

## Editorials

and high toilet seats in the bathroom, or through changes in medications prescribed, in order to reduce adverse drug effects.

As can be seen, the risk factors for falling are complex. At the same time, falls may themselves be a signal for other troubling conditions and, moreover, can be exacerbated by circumstances all too common in later life, like transitions in where one lives and the piling on of more prescribers when one manifests additional health problems. Falls and falling are anything but a static issue.

Our VGEC is adapting the seminal work of Mary Tinetti and colleagues, who demonstrated effective intervention in risk for falling. We have embraced a team-building approach in our planning meetings, which are frequent and lengthy but which have produced significant inter-professional results. Our training curriculum features not only rationale and mechanics of multi-disciplinary risk assessments but also inter-professional interventions that work. The team approach values integrated clinical care, the division of labor around common goals, shared responsibility, open communication, re-evaluations, and an outcomes orientation. We believe that the complexity of the problem of falls requires the different skills of an inter-professional team. We are launching the first of our evidence-based training programs in May, 24 content hours, with both face-to-face sessions and learner-directed use of a menu of resources that we have identified.

### From the **Interim Commissioner, Virginia Department for the Aging**

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and  
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#### ***Legislative Success + Emerging Blueprint = Great Potential for Livable Communities***

As the dust settles and time allows for a review of the details, Virginians across the Commonwealth again benefited from another successful and productive session of the Virginia General Assembly. Several bills passed by the legislature will complement a community planning effort that is postured to assist all who share a commitment for making our neighborhoods more welcoming to older Virginians and Virginians with disabilities.

Secretary of Health and Human Resources Dr. Bill Hazel is leading the ongoing statewide community planning initiative, overseeing an 18-member citizen advisory group to help develop ***Virginia's Blueprint for Livable Communities*** to be presented as an initial report to the General Assembly's money committees in June 2011. The Commonwealth's human services agencies are teaming up with transportation and housing agencies, private and non-profit service providers, local and regional governments and councils, academics, and advocates from the disability and aging communities to figure out how to "incentivize" change in

the direction of more livable communities for Virginians of all ages and abilities. The policies being developed as part of the *Blueprint* aim to make Virginia a national leader in preparing for the growing needs of an aging ***Baby Boomer*** population.

The June report will highlight regional best practices in livable communities planning already underway in Virginia; describe ongoing state initiatives and resources in transportation, housing, and long-term services, and in-home supports that can contribute to a more livable Virginia; it will propose recommendations for the Secretary to take up as the state delves deeper into the livable communities initiative.

One key livable communities measure passed during the recent General Assembly Session and awaiting Governor McDonnell's signature is the ***Livable Homes Tax Credit*** (HB 1950- Villanueva) which enables Virginians to apply for a tax break for building or remodeling their home to make it "visitabile." In an effort to enrich Virginia's supply of accessible homes and increase awareness of the social barriers to individuals with mobility challenges, the General Assembly approved the expansion of the Livable Homes Tax Credit eligibility from \$2,000 to \$5,000 per person, and also extended eligibility to homebuilders when previously only homebuyers had been eligible.

In another bill, (HJ 648- Plum), lawmakers also directed state agencies to study the need for changes to the Uniform Statewide Building Code that would compel attention

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toward providing accessible routes to public and private buildings and encourage universal design features in dwelling units. Both of these bills were recommendations from Governor McDonnell's Housing Study that highlighted these and other improvements in the state's housing programs.

As part of the livable communities initiative, our Commonwealth is fully engaged in an effort to promote livable communities by encouraging and educating community leaders to assess the ease with which any person, especially those experiencing significant financial or mobility barriers, can locate and remain in adequate housing, navigate the community, and receive necessary supports that will enable achieving the greatest independence while living in the community environment. The initiative is person-centered in its approach, taking the concept of universal design for housing and expanding it to macro levels, from neighborhood to locality, region, or state.

For example, improving the "walkability" of a neighborhood by promoting policies favoring mixed-use, mixed-income development, safe sidewalks and streets, and resisting suburban sprawl can contribute to the improved health of all Virginians, while reducing demands on scarce public dollars for transportation assistance by introducing walking as a viable option in some areas. Even without making any changes to its infrastructure or design, a community can improve livability by convening service providers and encouraging coordination to reduce service overlap and identify places to change or expand

coverage, so that more Virginians can be served with conservative use of funds.

In Culpeper, the Rappahannock–Rapidan Community Services Board and Area Agency on Aging has convened more than 100 organizations from the surrounding five-county region in the *Aging Together Partnership*. With a 13-member core leadership team and leadership teams in each of the five counties, the Partnership has made extensive headway in creating new programs and expanding services to older adults and people with disabilities living in this rural area, simply by identifying opportunities for coordination among public, private, and non-profit service providers. Initiatives that have evolved due to this special long-term partnership include county-based volunteer transportation networks, a medication prescription program for low-income persons, and regional supports for individuals with dementia and their caregivers, among many others.

As another example of livable communities planning, Fairfax County has established a "*50+ Action Plan*" through the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors' Committee on Aging. The 2009 written report offers guiding principles for development and planning to improve community preparedness for the coming Age Wave. More specifically, the plan lays out a framework for assessing housing and transportation livability, community safety, engagement, diversity, caregiver support, health, and service capacity, and establishes a "scorecard" to track progress in meeting community livability goals.

Abundant guides and resources are available which lay out the initial planning process so that a group of any size, background, and experience level can take up the cause and make meaningful gains in the livability of their community. One source of particular noteworthiness is the *Transportation and Housing Alliance Toolkit*, a "how-to" guide for an organized livable communities planning initiative developed and available through the *Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission* in Charlottesville ([www.tjfdc.org](http://www.tjfdc.org)). Localities and regions across the Commonwealth have already instituted livable communities preparedness as part of their comprehensive plan development, and others have taken up the cause at a grassroots level by advocating for awareness of desirable features, such as accessible bus stops, better local enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and easier access to parks and public recreational spaces.

It is exciting to see the convergence of efforts from both the Executive and Legislative branches of state government with initiatives at the most important local level that result in having communities improve their capacity to meet the needs of "Vintage Virginians" and Virginians with disabilities. The communities that share this vision and successfully act will assuredly be the most healthy and successful communities of the future.

**Jane Stephan, VCoA's long-time Assistant Director of Education, has retired. We wish her the best.**