



Stairmasters and Stair Lifts

A Case Study Report of Older Adults in Howard
County, Maryland

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“STAIRMASTERS AND STAIRLIFTS”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Opting for Independence (OFI) case study project was done to help residents in Howard County, Maryland, better understand the wishes and desires of older residents seeking to remain in their homes. Through funding from the Administration on Aging and in partnership with the Howard County Office on Aging, OFI also provides direct services to older adults in Howard County.

In this case study project, trained community volunteer interviewers conducted 30 in home interviews with older adults (over age 65) living independently in the County who were not receiving OFI care coordination services.

The objectives were to:

- Learn what these individuals were thinking about their aging in place prospects and their personal strategies for aging in place.
- Engage a wider segment of the community on issues impacting older adults by utilizing volunteer interviewers and community organizations in the process.

In all, 48 people were represented - 18 couples and 12 single individuals. The interviewees also represented a broad cross section of the older adults in the study area, with 19 Caucasians, 9 African Americans, and two Asian Americans. For household income, 43% were below household income of \$60,000, the average income in the zip codes in which they resided.

I. STUDY FINDINGS

The OFI interviews provide a snapshot into the lives of relatively healthy older adults actively engaged in family and community life. Reflecting Howard County’s status the country’s third wealthiest county, most were financially secure. Most practiced healthy life styles, exercising regularly. They felt in control and that their lives would remain stable in the near term.

“STAIRMASTERS” symbolize these positive aspects of aging in place, representing personal action to remain financially secure, healthy and engaged with a strong informal support network of family, friends, and faith and civic organizations.

However, despite these positive factors, uncertainty about the future was a recurring theme. Nearly all mentioned the inevitability of declining health and mobility. There were uncertainties of



continued financial stability and obtaining affordable health care. Especially noted were reduced health benefits and access to physicians through Medicare as well as reduced Social Security and Federal Retiree Benefits. Also some were concerned about providing financial support to adult children and their families.

Decline of their informal support network, especially the death of a spouse, was a major concern. Most realized help from some formal service would be needed, and that exploring other housing options (e.g, moving from the home) might be necessary.

“STAIRLIFTS” refers to help from the informal and formal support networks that will be required to age in place as health and mobility inevitably decline.

II. THE FOUR PILLARS OF AGING IN PLACE

The interviews reflect that the ability to successful “Aging in Place” can be compared to four pillars holding up a building: financial stability, health stability, a strong informal support network, and knowledge/use of a formal service network.

These four pillars are common to all older adults but differ in each unique situation –dependent on the underlying strength of each pillar.

The first three pillars for most of the OFI interviewees were strong. The strength of the fourth pillar- the formal service network - was more unknown or uncertain, possibly because most interviewees had not experienced chronic health or financial problems. Many felt that they would look to the Howard County Office on Aging for entry into the formal services network when health or mobility declined.

Three essential Aging in Place supports were frequently mentioned:

- **TRANSPORTATION.** Adequate transportation when no longer able to drive.
- **ACCESSABILITY:** Ability to navigate multi level homes as mobility declines.
- **TRUSTWORTHY SERVICES:** Access to reliable and affordable “vetted” home modification, medical and non -medical services.

III. INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As “Stairmasters”, all felt it was their responsibility to have control in preparing for their “Aging in Place” future.



While most had not researched the range of available services and options, many were thinking about how to “connect the dots” which would enable them to stay in their homes. Insights and recommendations included:

- **Expand community education and outreach on Aging in Place strategies that are easy to understand and implement.**
- **Increase understanding of resources available to help older adults and their families navigate the formal support network when needed.**
- **Promote access to health, wellness and fitness programs with an increased emphasis on physical activity.**
- **Conduct community outreach activities in neighborhoods with a high percentage of older household members.**
- **Develop an Aging in Place Guide or Checklist.**
- **Develop a Seniors Consumer Clearinghouse of reliable home service providers.**
- **Offer proactive Aging in Place Assessments for those most at risk.**
- **Promote existing financial incentives that exist for home modifications; review the potential for tax credits, grants and low cost loans for Aging in Place home modifications.**
- **Develop a Senior Transportation Plan, incorporating public and private resources, and including increased access through subsidies for lower income older adults.**
- **Broaden “Aging in Place” program considerations to reflect the breadth of public and private health and community resources and increase understanding how to use them.**

The full report is available on The Coordinating Center’s web site at:
http://www.coordinatingcenter.org/prog_publications.html.

A second case study project will be done in 2012, and consist of interviews of older Howard County adults of limited income. For more information, contact Phyllis Madachy, OFI Project Director at pmadachy@coordinatingcenter.org or Rusty Toler, Case Study Project Manager at rusty.toler@gmail.com.