

THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN & OLDER ADULTS:

OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES FOR LOCAL LEADERS



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Funkhouser & Associates is a consulting firm founded by Mark Funkhouser, a longtime public servant and a former publisher of Governing magazine. As mayor of Kansas City during the Great Recession, Mark has direct experience with managing government through a fiscal crisis. Funkhouser & Associates was founded on the idea that we can build a better government by building trusted relationships with each other and government partners.



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AARP is the United States' largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 or older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families, with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. The AARP Livable Communities initiative's programs include the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities and the annual AARP Community Challenge "quick-action" grant program.

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INTRODUCTION

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) was signed into law in March 2021 and represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance communities. ARPA provides local governments with the ability to create economic resilience by investing resources to address persistent livability challenges, and creating new and innovative solutions to make communities better for residents of all ages.

As local leaders begin to operationalize ARPA, it is critical that all community members help shape and benefit from this unprecedented moment—and that advancements in livability and economic resilience are felt by everyone.

Livability principles can be a key factor as local leaders consider their many options for putting this funding to work in their communities. Livable communities are inclusive and resilient. They're designed to serve the needs of all people, regardless of income, age, race, or ability.

The funding streams made available through ARPA present an opportunity to make catalytic investments. To capitalize on the moment, leaders must root their decision-making in strong public engagement processes, and ensure that people of all ages, abilities, races and incomes are actively involved. As local leaders weigh opportunities and make forward-looking investments, AARP's resources, tools, research, intellectual capital, and relationships can help empower communities to best utilize their funding to create inclusive, livable places for all.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE AND WORK WITH AARP

COVID-19 had a devastating impact on communities, and older Americans are among the groups most affected by the health and economic effects of the pandemic. The experience of the last 17 months has also shown the importance of engagement as local leaders take action. ARPA funds represent an incredible opportunity to address critical needs, tackle long-standing challenges and engage residents.



This resource is intended to help local leaders identify opportunities within ARPA to help improve livability in their communities. After reading this document, the hope is that local elected officials and staff will seek to: Gain a better understanding of the experience of older adults in their community throughout the pandemic by engaging older residents.



Use the information and guidance presented to help inform community leaders' thinking and planning as communities prioritize investments made with ARPA funding.

AARP is a nationwide organization with a national headquarters in Washington, D.C. and hundreds more staff and 60,000 volunteers based in AARP State Offices in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. These dedicated staff and volunteers are working in partnership with local leaders and organizations in hundreds of communities, providing support in outreach, engagement, and visibility; connecting organizations and individuals to a broader AARP network; granting technical assistance and resources; and sharing research and information.

With this reach, expertise and on the ground presence, AARP can be a powerful partner as local governments seek to meet the challenge of making the very best use of the ARPA dollars on behalf of their constituents.

Forward-looking leaders recognize that ARPA can be a way to make their communities better places for all. That idea — creating livable communities that serve people of all ages and abilities — is the driving ethos behind AARP's Livable Communities efforts. Creating a more livable community is key to creating a thriving community – and can serve to draw new residents and taxpayers.

AARP can help leaders understand how to approach critical investments to ensure that they deliver benefits for people of all ages, abilities, races and incomes, and allow localities to recover and thrive. As one local leader noted, “We as a city are not in a role of advocacy, but if organizations like AARP are advocating for things that are in lockstep with things local government is trying to do, that is really helpful.” AARP has multiple resources and tools that can be leveraged to support local officials and create communities for all ages.

Local Outreach, Engagement, and Visibility:

With 38 million members and tens of thousands of volunteers, AARP State Offices in all 50 states, D.C. Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands can help local officials reach and engage this critical group of residents. AARP also has extensive communication channels and can help raise visibility of promising work locally, statewide and nationally.

Connection to a Network:

The AARP Network of-Age Friendly States and Communities provides a framework and resources to help communities become livable for people of all ages. Currently, the network includes eight states, and nearly 600 towns, cities or counties, and one U.S. territory.

Technical Assistance and Resources:

AARP develops and produces resources designed to support local leaders, including free guides, publications, best practices and more. AARP’s Community Challenge grant program has also awarded \$9.3 million to 804 quick-action projects.

Research and Data:

AARP is able to provide information and insights on the needs and wants of older adults and share how specific policies affect the lives of older residents.

Local leaders can consider AARP an engagement partner by:

- Reaching out to the AARP State Office. Leaders can find contact information at www.states.aarp.org or email livable@AARP.org to be connected.
- Using tools and resources (including many referenced in this publication) to help advance livability work by visiting www.AARP.org/Livable.
- Learning more about livability and age-friendly efforts underway across the country by visiting www.livablemap.aarp.org.
- Sharing pressing challenges and requests for helpful resources by emailing AARP at livable@aarp.org.



UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS:

U.S. Treasury Guidance on the American Rescue Plan

The American Rescue Plan Act is a \$1.9 trillion law that includes \$350 billion in direct, flexible aid to states, counties, cities and tribal governments with populations over 50,000 and available via the State and Local Coronavirus Fiscal Recovery Fund. On May 10, the Treasury Department released its initial guidance, called the interim final rule, which included some 151 pages of background, reasoning, spending categories, and guidelines for accounting. Eligible local governments that are classified as non-entitlement units (typically under 50,000) should expect to receive this funding through their applicable state government.

These funds are “intended to provide support to state, local, and Tribal governments responding to the impact of COVID-19 and in their efforts to contain COVID-19 on their communities, residents, and businesses.” There is flexibility within five main categories of eligible spending are:

- Supporting public health expenditures
- Addressing negative economic impacts
- Replacing revenue lost because of the pandemic
- Providing premium pay for essential workers
- Investing in infrastructure including water, sewer, and broadband

The funds must be obligated by December 31, 2024 and spent with all projects completed by December 31, 2026.

Addressing Community Inequity

The federal ARPA guidance repeatedly encourages officials to put funds toward addressing inequities in their communities. Low-income populations, older adults, and people of color have suffered disproportionately high rates of infection and death during the COVID-19 pandemic. The US Department of Treasury’s mindset on community inequity is clearly highlighted on page 41 of the rule: “The Fiscal Recovery Funds provide resources to not only respond to the immediate harms of the pandemic

but also to mitigate its longer-term impact in compounding the systemic public health and economic challenges of disproportionately impacted populations. The Treasury encourages recipients to consider funding uses that foster a strong, inclusive, and equitable recovery, especially uses with long-term benefits for health and economic outcomes.”

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) notes in a recent case study that the pandemic revealed how disadvantaged neighborhoods and selected demographics faced unique challenges. From fees and fines to zoning regulations, economic-development incentives, and policing strategies, “an increasing number of local officials are re-evaluating the equity impacts of their operations and investments — and often within programs historically managed by technical experts.”

The rule also makes it easier to spend money on behalf of disproportionately affected populations – including older adults – in two key ways. It allows for greater spending flexibility in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The rule cites “the role of pre-existing social vulnerabilities in driving [the] disparate outcomes” seen during the pandemic and says that investment in programs and services in disadvantaged communities “will be presumed to be responding to the public health emergency.” It specifically identifies programs not strictly tied to immediate pandemic response, such as those focused on affordable housing, early childhood education, and remediation of lead paint, as applicable uses of fiscal recovery funds in these communities.

In addition, governments that invest in this broader category of programs and services within a Qualified Census Tract will not have to provide additional documentation that the investment is in response to the pandemic. This helps streamline use of funds for the above-mentioned program types so that, as the Treasury rule states, it “may speed implementation and decrease administrative burden, while identifying areas of need.”

The timeline for funding delivery also allows for thoughtful planning of how best to use ARPA to create inclusive and livable communities. Half of governments’ ARPA recovery funds were delivered in the spring and summer of 2021, while the second half will be delivered approximately 12 months after the first tranche. With wide latitude in which to spend the money and a year separating their deposits, governments can direct their first round of funding toward more immediate needs, and then plan for longer-term investments. ARPA “provides a substantial infusion of resources to meet pandemic response needs and rebuild a stronger, more equitable economy as the country recovers,” the rule states.

The National League of Cities (NLC) advises that municipalities consider several principles in determining how to use their fiscal recovery funds. Two key points they highlight are prioritizing funding to ensure fiscal stability, which includes returning residents to work, and collecting input from key municipal staff and stakeholders. The NLC and GFOA are also encouraging local officials to strategically use their fiscal recovery funds for gaps and priorities not eligible for other Federal and state assistance programs created or enhanced as a result of other ARPA funding.

From small towns to large cities, local leaders recognize that this funding isn't just an opportunity to respond to the pandemic — it's a chance to transform their communities in diverse ways reflecting the unique needs and opportunities of each locality.

As San Jose, California, Mayor Sam Liccardo noted, his city has an opportunity to “expand transportation infrastructure, digitally connect families and create much needed living-wage employment opportunities.” In Phoenix, Arizona, Mayor Kate Gallego and the city council, as part of a far-reaching plan, approved setting aside a significant portion of their city's ARPA funding for vulnerable populations to help with utilities, rent, and mortgage payments. And like many small rural towns, Sesser, Illinois, is hoping to use its funding to make much-needed and overdue improvements to its sewer system.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Older Adults, and Livable Communities

Older Americans are among the groups most affected by the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. People ages 50 and older represent roughly 95 percent of deaths from COVID-19, with long-term care facilities in particular seeing extremely heightened cases of mortality. As of the date of this report, more than 184,000 residents and staff of these facilities have succumbed to COVID-19, or related complications.

While coronavirus containment actions, including confinement measures, physical distancing, and restrictions on movement and social gatherings, helped prevent deaths, they also had repercussions—particularly for older adults. For residents without access to nearby parks, the pandemic underscored how uneven access to green space poses health risks that can affect longevity and mental health. Social distancing requirements exacerbated the already-prevalent risk for social isolation and loneliness often faced by older adults. Even before the pandemic, reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that many older adults were already more socially isolated and experiencing greater loneliness than other population groups.

Older workers also suffered higher rates of unemployment due to COVID-19. During the first six months of the pandemic, workers aged 55 and older were 17 percent more likely to lose their jobs than employees just a few years younger. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 350,000 older adults aged 55 to 64, and 122,000 aged 65-plus, who wanted to work, were unemployed for 27 weeks or longer in 2020. These adults are also being rehired more slowly than their younger counterparts.

This translates into a staggering toll on the health and retirement security of older adults.

Additionally, new programs implemented in response to the pandemic have sometimes fallen short when it comes to the needs of older adults. Vaccine distribution is a prime example: although older adults were among the initial demographic groups prioritized for early vaccine eligibility, many struggled with the steps involved in actually securing the vaccine because of requirements to register digitally, lack of transportation to get to vaccine sites, or general lack of information on how and where to get vaccinated. Some localities swiftly pivoted in response with initiatives like pop-up vaccine clinics, volunteers to sign people up online and drive them to appointments, and engaging faith leaders and churches in vaccine outreach. This experience showed how engagement and outreach are critical first steps when designing and implementing new policy.

Many local leaders recognize the benefits of a more targeted approach to community support that prioritizes the needs of older adults. Given the longer timeline for spending ARPA recovery funds, leaders are implementing creative solutions to incorporate community feedback on how their residents would like to see ARPA money spent. The pandemic reinforced the importance of using multiple platforms—including online and paper surveys, telephone hotlines, email, and both in-person and virtual community meetings – and in multiple languages— to ensure that the whole range of community voices is heard.

Local leaders also face other challenges as they plan their ARPA-related spending, including their capacity to administer the funds. Localities are required to submit regular reports on their spending and to account for and track where every dollar goes. Even for cities and counties accustomed to dealing with federal funds, this can be daunting. For smaller jurisdictions that have limited staff, this can be crippling. Ensuring that adequate systems and personnel are in place to manage both the spending and implementation of any new federally funded project is a very real concern for many local finance officials—especially after a downturn that saw more than one million local-government jobs disappear. Local nonprofits and other community partners can play a critical role in filling this capacity gap. According to Stockton, California, City Manager Harry Black, “We know what to do and how to do it, it’s just finding the right local partners who can handle it.”

AARP Resources:



- Local leaders and residents can use the free AARP publication, [Engaging the Community to Create Community](#) for ideas on how to engage the public.
- AARP supports engagement efforts for communities through [AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities](#) by assisting with outreach to older residents and providing resources and survey tools for communities.
- Communities that have enrolled in the [AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities](#) conduct [community assessments](#) that gather input from residents on their priorities, needs and wants as they seek to become more livable for all ages. Local leaders can reference these assessments to understand priorities of older residents.
- [AARP's Community Challenge](#) grant program has funded grants nationwide that have focused on community engagement during the pandemic. For example, a member of the AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities, the City of Chattanooga, Tennessee's, Department of Youth and Family Development received funding to develop a "Senior Technology Support Team" of volunteers to help older adults with technology needs during the pandemic. This effort trained and empowered volunteers so that they could reach older adults and extend the reach of the city's efforts.

Leveraging ARPA Funds to Create and Enhance Livable Communities

A livable community is one that is safe and secure. It offers choices in where to live and how to get around. And it equitably serves residents of all ages, ability levels, incomes, races, ethnicities, and other backgrounds.

LIVABLE COMMUNITIES:



ENHANCE PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE



ALLOW RESIDENTS TO REMAIN IN THEIR HOMES AND COMMUNITIES AS THEY AGE



PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESIDENTS OF ALL AGES, ABILITY LEVELS, AND BACKGROUNDS TO ENGAGE FULLY IN CIVIC, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL LIFE

TRANSIT, MOBILITY AND OPEN SPACES

Older adults will outlive their ability to drive on average by 7-10 years, and many rely on transportation alternatives – such as public transit – to live independently. ARPA's transit funding is therefore a critical resource for communities that have seen declines in ridership and fare revenue during the pandemic. Many transit agencies, particularly those in large cities which rely heavily on passenger fares to pay for operating costs, are at a funding crossroads. Public health fears around public transportation—whether founded or not — plus more people working from home (and therefore not commuting), could keep ridership and revenues low for years. If rider demand and revenue remain low, transit agencies may be forced to reduce service levels for the foreseeable future. That could lead to a transit “death spiral,” in which fewer routes and more limited hours provide less incentive for people to use public transit – an experience borne out by academic studies. Early in the pandemic, numerous major transit systems warned that their systems would collapse without an infusion of federal funds.

These trends, and the threat of further service cutbacks, have a direct impact on the many workers who rely on public transit to work, as well as those who depend on transit for access to medical care and services—many of whom are older adults and people with disabilities. The pandemic highlighted the connection between transit and essential workers, proving public transportation to be an essential public service. For many older adults on fixed incomes, public transit remained the only affordable option to get them to the grocery store or a doctor's appointments.

As policymakers plan their ARPA spending, expanding and improving affordable and accessible public transportation programs is a critical area of opportunity. Promoting public

ARPA Transportation Funding

\$26 billion to urban transit systems

\$25 million in Competitive Planning Grants

\$50 million for Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities program funding

\$317 million to states and possessions for rural transit

\$1.7 billion for capital investment grants (rail and bus)

transit resilience can include requiring systems to implement and enhance safety regulations, along with efforts to actively promote the broad use of public transportation. This can be done by encouraging transit authorities to reduce or eliminate fares for vulnerable populations, such as low-income riders and people with disabilities.

Free transit is already a practice in some small urban areas, and mid-sized Kansas City, Missouri, has embraced the concept to a large degree. Policymakers can also encourage ridesharing and other low-cost programs to help meet older adults' transportation needs, as West Sacramento, California, is doing with its dial-a-ride service.

It is also critical that residents have safe and accessible pedestrian and bicycle access to transit routes. As local leaders make improvements to transit investments, street and sidewalk infrastructure that is safe for users of all ages and abilities can also be a consideration.

Localities in the pandemic also took innovative approaches to provide residents much-needed access to open space and outdoor recreation. Among the most popular were Slow Streets pilot programs, which are another potential outlet for ARPA transportation spending. Slow Streets programs restricted portions of mainly residential streets to local

AARP Resources:



- AARP State Offices have worked with organizations and local governments nationwide and advocated to advance the adoption of policy changes that make streets, sidewalks and trails safer for pedestrians, including Complete Streets and Vision Zero policies.
- AARP teams have also advocated and engaged older adults in discussions as communities have weighed ballot measures to expand access to transportation. This includes successful efforts in Los Angeles, California (Measure M); Phoenix, Arizona (Prop 104) and Marion County, Indiana (Marion County Transit Plan) and more places.
- AARP Community Challenge Grants have also funded engagement and direct improvements in sidewalks, roadways and transportation infrastructure in hundreds of communities. For example, in Ada County, Idaho the community received a 2021 grant from AARP to help fund a workplace mobility pilot program to assist small businesses in making facility or mobility enhancements that increase transportation options for employees.
- Through the Future of Transportation initiative AARP's Public Policy Institute has also profiled several critical policy advancements and improvements that communities can consider.
- Residents and organizations can also use the free AARP tool, the AARP Walk Audit Guide for information and guidance on how to identify and address unsafe streets and sidewalks.

and emergency traffic and lowered speed limits as a way to offer more space and enhanced safety for those traveling by bike or on foot. In some places, streets were closed to traffic entirely. Not only did they create new walking routes and connect residential neighborhoods with retail areas, but Slow Streets became a safe option for residents to enjoy the outdoors in their own communities, while also practicing social distancing and other COVID safety protocols.

Access to public spaces is critical for older adults, particularly given their disproportionately low use of parks. One study of the 20 largest cities noted that while older adults represent 20 percent of the population living around parks, they account for only 4 percent of park users. Temporary measures enacted during the pandemic, such as Open Streets, were found incredibly effective in reducing this disparity. And ARPA provides a mechanism to make those temporary measures permanent, such as increased access to public spaces (including features such as outdoor dining), and improvements to the accessibility of public spaces for all ages and abilities. Many communities are already doing so. In fact, San Francisco now views Slow Streets as “critical infrastructure” that attract a diverse set of neighborhood users, including children, older adults, people with disabilities, and people of color. “In order to support further reopening of the economy,” the [city’s program page](#) states, “we need to make San Francisco more welcoming and accessible for people who want to travel on foot, bicycle, wheelchair, scooter, skateboard or other forms of micromobility.”

Ensuring that older adults have access to public spaces and downtown corridors can also be a critical tool for local leaders to generate economic activity. For example, according to AARP’s “[Longevity Economy Outlook](#)”, the 50-plus population contributed \$8.3 trillion in economic activity to the U.S. economy in 2018. Looking forward, this is expected to more than triple to \$26.8 trillion by 2050.

AARP Resources:

- AARP State Offices have worked to increase equitable access to public spaces and Main Streets and have worked with local officials to help ensure older adults are included in engagement and planning discussions.
- AARP [Community Challenge Grants](#) have funded hundreds of grants that make improvements in public spaces, including those with an emphasis on pandemic recovery in 2021. For example, in Honolulu, Hawaii, a grant supports pandemic recovery by installing parklets to provide additional outdoor space for people to safely gather and serve as traffic calming interventions.
- Members of the AARP [Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities](#) are working to improve access to public spaces, many of whom have included items in local budgets to add exercise equipment for older adults and make improvements to parks so they are more accessible with paved sidewalks, trails and more.
- Local leaders can use the free AARP tools, [Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages](#) and [The AARP Pop Up Placemaking Toolkit](#) for inspiration and resources.



CASE STUDY

AARP can help with:

- Engagement
- Resources
- Needs assessment

Open, Livable Spaces

"Parks are such a critical part of the city fabric," said Tori Kjer, executive director of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust. While this has always been true, the pandemic prompted people to take greater advantage of parks and other open spaces in their communities. Now, as local leaders prioritize investments in new public spaces and improving or reimagining existing parks, they must keep the needs of all residents in mind.

Community engagement is key to creating livable spaces for people of all ages. For example, the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, using input from the community, designed Golden Age Park as an intergenerational facility. It incorporates age-appropriate, functional designs for senior residents as well as children-friendly play areas. Kjer said the AARP Community Challenge grant was critical to the project's success, helping to fund many of the park's amenities.

The grant program is part of AARP's nationwide Livable Communities initiative, which supports efforts to make cities, towns, neighborhoods, and rural areas great places to live for people of all ages. Just over half (54 percent) of its funding has gone to improving access to parks and open spaces.

Since 2017, 804 organizations have received \$9.3 million in grant funding to execute "quick action" projects. The program is designed to bring communities together to quickly bring their visions to life. In fact, 100 percent of grantees have seen greater overall awareness and engagement in their work (attracting new volunteers and partner organizations to help complete the project), and 45 percent have used the grant to leverage additional funding. Civic participation and engagement are critical elements to the AARP Community Challenge.

A 2020 AARP Community Challenge grant also allowed a team of Penn State Extension Educators to develop an online intergenerational community assessment tool and supporting materials called **One Community – Many Generations**. The process defined in the training materials then helps community leaders and residents use the feedback to identify top priorities and take action to begin the process of making the community more livable for people of all ages. To test and refine the product, the team worked with a pilot project community to hold virtual sessions and a virtual community walk to identify needs. Through that process the community identified a project the community cared about and used grant funds to implement a project identified by the community. The assessment tool along with the guidebook, and training materials are [available online](#) and can be used by any community to gather feedback about livability from residents of all ages.

Finding success with Community Challenge grants proves that a project is viable, which convinces others to invest in it. Laura Semmelroth, director of creative placemaking for the Wilmington Alliance in Delaware, said a Community Challenge grant helped a [community garden and park](#) qualify for and receive additional funding to finance a pergola. The garden is part of a project that revitalized a neighborhood with many vacant lots in downtown Wilmington. That project began with public engagement sessions about what to include in the new public spaces.

“We asked the neighborhood's residents what type of programming they were interested in to ensure there was local buy-in,” Semmelroth said. “The highlight of the project has been the positive community reaction to the park and garden. The green space has become a staple in the community, and the neighbors have embraced the opportunities the garden presents.”

She adds, “The increase in livability can have a dramatic effect on residents, such as older adults, who might have been socially isolated due to a fear of crime.”

Local leaders can use a free AARP tool, [Creating Parks and Public Spaces for People of All Ages](#), to help identify opportunities. As COVID recovery continues, a greater focus on equity and access in public spaces will allow all community members to take advantage of these spaces and amenities.

100 percent of grantees have seen greater overall awareness and engagement and 45 percent have used the grant to leverage additional funding.

HIGH SPEED INTERNET

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the nation's growing digital divide. As work, school, and appointments shifted online, tens of millions of Americans were excluded because of a lack of affordable, reliable internet access. Roughly 30 million Americans (9 percent of the population) don't have high-speed internet service (also known as broadband) in their homes, according to the Federal Communications Commission. The problem is particularly acute for older adults, who are already at increased risk of isolation. AARP studies show that 15 percent of adults 50+ do not have access to any type of internet and 60 percent say the cost of high-speed internet is a problem.

The gap also affects areas like health and telemedicine because those who don't have internet access also are more likely to have underlying health

issues. According to the FCC's Connect2Health Initiative, almost half of the nation's counties face a "double burden" of having high rates of chronic disease and a need for improved broadband connectivity.

In response, ARPA includes significant funding for broadband expansion via the Recovery Fund and Capital Projects Fund. It also builds upon funding in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 designed to reduce consumer prices via the Emergency Broadband Benefit program. Combined, these two initiatives add up to billions in new funding and are "the broadband down payment the country needs," as the Brookings Institution noted earlier in 2021.

Leveraging ARPA funds and promoting the Emergency Broadband Benefit can help residents expand home broadband access, increase digital literacy for those who do not regularly use the internet, and reduce the overall cost of internet access to everyone in the community.

Other Federal Broadband Funding

Capital Projects Fund:

\$10 billion for states, territories, and tribes to cover the costs of capital projects like broadband infrastructure.

Emergency Connectivity Fund:

A \$7.2 billion competitive grant program for schools and libraries to purchase equipment and broadband connectivity for students, staff and library patrons in need during the pandemic.

Emergency Broadband Benefit program:

\$3.2 billion in aid to help reduce monthly bills for families and households struggling to afford internet service during the pandemic.

CASE STUDY

AARP can help with:

- Innovation & best practices
- Communication
- Getting the word out on this new program

Reinvigorating and Developing The Workforce Post-COVID

"Quite simply, our economy is changing so we need action now," San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg said last fall during a Facebook Live conversation with Ismael Herrera, who leads AARP's work in San Antonio.

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on communities across the country, as many faced both a health crisis and an economic one. In San Antonio, more than 150,000 residents filed for unemployment, and a quarter of those lost jobs may never be available again. To address this dire situation, the city put forth a ballot initiative in the fall of 2020 to reallocate money to support workforce development and redevelopment aimed at the 40,000 people who lost their jobs permanently. "Proposition B is an economic workforce recovery strategy to get the workforce back up on its feet," Mayor Nirenberg explained.

Passed overwhelmingly by voters, San Antonio's four-year, \$154 million Ready to Work program, which kicks off in the fall of 2021, puts forth two paths for reinvigorating the workforce. The first allows people to obtain a training or professional certificate in a short period. The second path, designed for individuals who have some post-secondary credentials, enrolls workers in a two- to four-year degree track in targeted industries.

"The emphatic win for Prop B is a testament that our community supports one another and wants to invest in the people of San Antonio," Mayor Nirenberg said.

The program also takes a multigenerational approach and includes “wrap-around services” such as child care and transportation support to mitigate obstacles for older workers. “We know that older workers have been quite affected by the pandemic and by job displacement,” said Nirenberg, so the city will be working closely with AARP and other organizations to get the word out about enrollment to include older San Antonians in the workforce-recovery effort.

San Antonio’s investment in a multigenerational workforce approach is aligned with AARP research that shows that age-diverse workforces have a positive effect on employee engagement, productivity, and the bottom line. Multigenerational teams also perform better and build a stronger pipeline of talent by providing continuity, stability, and retention of intellectual capital, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The pandemic has accelerated trends that were already underway, forcing businesses and communities into a grand experiment on the future of work — pushing practices on telework and flexible work forward with unexpected urgency. As people live longer, they’re working longer, giving employers and employees of all ages the opportunity to reimagine what it means to earn and learn over a lifetime. San Antonio’s approach illustrates how local governments and communities can implement innovative strategies to embrace this unprecedented opportunity to redefine and redevelop its workforce.

More information on these trends and age-diverse workforces can be found in a resource compiled with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development — Living, Learning and Earning Longer — that local governments can use to access and use standards, policies, and practices that reflect an age-diverse and inclusive workforce.

***Our economy is changing,
so we need action now.***

WATER, SEWER & UTILITIES

Local governments can use their ARPA fiscal recovery funds for “necessary investments” in water infrastructure, particularly investments that meet health-related standards and improve resilience to climate change. Investments to improve, repair, or expand utility systems can achieve the goals of reducing costs for ratepayers (if special assessments be avoided), which can be critical for many low-income households—which often include adults on fixed incomes. In addition, ARPA-funded investments to ensure greater reliability in energy and water systems protect people against the health and safety risks associated with blackouts, water restrictions, or other weather-related crises. Disruptions to these utilities, whether driven by a natural disaster or deteriorating infrastructure, disproportionately impact lower-income and older residents – particularly those with reliance upon power for medical support equipment, or without the means to acquire generators or bottled water. Projects such as lead pipe removal and replacement and system upgrades to withstand extreme weather contribute to a healthier and more secure home environment, and can ensure greater reliability and affordability for all residents. The fiscal recovery fund money can also be used to help offset rate increases that local governments would otherwise use to pay for drinking water or wastewater infrastructure projects.

ARPA also creates several new funding resources to assist targeted, low-income households with the cost of utilities, including a new funding program modeled after an existing federal program to subsidize utility costs for low-income households. This new Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (see text box) helps consumers afford the cost of water, which has been increasingly expensive in western states.

Other ARPA programs for homeowners and renters (detailed in the next section) can be used to help residents pay overdue utility bills that have accumulated as a result of the pandemic, while helping to avoid service disconnection or displacement.

Low Income Household Water Assistance Program

ARPA has provided an additional \$500 million for a new emergency Low Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) to be administered by states. The program was first authorized by the 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act for \$638 million. States are required to stand up LIHWAP before funds can be allocated to eligible households. Local officials will need to engage their state governments to understand access to the program.

HOUSING & HEALTH

The affordability and supply of housing has been strained as a result of the economic impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Nationwide, 11 million renter and homeowner households were significantly overdue on their regular housing payments as of December 2020, placing them at heightened risk of losing their homes to foreclosure or eviction over the coming months. Many older adults struggle to pay their rent or mortgage, are living in units that are inaccessible or isolated, and are anxious for solutions that will help them stay housed in the future, particularly as national, state or local eviction moratoria come to an end. ARPA grants flexible spending on homeowner and renter assistance through the recovery fund, while also including additional money for the housing-insecure. One of the most pressing matters for many localities is keeping homeowners and renters in their homes. Even as employment is rising, millions still report that they are not caught up on housing payments, particularly low-income households and people of color.

The housing assistance funding included in ARPA provides a remedy to many of these challenges by reducing requirements that housing instability be related to COVID-19, thereby allowing housing stability funds to be spent on “specialized services for individuals with disabilities or seniors that supports their ability to access or maintain housing.” ARPA also allows for rental assistance to be sent

ARPA Homeowner Assistance Fund

ARPA included \$9.9 billion for a Homeowner Assistance Fund to prevent mortgage delinquencies, defaults, and foreclosures. It also nearly doubled the money available for Emergency Rental Assistance to more than \$46 billion, and allows for more flexible use of funds.

directly to renters if landlords opt out of the program. Governments can also direct immediate financial assistance to renters beyond direct rent payments. This assistance can include food, utility bills, and moving expenses.

Federal dollars can also be used to help localities institute more housing solutions for older adults by increasing affordable housing options, which help at-risk older adults age in place. Recovery funds can also be used to reduce homelessness, incentivize affordable housing development, grant housing vouchers, and provide residential counseling and housing navigation assistance.

ARPA funds can also be used to create programs that incentivize home modifications, another way of helping older adults age in their existing homes. An example of this type of program, put in place before the pandemic, is Maine's Community Aging in Place Grant which was based on Bath's aging in place initiative and launched in 2017. The program offers no-cost home safety checks, minor maintenance repairs, and accessibility modifications to eligible low-income elderly and disabled homeowners. Initiatives like these, which offer older adults relatively simple solutions, can help them live independently in their homes and out of long-term care facilities, which posed a deadly risk during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ARPA also provides an opportunity for communities to reassess their approach to housing and consider policy changes that provide more housing choice for older adults, particularly those who wish to age in their community. One solution can include encouraging and promoting state and local policies that allow for Accessory Dwelling Units, (ADUs), such as backyard cottages and basement apartments. ADUs can serve multiple purposes for older homeowners, including helping them maintain their independence by providing additional income to offset property taxes, maintenance and repair costs, or by providing housing for a caregiver. ADUs can also become the primary residents' home if they wish to downsize, allowing older adults to rent out the larger house, or have family move into it.

ARPA Health Service Funding

\$460 million for Older American Act (OAA) supportive services

\$25 million for OAA services for Native American communities

\$44 million for OAA evidence-based health promotion and disease prevention programs

\$145 million for the National Family Caregiver Support Program

\$10 million for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program

\$276 million to fund the Elder Justice Act

\$50 million for grants to public transit systems to improve transportation access for older adults and people with disabilities

\$10 million to create a new technical assistance center for kinship families in which the primary caregiver is an adult age 55 or older or the child has one or more disabilities



AARP Resources:

- AARP state offices have been active players in discussions around housing, continuing those efforts with advocacy for relief during the pandemic. For example, in 2020 AARP Pennsylvania supported and advocated for Philadelphia City Council to pass an Emergency Housing Protective Package with webinars with residents and letters of support. The package ensured renters avoided eviction, waived late fees, restored funding to the Philadelphia Housing Trust Fund, and directed federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act resources to critical housing programs.
- Through five years of grantmaking under the AARP Community Challenge grant program, AARP has provided 50 grants totaling nearly \$500,000 to expand the availability of a range of housing solutions, including a 2021 grant to help convert a hotel to transitional housing for residents who were devastated by wildfires in Jackson County, Oregon.
- AARP Network of [Age-Friendly States and Communities](#) are working on housing, including the advancement of policies on ADUs, home modifications, accessibility, and affordability.
- AARP's publications on ADUs, including [The ABCs of ADUs](#) and [A Step by Step Guide to Design and Development](#) provide an overview of the benefits of ADUs and how local leaders can encourage their adoption in their communities.
- AARP Resources like the [HomeFit Guide](#) can help residents understand changes they can make to their homes to make them more accessible.

ARPA also included several programs to expand access to home and community-based services (HCBS) that help older adults remain in their homes. While most of these programs are directed at the state level, local governments and their partners have a role to play in helping to ensure community members have access to this funding. Leaders may benefit from staying in close touch with their Area Agencies on Aging and other aging network organizations to ensure funds are distributed locally and identify ways to help connect residents with HCBS that can help them safely age in place.

ARPA Health and Nutrition Funding

15 percent increase in SNAP benefits for all participants is extended through September 30, 2021

\$37 million for senior nutrition through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program

\$500 million in Community Facility Program funds to help rural hospitals and local communities broaden access to COVID-19 vaccines and food assistance

Health consequences of the pandemic have been especially debilitating for older Americans. Additional funding in ARPA directs aid specifically toward nutrition programs, food assistance, and vaccine access in rural areas. With the ongoing expansion of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to local farmers' markets, the additional funding means that low-income Americans in food deserts can more easily access healthy food options. In at-risk neighborhoods, recovery fund dollars can be used for a wide latitude of services, such as helping local residents access health services, or home-based care or counseling, as well as services to support healthy living environments, such as lead-paint removal.

CASE STUDY

AARP can help:

- Leverage resources
- Enhance communication
- Implement programs

The Vaccine Rollout:

Using AARP volunteers and resources to help communities get a job done

Even though the Federal and state governments prioritized older adults during the initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout, many older adults struggled to access the vaccines. Vaccines were often not available through patients' primary-care physicians and instead had to be obtained at clinics, mass vaccination sites or pharmacies, with appointments available only through unstable and decentralized online portals. Those with physical limitations or who had trouble with technology struggled.

"We heard so much fear and desperation from older people during the confusion of the vaccine rollout," said Anne Schroth, co-director and healthy-aging coordinator of Maine's Healthy Peninsula, which is a member of the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. "Our efforts seemed to help to ease the anxiety and frustration, especially for people who don't have access to or facility with technology."

Among the nation's communities and local leaders on the front lines of the global coronavirus pandemic are the more than 500 towns, cities, counties, and states enrolled in the AARP age-friendly network. AARP volunteers and resources have helped communities share information with and reach out to vulnerable residents who didn't know where to get vaccinated.

For example, Niki Delson, co-chair of the Carbondale Age-Friendly Community Initiative in Colorado, is part of a three-woman team of self-dubbed “Shot Whisperers” who researched and shared information about unused vaccine doses in pharmacies, clinics, and vaccination sites that would otherwise have gone to waste. Their outreach targeted older adults with health issues who were having trouble figuring out their vaccine eligibility and access.

In Sarasota County, Florida, which has an active age-friendly program, several vaccination clinics were staffed largely by volunteers, including retired nurses and doctors. About 40 percent of the county’s population is over 65, so the county created a registration system to save older residents from having to hunt for the small number of initially available doses.

Another Florida county utilized faith leaders and churches, Hispanic community organizations, and the local NAACP to dispel vaccine skepticism among people of color. Those efforts were largely successful, with more than half of the county’s Black and Hispanic residents over age 65 vaccinated during the first round.

In Massachusetts, which as a state is a member of the AARP network, the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing created what it calls a COVID-19 Card, a visual tool providing information about preventive measures such as handwashing and social distancing. It also shows pictures depicting symptoms and preferred methods of communication (such as writing and lip reading), as well as resources for finding vaccinations. The card is available in eight languages, in large print, and in a screen-reader-accessible version. The website also provides a card that can be adapted for use by health-care practitioners outside of Massachusetts.

These efforts demonstrate how AARP volunteers and resources can support communities, assist with effective communication with citizens, and ultimately get a job done. Local governments would be wise consider how these models might be transferrable to address tasks involving accounting and documenting the use of funds and for effective project management.

AARP volunteers and resources have helped communities share information with and reach out to vulnerable residents who didn’t know where to get vaccinated.

IMPLEMENTING AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN INVESTMENTS: WORKING WITH AARP

AARP can be a partner and an ally for local governments as they seek to leverage funding under ARPA. AARP can help officials with three specific challenges that they face: engagement and communication, capacity building and identifying opportunities.

Engagement & Communication

Public communication has to be much more than simply churning out press releases. It's a way for local governments to let residents know what they're doing and why they're doing it, and for residents to hold local governments accountable. Public communication is also the way that residents can get more information or share their views with policymakers. However, it is increasingly more difficult for local officials to keep residents informed.

In April 2021, a coalition of organizations surveyed local officials to learn what they would be focused on in the coming year. The top choice of the nearly 600 respondents was community engagement.

As noted above, local officials understand that engaging their residents in general — and especially as they plan for how to spend ARPA funds — is critical to their long-term success. But engaging residents is a heavy lift. It requires a certain level of intimacy. Engagement is essentially dialogue, and doing it in a superficial or inauthentic way can actually strain the relationship between residents and their governments.

Older adults are a key group in many communities. They are growing in numbers as communities age, they are incredibly engaged and care about their communities, and they vote at a much higher rate than other groups.

AARP's 53 state offices can help local officials develop communications strategies and events that engage older adults in their outreach regarding ARPA planning. For example, after hosting hundreds of state and local telephone townhalls nationwide during the coronavirus pandemic, AARP is now supporting leaders by hosting tele-townhalls with mayors and county officials. These conversations allow local leaders to share their vision and hear directly from residents. In May 2021, AARP arranged a tele-townhall in which Phoenix Mayor Kate Gallego joined AARP Arizona for a discussion with 1,000 older adults about their priorities in recovery from the pandemic. The conversation was a two-way street: Mayor Gallego shared ways in which Phoenix is focusing on older adults under ARPA, and she heard from older Phoenix residents about their concerns and priorities.

Beyond tele-townhalls, **AARP can support local leaders by providing a key constituency with critical information.** That ability to communicate is key to engagement — letting constituents know how and where to share their views with local leaders— and key to transparency — letting constituents know where and how to access information about their government’s plans and activities. For example, during the COVID-19 vaccine distribution, AARP State Offices worked with local governments and organizations to reach out to older adults across the country. AARP Alabama worked with the Alabama United Way’s 2-1-1 system to help residents register for a COVID-19 vaccine. Similarly, AARP Maryland launched an effort with messages in English and Spanish on busses and bus shelters aimed at audiences that lack internet access, encouraging them to get information about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Capacity Building

A tremendous barrier for many local leaders is a lack of staff and capacity to plan, manage, and execute ARPA-funded projects. Many local governments lost staff during the Great Recession that were never replaced, and even prior to the pandemic they were sometimes struggling to have the capacity to perform efficiently and effectively. Now, some express reluctance to hire temporary staff to manage an infusion of federal money. Local officials have used the “pig in the python” analogy (a large bulge in an otherwise level pattern) to describe the situation regarding the huge but temporary workload on their staffs and systems. Others point out that not only are there staff shortages within their governments themselves, but that community agencies, nonprofits, and other funding recipients — may also lack the people-power and expertise to meet the requirements for documentation and reporting that come with ARPA funds.

Experienced older adults often represent a critical untapped resource for local governments— both for volunteer or for paid positions. Three in four adults age 50+ volunteered in the past year. Many older adults have valuable work experience and are interested in learning new skills. According to a recent AARP survey, two-thirds of older workers are interested in additional job/skills training, which can be a great match for local governments looking to fill short and long-term staffing gaps.

Many communities already know about this phenomenon and intentionally engage older adults. For example, North Yarmouth, Maine, a member of the AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities has implemented a first greeter program, where older volunteers work in close coordination with the local government and partners to help connect new residents to resources in town.

One chief financial officer noted that “We’re looking at two to three-year jobs. With the new Federal stimulus resources, jurisdictions have tremendous needs to add experienced workers. It would be great to have a pool of people in their post retirement years to do these jobs. It would be even better to have a partner who would help us market these jobs to experienced workers who would embrace temporary employment.” Another official noted a need to reach local nonprofits and other trusted community organizations, but many of those organizations lack the

capacity to manage ARPA funds.

AARP, through its network of partners, members, and volunteers, can help share information about opportunities among residents with the skills to manage and implement local projects. For example, through Experience Matters, a pilot program with Cities of Service and AARP's Livable Communities Corps a pilot program with Public Allies, AARP State Offices were able to help recruit volunteers and AmeriCorps VISTA placements within state and local governments and organizations to help advance livable communities efforts. These recruitment efforts helped the partners organizations identify experience residents to advance their missions.

Identifying Opportunities

AARP can help local leaders identify specific opportunities to help older residents with ARPA funding, and through local policies and programs that can be initiated using ARPA support.

Through research, expertise and connections with hundreds of communities across the country, AARP teams are equipped to support local officials and help shape policies to better support older residents.

The AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities provides a programmatic framework and serves as a way for local leaders to engage residents and implement the types of changes that make communities more livable for people of all ages, especially older adults. The nearly 600 communities that are members of the AARP Network of Age Friendly States and Communities have conducted community assessments and developed (or are developing) action plans that provide a set of clear recommendations and actions in their unique localities.

Local officials can often look to their existing plans, including Age Friendly action plans, to identify priorities and peer communities as a source of ideas. These Age Friendly action plans have been completed by hundreds of communities and are robust work products that are informed by extensive public engagement efforts and the local level. **They provide a detailed list of actions that the community plans to take that can help older adults and can provide local leaders with a shortcut to identify priority needs for older residents in their communities.**

Furthermore, these action plans are the product of local work groups who have an established infrastructure that they are ready to implement. As elected officials and leaders seek to identify opportunities and best practices for ARPA plans, AARP staff and volunteers can help provide input and identify promising actions. In addition, local leaders who are currently not members of the Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities can reach out to AARP to learn best practices, read case studies and receive guidance as age-friendly communities implemented local policies. Links to all of the action plans are available on AARP's searchable Livable Communities map.

One example of how local leaders were able to leverage this infrastructure and pivot during the pandemic is in Columbus, Ohio, where leaders turned to existing age-friendly resources to identify where older adults live, how they got their information, and what their needs were as they developed their response to the pandemic.

CASE STUDY

AARP can help with:

- Technical assistance
- Collaboration
- Innovation support for small businesses

Small Business Recovery

Despite the devastating economic impacts of the pandemic, the inherent drive toward innovation and adaptation found among many Main Street commercial district leaders and business owners serves communities well.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit small businesses hard, forcing many to shutter their doors temporarily or even permanently. The impact trickled down to individuals, including older adults, who lost their jobs or were forced to leave the workforce due to increased caregiving demands at home, a consequence of the pandemic that has disproportionately impacted women and minorities.

Economic-recovery strategies that are safe, equitable, and age-friendly are key to ensuring the revitalization and stability of small businesses and communities. As longtime centers of small business innovation, commercial districts nationwide are natural incubators for creative approaches to place-based entrepreneurship and engagement. This has never been more apparent.

Soon after COVID-19 temporarily closed businesses downtown, the city of Florence, South Carolina, and its Main Street program, Florence Downtown, mobilized to help small businesses. That response has been diverse and multi-level, offering an e-commerce technical assistance program, a grant program, and guidance on the adaptive use of spaces.

AARP partner Main Street America found in its April 2020 report, The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses, that nearly two-thirds of the 6,000 small businesses surveyed had no online sales component. However, in response to the pandemic, many tenacious small businesses have been incorporating e-commerce platforms into their business models. This digital lifeline enabled owners to diversify their businesses and revenue streams while attracting and supporting a diverse pool of remote workers.

In Florence, innovation and collaboration supporting e-commerce have taken center stage. The Main Street staff help business owners identify their e-commerce goals and provide technical expertise to add new baseline functions, such as shipping or updated payment systems, to their online platforms. For businesses that don't have a full e-commerce platform, the city provides alternative training and guidance on e-gift card launches, website checklists and best practices, and sharing of partner information on essential website elements. Though created in response to the pandemic, the city plans to continue offering these services free of charge.

This new hybrid/online approach put small businesses in a better position to weather COVID-19 impacts while fostering overall resilience that will allow them to better withstand inevitable disruptions in the future.

As these examples illustrate, continued collaboration, innovation, and investment in infrastructure (particularly in rural communities) are critical to championing recovery. Local-government support of entrepreneurship, e-commerce, adaptive use of physical spaces, and digital enhancements (WiFi and broadband services) have been and will remain critical to ensuring the recovery of small businesses and commercial districts.

In partnership with Main Street America, AARP has assembled a multitude of resources that local-government leaders can tap into to explore strategies to assist in the economic recovery of small businesses and communities navigating the impacts of the pandemic and the aftershocks of the shutdowns.

Other AARP resources that support small businesses, entrepreneurship, and innovation include the pop-up toolkit, a guide to small-business loans, and a multitude of livable communities resources.

As longtime centers of small business innovation, commercial districts nationwide are natural incubators for creative approaches to place-based entrepreneurship and engagement. This has never been more apparent.

CONCLUSION

Many questions remain about the long-term health and economic toll the pandemic and COVID-19 will have for Americans and the communities where they live. The pandemic shed a light on the challenges many communities face and also showed how resilient local communities could be. ARPA has presented local governments with an opportunity to invest in their communities in a way that addresses local needs and supports local leaders in preparing for the future. Using a framework of livability for all, including considering the needs of older Americans, that vision can be achieved.

AARP can help leaders understand how to approach these critical investments to ensure that they deliver benefits for people of all ages, abilities, races and incomes, and allow localities to recover and thrive. AARP can also be a partner and an ally for local governments as they seek to leverage funding under ARPA. AARP can help officials with three specific challenges that they face: engagement and communication, capacity building and identifying opportunities.

Consider AARP an engagement partner:



Reach out to the AARP State Office. Find contact information at www.states.aarp.org or email livable@AARP.org to be connected.



Use tools and resources (including many referenced in this publication) to help advance livability work. Visit www.AARP.org/Livable.



Learn more about livability and age-friendly efforts underway across the country by visiting www.livablemap.aarp.org.



Share pressing challenges and requests for resources by emailing AARP: livable@aarp.org