivers go over the speed limit, do not use turn signals, or make complete stops. One participant shared, *"I notice that younger people have a tendency to drive faster which increases the risk for walkers and bikers."*

In addition, shrubbery and tree overgrowth obscures traffic signs in multiple locations. One participant shared, *"I have had many near misses either riding my bike, walking the dog, or even in my car. Need these to be trimmed."*

Some especially unsafe roads are Walsh Road, Fair Oaks, and Park Drive. On Park Drive, the construction and large trucks make it difficult to maneuver.

Finally, participants expressed concern about kids on e-bikes who ride through the stop signs. *"They don't understand the danger."*

Transportation & Mobility: Potential Solutions

Public Transportation

It was suggested that an assessment be made to understand how many residents in Atherton can no longer drive and/or have unmet transit needs. These residents could possibly be identified through A.D.A.P.T. (Atherton Disaster and Preparedness Team) program efforts.

There needs to be better promotion of existing transportation options, including those offered by nearby cities that Atherton residents can benefit from. For example, Avenidas Door-to-Door provides transportation services to Atherton, Menlo Park's shuttle offered through their Parks and Recreation, the Marguerite bus system, Redi-Wheels (SamTrans), and a Palo Alto transportation for seniors that takes them from point A to point B for $1.

To meet remaining needs, Atherson could offer our own dedicated senior-specific transportation service. Shared rides could be used where both people have the same destination. This could be offered in collaboration with nearby cities. For example, currently, Sam Trans is doing a pilot program – a specialty door-to-door service at a reasonable price with 3 cities (E. Palo Alto, City of Palo Alto, and one other). It would be great to see if this can be expanded to Atherton.

One final idea was to offer tech training for older adults to use Uber and Lyft.

Mobility, Walkability

The safety challenges around Fair Oaks are currently being addressed. Public Works has developed a project plan and funding has been approved. They will be adding school speed bumps, beautifying the intersection, and adding a walking trail at the corner.

Suggestions to improve mobility and walkability included: encouraging residents to report safety concerns to the Police Department; requiring trucks to make noises signifying their approach (similar to an ice cream truck or lunch truck); potentially adding sidewalks; and/or encouraging residents to walk in areas outside of Atherton, for example, organizing an intergenerational walk-a-thon event to get people out of the house and moving.

Social Participation: Unmet Needs

Participants expressed a significant need for more inclusive and regular community activities that cater to all age groups. Building a sense of community is important. As one participant said, *"We need a way to get to know neighbors so we/they can count on them if there's a problem or emergency."* Participants also noted that isolated older residents, especially those who cannot drive, may need extra community support.

Several contributors to social isolation were identified, including changing area dynamics, large distances between homes, empty homes ("ghost residents"), and working adults and families being too busy. Participants shared, *"It is tough to meet people here and develop close relationships or create a neighborhood due to the dynamic we have here,"* and, *"(We should) look at how to change the cycle, structure, and challenge of meeting other people in this town so that the upcoming cohort does not have the same experience as us."*

It was noted that Atherton does not have a Parks and Rec department, which helps to organize social events in other cities. Additionally, Atherton lacks an official downtown and a Senior Center. While there is a library, it was noted that many of their activities are geared towards children and youth.

Also, participants felt that community-wide events seem to be more catered towards families than older adults, such as Atherton's National Night Out.

Social Participation: Potential Solutions

Participants brought up a variety of ideas to increase social participation among older Atherton residents. First, social connections can be fostered through physical places. Participants suggested to find ways to make the Town Center area feel more like a 'downtown' by offering activities and events that get residents to gather there. (One participant noted that Mademoiselle Collette will be opening a shop in front of the library soon and their intent is to somewhat replicate a downtown.) Other ideas were to install an outdoor chessboard or Bocce ball courts.

A variety of programs and events could be offered and advertised to older residents. They could be held at the Town Center, new library, Heritage Room, Holbrook Palmer Park facilities, Old House, Atherton Arts Foundation for art classes, or a variety of outdoor spaces. For example, we could offer:
- Yoga, stretching classes, exercise classes, dancing
- Tae Kwon Do
- Bingo
- Bridge groups (mentioned several times) or lessons
- Mahjong
- Photography classes
- Book reviews/ Book clubs at Library
- Educational classes on environmental and potential emergency issues (wildfires, emergency preparedness). Classes could highlight ways to volunteer or support relief efforts.
- Speaker series (similar to Menlo Park) - topics include culture, travel, safety
    - Movies or organize a film festival and invite renowned directors /speakers
- Small local environmental program
- Music-related events or Concerts
- Monthly food truck event
- Small tours to a historical or other museums, or to hear speakers at places like Cantor Arts

Several participants mentioned interest in Computer classes/clinics. A weekly 'tech support' day could be offered where residents could bring their devices to receive help. This could be offered at the Old Heritage Council Room. An IT support person could be funded a few hours per week. This also provides the opportunity for a social network and new friendships to form since people will talk together about their technology challenges.

Other participants mentioned tech support resources are in-the-works or already exist. Friends of the Library is planning to launch an initiative to provide tech help for older people, using excess funds from the Atherton library. *AnewVista.org (*or *anvcs.org)* is another tech program offered through Sacred Heart (Eric Gee is the instructor). This program is open to older adults; you can participate online or in person. Perhaps these could be better advertised.

The Town could consider organizing intergenerational activities and events. One participant shared, *"The older I get, the more I enjoy being around younger people."* The library was noted as a great place to connect generations and Friends of the Library was noted as a resource to organize intergenerational programs.

One participant suggested cooking- and food-related events be organized. As residents age, they may have transitioned from cooking for a family, to only cooking for themselves. There is a need to

ensure meals are still nutritious and easily made. Eating is also a social activity – and older residents may enjoy cooking and eating together.

Another idea was to organize a local Farmer's Market, for example, at the Town Center or Holbrook Palmer Park.

One person suggested we get the Atherton Dames back together. They were a great group that sponsored Easter and Christmas events and contributed a lot to all ages of the community.

We could partner with Palo Alto Medical Foundation to organize educational classes or a resource fair. They do outreach to seniors and provide classes and may know of topics of interest. They may also be interested in sponsoring an event and have a table with their logo.

Menlo Park has a pancake breakfast through the Fire Department – it is a community event; we can do the same, with pancakes, Belgium waffles or crepes; since we have the same Fire department, we can ask them.

Approximately seven to eight existing Town committees and groups have within their charter some activity that would help in social connection. These groups could help brainstorm opportunities to increase engagement among older residents. Many of these committees already include older members. A separate senior-focused committee could also be formed. They could help plan and manage a calendar of events and programs geared towards older residents.

To get a better understanding of what types of social engagement opportunities are of greatest interest to older Atherton residents, a survey could be collected.

We could also learn from what other communities are doing. For example, we could sit in on one or more meetings to hear ideas from the Los Altos and Los Altos Hills senior committee. The two cities formed a combined senior committee where they each share ideas on what their city's/town's older adult residents are doing. We could also look at small towns that are similar to ours, such as Hillsborough, to see what they offer to engage older residents.

Existing social opportunities should be better promoted. For example, A.D.A.P.T. meetings were noted as a good way to get to know neighbors. Also, morning Tai Chi is offered at the Town Center. When advertising programs and events, promotion should be accessible for those with low vision or limited internet access. Ensure that programs and events are accessible and attractive to older residents, not just young families. As noted, currently, many community events feel as though they are more geared towards youth or young families. The Town could market events with photos and language that is more inclusive of older residents. To ensure events are accessible for all ages and abilities, there should be accessible parking, restrooms, shade, and seating.

Social opportunities from neighboring cities could also be better advertised to Atherton residents. For example, Menlo Park provides community programs and services that are used by Athertonians; their activities guide comes out quarterly and is mailed and available at the library.

Finally, for residents who are particularly isolated, it was noted that the A.D.A.P.T. team visits residents door-to-door. They check on people and describe services; this is a form of social connection. The Scouts/ Boy Scouts can also visit older residents or provide volunteer assistance to those who need it. (Lee Kenna was noted as a key contact.) Scouts get merit badges for serving seniors. Scouts may be able to walk door to door for A.D.A.P.T. to gather data on isolated adults and also learn who needs help. If someone arrives in a Scout uniform, a person is more likely to open their door. Finally, participants felt that High School students could be engaged in supporting isolated older residents.

Communication and Information: Unmet Needs

There is a need to improve and enhance communication methods to keep older Atherton residents informed about community events, resources, and services. Communications could highlight information about social activities, how to sign up for emergency alerts and local crime alerts (e.g., through San Mateo County or the Newsflash), key community contacts (e.g., who to contact if a tree goes down in your neighborhood, non-emergency policy number), healthcare resources, trusted and vetted resources for home maintenance and repairs / handymen, and resources related to technology and appliances. We could also communicate information about programs, activities, and resources from local communities such as Menlo Park and Redwood City.

It was recognized that communication channels exist, such as the Athertonian, Atherton Living, and the library. Additionally, the Town currently distributes quarterly newsletters to every resident mailbox, which is a valuable communication piece, though there is a desire to receive more regular communication about ongoing programs, activities, and events. Participants shared that there is no obvious focal point for communication; the town used to have bulletin boards in the neighborhoods that were helpful.

One participant described feeling overwhelmed with receiving too much communication via email and mail; they said it was challenging to prioritize and differentiate what's important and worth their while.

Another barrier to accessing information is limited technology skills among some older residents. Some may need education and training on how to use their electronic devices.

One participant mentioned that he was becoming increasingly visually impaired and that he knew others who were the same. He expressed the need for ways to communicate to the visually and hearing impaired.

Finally, a challenge related to communication is scams and fraud. It is important that residents know who/what they can trust for information. At the same time, we can offer education on how to prevent scams, e.g., offer training and a document (to be posted on/near your front door) on steps to take if for example, someone comes to your door or calls and you don't know what to do. Participants felt that most people won't remember what to do unless they have an actual list of steps to take; they can keep copies on/near their door, phone, etc.

Communication and Information: Potential Solutions

Participants brought up a variety of existing communication resources in Atherton that could be better promoted. For example, we could increase resident awareness that they can enroll in Atherton online - a weekly email blast from the City Manager's office that provides new and recurring topics, meetings, etc. (contact Anthony Suber with your email address to receive these).

Existing, local communication channels could incorporate a regular section geared towards older residents. For example, the Athertonian could highlight articles of interest to older residents and advertise trusted resources and services.

For residents with accessibility needs, we should communicate that the Town website and Atherton's Agenda Management System are both ADA compliant. The information on the website can be accessed using a screen reader and it will read everything to you. There are free versions available.

Another resource that should be better advertised is the *Simplicity* app. Residents need to set up an account to receive information in the categories you select, and specific to your area (Atherton,

San Mateo County). It is one-way communication so there is no noise. One participant learned of the focus group this way and is happy with the app. Simplicity goes out and scrapes information from the town's website; for example, a news flash about the burglaries that happened, or about an upcoming meeting.

Participants expressed the importance of communicating in a wide variety of ways and then let people know *how* we will continue to communicate. This can be achieved through traditional methods such as mailing, distributing flyers door to door (A.D.A.P.T. leaves handouts in residents' mailboxes), large-print newsletters, or phone-based notifications about town events and activities.

Communication can also be shared electronically, for example, through a shared electronic or downloadable calendar, local alert systems, and a website or online platform that lists activities and events in and around Atherton. Participants liked the idea of an accessible living calendar that people can just tap into at any time, and it is continually evolving; we would just need to publicize the calendar itself. However, it's important to keep in mind that some older adults are not comfortable navigating online apps and email. To bridge this need, we should offer technology classes that can help older adults stay connected, informed, and engaged with the community. Attendees could have questions answered such as, "How do we share events via our e-calendars," "How do I get this email to work," or, "How do I get rid of my landline?"

For any printed or digital communication geared towards older adults, an idea was to create/ use a logo designated specifically for 'senior support' so that older adult residents are more likely to pay attention to it as information they can use. This could address the challenge of 'too much information' and help older residents prioritize what is targeted specifically to them.

Another idea would be to communicate key information at an event, for example, a senior health fair, or a farmers' market in Atherton; a booth could offer information geared towards older residents. We could also organize a booth at the Menlo Park farmers market to communicate about activities in Atherton.

San Mateo County created a Community Information Handbook about resources that our older adult residents might find helpful. This could be distributed to Atherton residents, e.g., via mail, dropping them off door-to-door, or distributing them at local events.

Finally, it is important to conduct extra outreach to older adult residents that are isolated. (A.D.A.P.T. is working on this.) In addition to communicating information, we may need to offer transportation to programs and events. A surprisingly large number of Atherton residents are housebound, living alone, and their family members only visit once or twice a week. Meals on Wheels is a resource that can be tapped into for this information.

Housing: Unmet Needs

The Atherton Housing Element provide a comprehensive overview of unmet needs and potential solutions related to local housing. We should ensure the Housing Element includes a focus on older residents, including availability of affordable and accessible housing, and support for residents to maintain their homes.

Participants noted community resistance to building more dense housing options. However, offering a variety of housing options can cater to those with different incomes and accessibility needs. For example, a senior housing complex could include universal design elements and be located in

walking distance to healthcare, groceries, social activities, and services. ADUs were noted as a resource to allow family members or caregivers to live nearby older residents.

Some participants described meeting with Habitat for Humanity as they may be building housing in Atherton that is not older adult focused but 20% low income. Part of the conversation included discussing housing needs related to older adults.

Besides building new housing, there's a need to help residents maintain and renovate their existing homes as they age. Participants expressed a need to communicate information about trusted, vetted, and affordable contractors and handymen.

Housing: Potential Solutions

The Town could provide leadership at a planning and policy level by reviewing the current Housing Element to ensure the needs of older adults are addressed and included.

Older adult residents could benefit from information about reliable services for home repair, maintenance, and other practical needs. Resources should be broadly shared (via communication strategies listed in the previous section), for example, Ace Hardware has tech people you can hire to do things in your home, and the Scouts offers minor home assistance (Scout hotline).

Participants also suggested offering a conference or educational session about accessory dwelling units (ADUs), or an issue of the Athertonian dedicated to ADUs along with resources and information. ADU builders could provide education about various ADU designs. Potential use cases could be presented, for example, various family scenarios, or the option to move out of the large home into the ADU, then rent the larger home to gain an income.

Respect and Social Inclusion: Unmet Needs

Atherton has a high percentage of older adults, at 24%, and overall, participants feel that older residents are respected. As described in the 'social participation' section, participants were interested in more intergenerational and age-inclusive programs, activities, and events. Bridging generations builds a sense of community and provides benefits to all.

Participants expressed concerns about safety. In particular, scams and fraud are a huge and growing issue. Neglect (including self-neglect) and isolation are challenges that are often invisible as they occur inside the home. Again, participants noted a high volume of Meals on Wheels clients in Atherton. Also, participants expressed concerns about recent robberies and fear of walking alone – whether it be daytime or nighttime. Older residents with mobility challenges may be particularly vulnerable to physical abuse or assault.

Respect and Social Inclusion: Potential Solutions

(*see also Social Participation and Community Support and Health Services*)

Older adults would benefit from activities that offer intergenerational interaction and accessible transportation. Also, it's important to offer activities that are not age specific but rather age inclusive. Menlo Park's community events were highlighted as a model, e.g., 'Tour de Menlo.' Several other potential solutions are described under the 'Social Participation' and 'Transportation' sections.

For those who need mobility assistance or are isolated, there is a need to provide education on how to maintain safety in a variety of environments. Elder rights education necessary and important for

all of us; for information and to avoid potential situations of elder abuse. A final idea in this section was to use Newsflash to alert residents on the latest scam that has occurred nearby.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings: Unmet Needs

Holbrook Palmer Park was described as a 22-acre jewel. Anyone can go and walk, use the facilities, or attend dog training activities. However, some participants felt that public spaces like Holbrook Palmer Park need better maintenance and upgrades to facilitate community gatherings. Specifically, the bathrooms and water fountains were described as 'unusable,' and need maintenance. One participant also suggested increasing the landscaping around new venues such as the Town Center and Library. Finally, the lack of sidewalks in Atherton also suggests a potential need for infrastructure improvements for older adults, particularly those with mobility issues.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings: Potential Solutions

Repair and upgrade of Holbrook Palmer Park is currently underway and will make it more welcoming, clean, and accessible. Now that the community center is done, the strategic plan is to focus on the park over the next few years and will include playground equipment, new bathrooms, and wayfinding signs.

Civic Participation and Employment: Unmet Needs

Participants felt there are plenty of volunteer opportunities for older adults in Atherton including 7 – 8 committees that are predominantly made up of older residents. New committees are often initiated by older adults when they see a need.

Civic Participation and Employment: Potential Solutions

Existing volunteer opportunities could be better advertised to older residents. Also, residents should be encouraged to start their own age-related volunteer initiatives. They could receive mentorship/ camaraderie via an 'Initiative Lab' or 'Entrepreneurial Lab.' Participants shared, "*There are a lot of great ideas in this town and there is definitely an opportunity to develop an age-related initiative at the end of this project." "If you call it a lab, people will get the idea that it doesn't need to be perfect.*"

Community Support/ Health Services: Unmet Needs

Participants noted that the term 'older adult' covers a range of abilities, ages, and needs. Some older adults are higher functioning, and their needs may range from a desire for more social engagement and/or support to maintain their own home, while less mobile older adults may need greater support with things like transportation.

One participant said, *"There's an endless list of tasks older adults can feel overwhelmed by."* Maybe they need:
- Home evaluation for safety: e.g. grab bars in the shower or a security system in their home
- Caregiver services or help getting the Medicare services they're entitled to
- Landscaping services e.g. help cutting their lawn or getting their gutters cleaned
- Assistance to clean things up or throw things out
- Meals on Wheels services
- Resources on who can help them; they have the money available to hire someone
- Information on *where* they can move if they want to move

Community Support and Health Services: Potential Solutions

The 'hidden' seniors (homebound) might benefit from outreach; personal visits from people who can determine if they're eating well, having regular wellness checks, and getting the help they need with home repairs and home safety assessment, or maybe even medical care and assistance. We're a small town that can identify the very elderly and possibly arrange visits with these people, maybe on a recurring basis to ensure their safety and even provide some companionship on an ongoing basis. Maybe the town can help these residents, or maybe the residents of Atherton would be happy to contribute their time and money to assist their neighbors with some minor repairs.

The Fire Department was highlighted as a resource with 'lift assist' for adults who fall, if a caregiver needs emergency support, or if smoke alarms need replacing.

Emergency Preparedness: Unmet Needs

More resources and education on emergency preparedness could enhance the safety, security, and resilience of older adults during emergencies. There's a need for more education on what to do in an emergency, particularly for those who do not have family close by to support them. Where do they go for help with the internet, or for power, if their phone is dead? One participant said, *"If there is an emergency, I need to know what to do if I'm here alone, or if my husband's traveling."* Public safety is top priority in this town. However, with extreme climate events and electricity power outages, we need to ensure there's a system of support. Some older residents may be reliant on power for life sustaining equipment. Others are reliant on electricity for communication.

Potential Solutions: Emergency Preparedness

A.D.A.P.T. offers many critical services related to emergency preparedness and response, but many are not aware of what they offer. One project could be to better advertise their services and also recruit more volunteers to participate. A.D.A.P.T. is recruiting more volunteers to help to knock on doors in neighborhoods. At some point would be nice to be able to ask, as was done in the past, "Do you know how to turn off your gas? Let me show you."

A.D.A.P.T. is currently launching a new initiative to identify isolated seniors. A database is being developed to include their names, how to contact them, what to do, and what steps to be followed. They are doing an outreach into neighborhoods and having parties in each of the areas. This way people meet each other, and also sign up at tables; if you are physically able to help others, you can sign up. You can also sign up if you are an older person and will need help in an emergency - you can request a home check. These will be held at assembly points in each neighborhood and information will be shared with the Area Coordinator in charge.

We could periodically offer classes on how to prepare for electrical outages, including the cost and types of generators, or option to run in a natural gas line. The Town Center is a key resource in Town during power outages, as they have a generator. Another resource for emergency preparedness is the Police Department non-emergency line.