Fifty-two percent of older Mississippians live in rural areas, and more than 80 percent of elderly Mississippians live in their own family dwellings. The challenge for Mississippi is finding ways to maintain and improve the health of our senior residents while ensuring them the freedom of residing in their own homes. This is especially true for rural areas with less formal support for seniors’ health and well-being.

Based upon that need, the *Smart Aging: Healthy Futures* project was developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service to help communities foster the healthy aging of their senior populations. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, the project is being conducted in Oktibbeha, Clay, Copiah, and Lincoln counties. In Copiah and Lincoln counties, the project is being directed in cooperation with Copiah-Lincoln Community College.

As part of this effort, a series of Forums on Healthy Aging were held to involve the community in a dialogue focused on identifying the resources—and the challenges—relative to healthy aging within the involved counties. From that dialogue, a number of community action groups were formed to begin developing community solutions to concerns relevant to the health and health care of seniors.

This report has been developed to give voice to the findings of those forums and the concerned, committed residents of Copiah and Lincoln counties who participated in the process and are working today to turn their concerns into action. It is hoped that others reading this report will see it as more than an informational document. Civic organizations, churches, businesses, schools, public officials, and others may find opportunities in these findings to improve the quality of life of our seniors because they are a significant asset to our community.
OBJECTIVES

To meet the goal of assisting communities in their efforts to foster the healthy aging of their senior populations, the following objectives were established:

• Identify community resources and deficits relative to supporting the health and health-care needs of its rural elderly population

• Engage the community in a grassroots effort to improve the health and health-care accessibility of its rural elderly population

• Initiate various health promotion activities and educational programs focusing on rural aging populations within the community and their families and support systems
In October 2007, a focus group was held with a cross section of the community including seniors, working and retired; medical personnel; public officials; and ministers representing the needs and issues of those they serve. The meeting was held for the purpose of improving the project team’s understanding of the assets and the challenges to healthy aging within Copiah and Lincoln counties. The comments recorded during the focus group were later combined with information obtained from a series of individual interviews and observations made traveling around the two counties. A snapshot “First Impression” view of the positives and negatives relating to community attributes supportive of healthy aging was developed and aided the project team in their design of a series of community forums.

In late November and early December 2007, two public forums were held, one with individuals or organizations concerned about the health-related needs of seniors (loosely defined as 60 and older) and another with seniors themselves. The intent of the forums was for the community to begin identifying what was and was not working to support seniors’ ability to age in a healthy manner.

Having identified many of the issues and concerns related to healthy aging, a third public forum was scheduled in January 2008 to chart a path forward. Given the opinions expressed in the first two forums, what, if anything, did the community want to do? Participants from the first two forums and other seniors and resource individuals were asked to attend. A Senior Fair held before and after the forum provided an opportunity to talk with health and healthcare professionals and gain valuable health-related information. One hundred and twenty-five forum participants attended, as well as 17 exhibitors.

The forums were conducted using a modified “World Café” format. The World Café is a format that encourages participation of and dialogue between people attending the sessions. A facilitator aids in initiating table discussions of between six and eight individuals, and then their thoughts are joined with those of neighboring tables to build a voice for the room. This process helps identify a group’s collective knowledge and enables people to join together to pursue common aims. The format aids communities in better understanding, relative to the health and health care of their aging population, what is currently working within the community, what people would like to see happen, what they are willing to contribute or relinquish for what they want, what ideas they have for getting what they think is needed, what they see as obstacles, and what they are going to do as a result of attending the forum. It is an effective tool to involve people in identifying issues, setting priorities, and finding local solutions to problems as well as developing networking connections between interested parties.

Forum discussions centered on the following key questions:

• What are the programs, services, and resources that encourage and support healthy aging in Copiah and Lincoln counties?

• If you had three wishes, which programs or services currently lacking are worth pursuing?

• What should be done to help seniors “navigate” the system?

• What are the main challenges to supporting the goal of healthy aging?
FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The overall assessment of Copiah and Lincoln counties developed by the First Impressions team was positive. They attempted to capture the likely thoughts and feelings of seniors’ initial observations of the counties’ characteristics relating to healthy aging. In structuring their assessment, they viewed the following categories related to quality of life concerns for seniors:

- Health-care services
- Entertainment and recreation
- Shopping
- Family life, including faith-based organizations
- Food: restaurants and grocery stores
- Senior-friendly: other seniors and activities
- Transportation: traffic, streets, and public transportation
- Housing: low-maintenance, affordable, and accessible

Many of the counties’ positives identified by the First Impressions team, from the two hospitals to an array of social support and interaction programs for seniors, will be highlighted in the forum results below. Potential negatives for seniors include a lack of public transportation options and a deficiency in retirement developments for healthy seniors desiring independent living arrangements. Throughout most aspects of the Smart Aging: Healthy Futures project, the two counties were treated as a combined entity; this was done based upon the initial perception that many individuals cross county borders for health-related and other services. The First Impressions team did, however, note a perceived socioeconomic gap and variation in the level of available resources between Brookhaven and other communities such as Hazelhurst, Crystal Springs, and Wesson.
When participants were asked to consider what was working in Copiah and Lincoln counties to foster seniors’ ability to age in a healthy manner, numerous examples came forth. Group responses fell into three major categories: (1) general health and fitness; (2) social interaction and support; (3) social services. Examples for each category are listed below:

**General Health and Fitness**
- Walking trails, Wal-Mart walking
- King’s Daughters exercise programs, Lunch and Learn, water aerobics
- Humana Performance Center fitness program
- Outreach ministries; medical clinic
- County health department; immunizations
- Stability of physicians
- Diabetic classes
- Health fairs
- Wal-Mart $4 prescriptions
- Hardy Wilson Memorial Hospital behavioral/senior care facility

**Social Interaction and Support**
- Clubs and organizations
- Institute for Learning in Retirement
- Live Longer and Love It
- Senior programs at churches
- Senior adult choirs
- Library programs
- Nursing home visitation groups
- 50+ Club
- Civic groups – Kiwanis, Lions, Exchange
- Chamber of Commerce Retirement Committee, AARP
- Recreation Department; bridge groups
- Mississippi Homemaker Volunteer (MHV) activities
- “Women of Faith” caregiver seminars
Social Services

• Five-county transportation ($3 rides)
• RUOK and TRIAD programs
• Angel Tree Ministry
• Food pantry ministry
• Meals on Wheels
• American Legion Hall senior lunches
• St. Andrew’s hot lunch program
• Home health care
• Hospice care
• King’s Daughters transportation to physicians
• 55 Alive driving classes
• Area Agency on Aging case management
• AJFC (Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin County Community Action Agency) helps with senior utility bills
• Kingston Apartments for elderly and handicapped

This is not an exhaustive list of the assets supportive of healthy aging within the two counties, but it is representative and does indicate that the counties start from a position of strength in addressing the needs of their senior residents.

**THREE WISHES—MULTIPLIED BY MANY**

Participants were asked to consider what else was important and worth pursuing. If they had three wishes, what would they like to see added to the counties? Following is a summary of the group’s suggestions:

• Clearinghouse of information
• Advocacy for seniors
• Transportation
• Senior sitter services
• Adult daycare
• Senior citizen center
- Emergency fund for medication money
- Caregiver support
- More physicians, more specialties, geriatrics
- Neighborhood watch programs
- Fire and burglar alarm system programs
- Assisted living facility
- Using seniors to meet the needs of seniors
- Help registry for small household repairs, yard work – available for pay or free
- Affordable counseling and support programs for depressed seniors
- More home health aids; house cleaning assistance
- Assistance with Medicare and insurance forms
- Dance group for seniors; local book clubs
- Food assistance (“Have to have babies to get food stamps.”)
- More services for visually impaired and blind
- Hearing tests
- Programs to support independent living
- Assistance with housing adaptations (step and porch lights, railings, wheelchair ramps)
- Wheelchair accessibility in more restaurants and businesses
- Involve young people with helping elderly
- Bookmobile
- Affordable medical alert systems
- Fitness program geared just for seniors; equipment and facility
- Volunteer senior visitation program
- Expansion of Co-Lin classes for seniors (nutrition, art)

The wishes are listed as they were recorded with no attempt at prioritizing. In the Community Action Group section below, we will discuss how the participants set priorities and began to focus on developing goals and action plans.

### HOW TO ACCESS WHAT’S THERE

Throughout the forum process, we continuously discovered that resources often existed that people were unaware of and did not know how to access. A common dialogue would be a participant at Table A saying, “What we really need is X,” and a participant at Table B saying, “I think X is available if you call such and such.” Often, the issue becomes one of knowing what is available and how to “navigate” the system. Finding the needed information or service can present a complex and difficult web that may require more knowledge and more persistence than the average person possesses. When asked where seniors would most likely turn for information, the following suggestions were offered:

- Directory of services
- Hotline – a 911 for seniors
- Senior bulletin boards
- Churches
- Encourage state and county employees to be more informative with seniors
- Kiosk in a Wal-Mart as a resource center with volunteers; outreach to senior organizations
- Phone trees
- Mass media
- Monthly newsletter for seniors through the Chamber of Commerce or the library
- Need a point of contact and feedback on what works
- Neighborhood watch type of system
- Navigation system with volunteers
• Community service announcements – need to be more prominent
• Centrally located organization responsible for referrals and coordinating service information
• Educate public officials
• 211 – United Way referral system
• Area Agency on Aging Web site
• Chamber of Commerce

Frequently, help and information are needed when people are least able to deal with complicated searches and stumbling blocks. Ease of access to information and human assistance when needed were considered hallmarks of usefulness.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES

With a view toward addressing some of the deficits noted by the forum participants, we asked that they identify some challenges to improving the prospects for healthy aging within the two-county area. Following are the obstacles cited:

• Financial resources – for systems and for individuals
• Really rural – reaching people who live in the country
• Social outreach to people not inclined to join groups
• Seniors’ concerns about confidentiality; trust issues
• Fear of change
• Stigma of what services might mean
• Churches fear of infringement – competitive programs
• Senior literacy issues
• Racial – some programs seen as more available for whites than for African-Americans
• Environmental – lack of healthy food in restaurants; narrow, unsafe roads; lack of sidewalks

Understanding and addressing potential roadblocks will help pave the way for a healthier future.

COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

At the final forum, we asked participants to consider the “three wishes” identified at the earlier forums and determine two or three projects that the community could and should accomplish. From the priorities established in this discussion, we would form community action groups to tackle the identified projects. Forum participants identified the following areas as their top priorities:

• Develop a senior citizen center (this community action group split into two, one for each county)
• Provide transportation services for seniors*
• Develop a navigation/information system to assist seniors in identifying and accessing needed services and resources
• Establish programs for independent living

Throughout the process that led to the establishment of community action groups, we stressed that success would come only if the community took responsibility for and lead-
ership of any potential projects. The projects would not be driven by Mississippi State University or Copiah-Lincoln Community College; our intent was to facilitate a process, engage the community, and offer guidance when possible. Day-to-day development and long-term sustainability would only come through community ownership.

To that end, we conducted a “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop following the establishment of the community action groups. The workshop brought interested individuals together and aided each group in establishing goals and action plans. As one participant kindly e-mailed after the “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop, “Thanks so much for the information. I have to tell you, this is one of very few times I have been involved in something that actually went from talk to ACTION. I am so excited about all that is being done and proud to be a small part of it.”

* This community action group had an insufficient number of people participating in the “Moving from Talk to Action” workshop and, therefore, is not active at this time.

**SUCCESSES AND STRUGGLES**

The largest of the action groups began an effort to establish centers for seniors within each of the two counties. The Copiah County group benefited from having the right people together at the right time. At the conclusion of the priority setting forum, where it was decided to pursue the establishment of a senior citizen center, two individuals came forward with the offer to host the center. As the committee formed, three potential sites were eventually discussed and visited. It was determined that a space available in a Crystal Springs church was the best possible facility. Then, the Parks and Recreation director from Crystal Springs offered a recently employed Vista volunteer from the Division of Aging and Adult Services to serve as the director of the senior center.

On June 3, 2008, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held at the newly organized senior center at the Free People Missionary Baptist Church. Initially, the center will be open one day a week (Tuesdays) from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m.; they will close during the summer months and reopen in September. The center provides lunch for those attending as well as a variety of games and activities. Simply having a place to go and people to socialize with is a key to healthy aging. As one of the action group members said, the center came about because “we wanted it to be.”
A pre-existing initiative had begun in Brookhaven, the Lincoln County seat, and local officials asked the Smart Aging: Healthy Futures community action group to serve as an advisory committee to that project. A community development block grant was awarded during the summer of 2008 to build a senior center on land donated by the city. The community action group is helping define the needs the center will address. They participated in a public meeting giving input to the architects working on the final design and look forward to the groundbreaking. The Mississippi State University Extension Service provided this group with a survey instrument developed by a similar group in Oktibbeha County to assess interest and desired activities for a senior center.

The city advertised for construction bids in early 2009 and anticipates building completion by the end of the year. The community action group will remain involved and is working with the Brookhaven Parks and Recreation Department, which ultimately will manage the center. The group believes their involvement has benefited the dialogue within the city over the nature of the center. A discussion is evolving as to whether the primary focus of the planned senior center should be activities (as envisioned by the community action group) or providing meals.

Congratulations to the community action group team members and thanks to the Free People Missionary Baptist Church and the Brookhaven public officials; these individuals are making a difference in these two communities and improving the quality of life for our seniors.

Throughout the forums, it became apparent that resources frequently exist to help our seniors, but often people do not know of the resources or how to access them. With that thought in mind, individuals associated with two of the community action groups (the navigation/information system group and the programs for independent living group) focused on helping to distribute the Copiah and Lincoln Counties Senior Health Care Directory that was developed by Mississippi State University Extension Service. Additionally, they established partnerships with the United Way’s 211 project and the Division of Aging and Adult Service’s Mississippi Get Help project. These services help locate needed resources for older adults. Action group members contacted local resource organizations that contribute to the healthy aging of seniors, informing them of the purpose of the 211 and Mississippi Get Help projects, and encouraged them to be listed with the two services.
Transportation for seniors within the two counties remains a concern. Limited public transportation is available through the Copiah County Human Resource Agency and Five County Public Transit. Medicaid enrollees can gain nonemergency transportation to medical appointments through a statewide provided service. Though the available services are an asset for the community, a broader system with expanded hours and ease of use would enhance the quality of life of seniors throughout the area. Fear of reaching a point in time when driving is no longer an option was frequently mentioned by seniors. Many who do drive do not feel safe driving at night, but would otherwise participate in social, cultural, and civic activities in the evening. Social interaction is a key ingredient to healthy aging. Limited transportation options can certainly inhibit that interaction and can, for a variety of additional reasons, be a significant source of stress.

NEXT STEPS – WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you are a senior, we encourage you to visit the Senior Center in Crystal Springs and take advantage of the activities and programs, or just stop in, sit down, and visit for a while. Seniors and nonseniors who have a particular interest, talent, or experience might volunteer to conduct a program.

Numerous ideas came out of the forums. Though community action teams formed around only a small number of those ideas, we hope the remainder will not be lost. Individuals, civic or faith-based groups, school classrooms, workplace organizations, and government leaders can review the “three wishes” list and consider where they might be able to contribute to the healthy aging of the senior population. The list is far from exhaustive, and the interests and talents of those considering working to impact the quality of life of older residents might envision other possibilities. An elementary school or Sunday school class might consider “adopting” a group of seniors and enjoy hearing stories of earlier times. A civic organization might initiate a
“Simple Help for Seniors Volunteer Day” and change out ceiling light bulbs or perform other tasks that may be difficult for older residents yet too basic to hire a handyman. It is not infrequent for the quality of life of seniors to be impacted by what may seem like the “simplest” of things.

Both counties have many fine attributes that benefit seniors. Nevertheless, opportunities to improve their quality of life, and that of the community as a whole, are plentiful. We hope you will join in the effort to make Copiah and Lincoln counties places of Smart Aging and Healthy Futures.

**COPIAH AND LINCOLN COUNTIES FACTS AND FIGURES**

**Copiah County:**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005–2007 American Community Survey:

- 16.3% of Copiah County’s population was estimated to be 60 and older (4,761).
- 39.9% of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 60.1% to be female.
  - Nationally, 76% of males 65 and older live with spouses; 19% live alone.
  - Nationally, 42% of women 65 and older live with spouses; 39% live alone.
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Copiah County was estimated to be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>1,047</td>
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<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>39.3%</td>
<td>1,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–84</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>1,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85 and over</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lincoln County:

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2005–2007 American Community Survey:

- 19% of Lincoln County’s population was estimated to be 60 and older (6,484).
- 39.5% of those 65 and older in the county were estimated to be male and 60.5% to be female.
  - Nationally, 76% of males 65 and older live with spouses; 19% live alone.
  - Nationally, 42% of women 65 and older live with spouses; 39% live alone.
- The age distribution of those 60 and older within Lincoln County was estimated to be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60–64</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>1,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>2,477</td>
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<tr>
<td>75–84</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>1,688</td>
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<tr>
<td>85 and over</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>731</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smart Aging: Healthy Futures A Community Report for Copiah and Lincoln Counties was prepared in the spring of 2009 by the following Smart Aging: Healthy Futures team members:

Bonnie Carew
Mississippi State University Extension Service
Rural Health Program Leader

Ann Sansing
Mississippi State University Extension Service
Community Health Coordinator

D. Alan Barefield
Mississippi State University Extension Service
Associate Director, Southern Rural Development Center

Evelyn Peavy
Copiah-Lincoln Community College
Project Coordinator

Brenda Brown Orr
Copiah-Lincoln Community College
Dean of Community Programs

Julie Jordan
Mississippi State University
Project Manager, Mississippi State Community Action Teams

Virgil Culver
Mississippi State University
Director, Mississippi State Community Action Teams

Throughout the preparation of this report, no attempt was made to modify or filter the opinions, suggestions, and concerns voiced by the forum participants. We appreciate the participants’ involvement, celebrate the successes that have come from their initial dialogue, and hope that their voice will be an impetus to additional actions that support the smart aging and healthy futures of our seniors.