

Snapshot of

AGE-FRIENDLY

CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

in the Americas during the COVID-19 Pandemic

LESSONS LEARNED

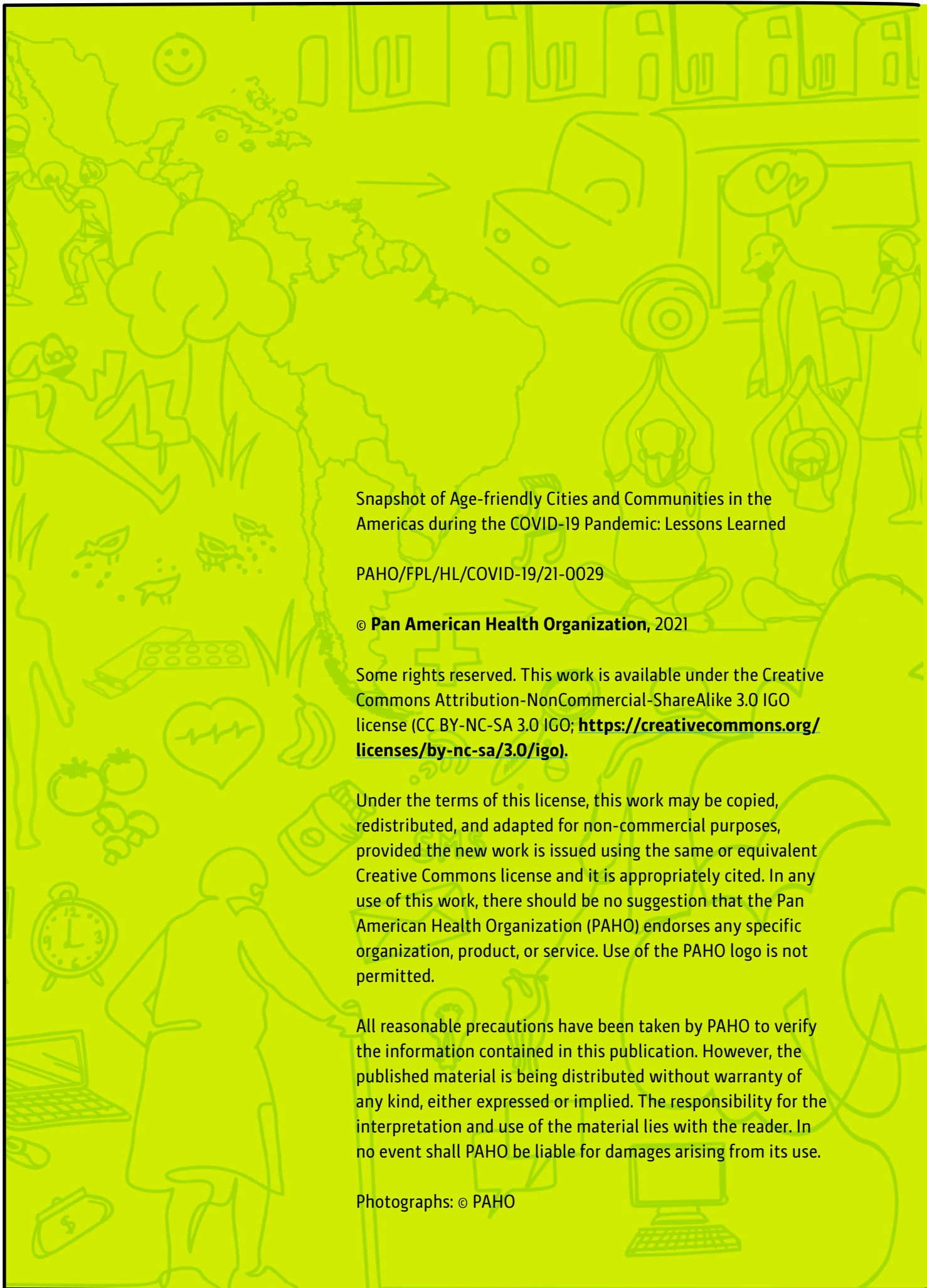
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Snapshot of Age-friendly Cities and Communities in the Americas during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned

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1. ABOUT THE SNAPSHOT

The primary target audiences of this publication are Member States of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and stakeholders that are involved and have prior knowledge of the practice of age-friendly environments. It also intends to reach age-friendly cities and communities in the Region of the Americas to share good practices that can be reproduced, as well as encourage such initiatives on behalf of older persons.

This publication aims to show that being part of the “age-friendly global network” is beneficial not only to older persons, but for all, and it can be especially beneficial in emergency situations. Its intended impact is to increase the quality of planning and concrete actions of age-friendly environments within the Region.

1.1 THE SITUATION: The Impact of COVID-19 on Older Populations in the Region of the Americas

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a notable effect on the health and well-being of older adults in the Region of the Americas. In fact, most COVID-19 related deaths in the Region have occurred in people aged 70 and over, especially older people receiving long-term care (1). Globally, people over the age of 80 are five times more likely to experience severe disease complications from a COVID-19 infection (2). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed the fragility of older adults, as well as of the health systems and communities that support them (1).

1.2 The Strategy: Age-friendly Cities and Communities

Age-friendly environments and related initiatives have played a key role in the timely adaptation to and mitigation of the effects of COVID-19. The multisectoral action on social and physical determinants of health in these age-friendly communities through existing networks can continue to promote health and well-being for these populations, even during the context of a pandemic (3). Overall, the design and objectives of an age-friendly environment benefit the entire community and positively impact the health and well-being of older adults. Various age-friendly cities and communities in Latin America participated in a survey aiming to understand the role of such initiatives in the Region and to present best practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Local stories, experiences, and community perspectives can help to inspire change by showing what can be done and how it can be done at the local, national, regional, and global level. Connecting cities and communities around the world to facilitate this knowledge exchange will support innovative solutions to respond in a timely manner to the needs and care of older people during the COVID-19 pandemic.●

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations General Assembly have recently endorsed the global WHO Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) as a new United Nations initiative, consisting of four key action areas, including developing communities in a way that **fosters the abilities of older people through the initiative of age-friendly cities and communities** (4, 5).

2. LESSONS LEARNED

The Region of the Americas has more certified age-friendly communities and cities compared to other regions of the world, representing more than half of the communities at the global level. It is important to consider the lines of action that age-friendly communities have put in place in the Latin American context for mitigating the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on older people. This has shown what can be done and how it has been done by applying a multisectoral approach, involving central and local governments, community engagement, and including older people's participation.

MAIN ACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS IMPLEMENTED IN RELATION TO COVID-19 BY THE 16 MUNICIPALITIES SURVEYED

Action/intervention	% of municipalities reporting implementation
Strategies to guarantee the safe access of medications without violating prevention measures and social distancing	94%
Digital interventions	87.5%
Communication strategies between local authorities and other stakeholders	81%
Coordination of the implementation of effective intersectoral strategies	81%
Actions related to the prevention and control of infections	75%
Community-led services to support routine activities (i.e., food delivery/ supermarket)	75%

2.1 Argentina: Vicente López (Buenos Aires)

The Municipality of Vicente López reported that being an age-friendly city has had a very positive effect on the response to COVID-19 in relation to older adults. The biggest challenge faced during this time has been economic security. The municipality has developed a program, which currently consists of over 1,000 volunteers, to assist and cover necessities for older adults. In addition, government authorities, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, civil societies, the private sector, community leaders, and older adults have all actively participated in jointly managing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The key actors and stakeholders focused on age-friendly initiatives have stayed active by communicating virtually, which has allowed for information exchange. An important lesson learned in this community has been using technology to maintain connectivity and ongoing communication between local actors and the older population.

Healthy aging is the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age (6). Functional ability depends on individuals' intrinsic capacity, the environment, and the relationship between them.

2.2 Brazil: Itapejara D'Oeste (Paraná)

The Municipality of Itapejara D'Oeste stated that being an age-friendly city has been somewhat positive during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it reported that the following conditions have been the most negatively impacted by COVID-19: the visibility of guidelines and regulations for older adults; reported crimes committed against older people; and lower participation of older adults in local decision-making processes.

An important action emphasized by the municipality was the wide range of community participants working together to develop actions aimed to protect, inform, and provide food support to the most vulnerable older adults and alleviate the stresses of COVID-19. A relevant lesson learned during the COVID-19 pandemic has been multisectoral collaboration at the local level. It has been stated that the greatest experience is the perception of the importance of collective work, which has stemmed from the positive results of these actions

2.3 Chile: Ancud (Chiloe), Coltauco (Cachapoal), Padre Hurtado (Santiago), Peñalolén (Santiago), and Santiago

Ancud has been able to deliver much-needed supplies to older adults, such as adult diapers, technical support, and food. Moreover, the municipality has arranged for podiatrists, kinesiologists, and nursing home support. The municipality has also held a virtual fair for older adult entrepreneurs, and provided online social programs and access to social networks for older people. Coltauco stated that the strongest efforts during this time have been the delivery of medications to patients with severe disabilities and chronic conditions.



Padre Hurtado reported that being an age-friendly city has been very positive for the older adult population during the COVID-19 pandemic. Home delivery of pharmaceutical medications has been offered for older adults living alone or with mobility difficulties.

Peñalolén reported that the local older adult population has valued most the home delivery of supplies and medications, the collection of pensions, and at-home health care services.

Collaboration among different sectors was also highlighted as very important, such as the leadership seen from the community and universities in the municipality's aid campaigns, community kitchens, psychological support through telephone services, and neighborhood support for older adults living alone. An important lesson learned is the need to teach new technologies to older adults to allow them to stay connected with families and social networks. In addition, telehealth services should be integrated and expanded further for the convenience of vulnerable patients.

Furthermore, a key factor in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic among older populations has been the role of the community, including neighbors, which has



helped to identify any possible requirements or support for older persons that have health problems, are dependent, or lack networks. This has been essential for providing timely care and improving their conditions and quality of life. One of the lessons learned has been the importance of collaboration between municipality officials and health officials in conducting permanent monitoring of older persons (i.e., by telephone) to provide them with guidance and any available support to face the pandemic. Beyond the concrete actions, “calling in” (checking in) was identified as the most valued by older people, as they felt connected, listened to, and taken care of by the community. In Santiago, an online school program for older adults was developed two years before the COVID-19 pandemic to help improve the connections of older people within the city. This allowed the municipality to train leaders of older people’s associations in the use of information and communication technologies, and it has also helped older adults maintain physical and cognitive activity at home. As such, this program has been able to maintain instantaneous communication with over 6,000 older adults in the area. The community teams working on older adult programs have been able to maintain open communication, which in turn has facilitated the needed support and intersectoral cooperation in

an efficient manner. Moreover, Santiago has also rapidly developed programs specific to older adult care during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of these programs is a delivery service, coordinated by the municipality and in collaboration with community vendors, without extra delivery charges. There is also a volunteer service, coordinated by the office of older adults and carried out with volunteer officials, that includes the purchase and delivery of medications from pharmacies, assistance in collecting pensions, payment of basic service bills, etc. A valuable experience in Santiago has been the contribution of the private sector through the availability of vehicles from the Automobile Club of Chile (cars from the driving school, with their instructors at the wheel) in its program STGO Te Cuida to carry out the volunteer services and delivery of food packages, free of charge, thus allowing for more efficient and immediate services to meet older people’s needs in the community. Another similar program has also provided food support to older adults with moderate to severe dependency, consisting of a daily lunch for 90 days that could be extended until home health workers returned. As at July 2020, 200 older adults had benefited from this program. In addition, subsidies are available for housing rent payments, common expenses, and medication costs.

Last, the recently incorporated telemedicine service has increased the availability and accessibility of medical assistance for older persons and those that are dependent. This initiative has also strengthened the telecare system that already existed. This has allowed the delivery of medical assistance during COVID-19 via telephone or online to older adults three times a month. Another initiative to increase communication with older population has been the establishment of a protocol for monitoring via telephone with the support of the University for Development. This protocol will be replicated to generate partnerships/alliances with other universities, and thus, reach more older persons in the municipality

2.4 Costa Rica: Cartago, Dota (San José), Flores (Heredia), San José, Tibas (San José), and Zarcero (Alajuela)

The majority of the municipalities in Costa Rica stated that being an age-friendly city has had a very positive impact during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the

application of multisectoral collaboration and timely adaptation of programs for older populations. Nonetheless, older people's economic security has been negatively impacted during the pandemic, as have participation in local decision-making processes, visibility in the regulations of the older population, and the proportion of older persons currently unemployed (affecting work continuity). Only half of municipalities are maintaining communication and staying connected to their networks during the pandemic. That said, all communities and municipalities have been able to maintain community-based priority actions focused on older people.

In Dota, the Ministry of Health has ensured that its population follows the appropriate distancing, hygienic measures to ultimately safeguard the health of older persons. In addition, the municipality, by its own means, has supplied itself with cleaning supplies in anticipation of a possible shortage. The local shelter for older people has provided care for those at risk of contracting COVID-19 by applying measures in monitoring the health and well-being of this population, and following up via telephone.

The delivery of subsidies in Cartago has helped to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Although day centers that serve the most vulnerable populations have been forced to close due to COVID-19, the staff at the day centers have delivered monthly subsidies to older people at their homes to help cover the cost of groceries and cleaning products. The municipality mentioned that, for this action to be successful, it was necessary to recognize the strong involvement of the community and ensure that it played an important role in the coordination efforts.

Support systems for older persons have been implemented in Cartago, Tibas, and Zarcero to maintain connectivity and communication with the population. In Cartago, there are public universities that have support groups for older people that hold virtual talks on different subjects. However, they mentioned that access to technology is very limited, and it has been very difficult to reach all older people.

In Tibas, the municipality is using its networks to carry out home visits. Through the Plenitud Dorada program in Alajuela, key actors have followed up with older people via telephone and online, while the local health services (EBAIS) have monitored the health and well-being of older people through care networks. An important lesson learned has been the impact of the growing digital divide



with older adults and, therefore, the need to train them to guarantee access to information and other means.

2.5 Cuba: Plaza de la Revolución in Havana

Being an age-friendly city has been a fairly positive experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been minimal impact on the conditions that the older population commonly experiences, such as health system disparities, health care access, access to social security, unemployment and economic insecurity, visibility in regulations for older people, reported crimes perpetrated against older people, and participation in local decision-making processes. Ongoing research has been conducted with medical workers and students on a voluntary basis to understand the needs of the older population within the community. Innovative solutions that have been implemented in the community include the creation of WhatsApp groups by the Psychology Society, the participation of private workers in the distribution of free food, and the development of an electronic commerce to purchase goods using cell phones. Support phone lines are also available to offer medical and psychological assistance for community members.

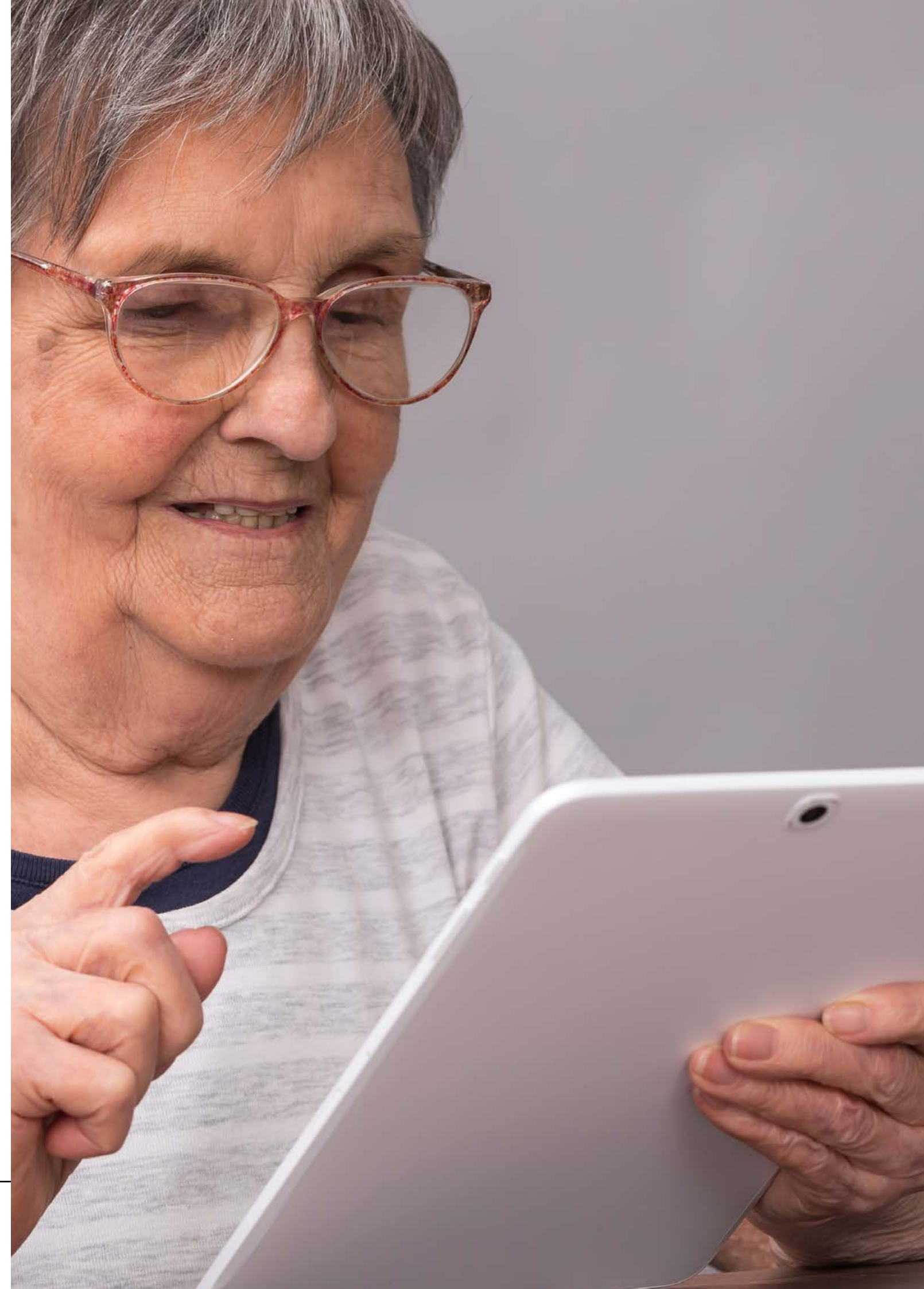
An important lesson learned in Plaza de la Revolución is that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased solidarity at the community level, with a focus on the most vulnerable people. The difficulties of health care services have become more visible throughout the pandemic, but the resilience of the health care system and community have allowed for intersectoral collaboration and community-led interventions to address the increased need for care among the older population.

2.6 Mexico: Jalisco (Guadalajara)

Being an age-friendly city has had a very positive effect, considering that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the socioeconomic conditions of older populations and their local communities. As such, equity in health systems, access to palliative services, mental health, economic security and unemployment, charitable donations, and participation in local decision-making processes have all been negatively affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to stay in contact with older community members, teams of social workers and teachers from the Development and Comprehensive Care for Older Adults Program (Desarrollo Y Atención Integral a los Adultos Mayores) of Guadalajara's National System for the Integral Development of the Family (Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) have maintained communication efforts, including sending videos of recommended activities, to reach the members of their older people's networks that had cell phones and/or home telephones. In addition, the municipality has supported an initiative called Despensa Segura (Safe Pantry), with the installation of a telephone line for the community in order to provide psychological and social support and the availability to request food assistance at home for community members without telephone access.

An important practice mentioned in addressing the increasing violence against older people has been the implementation of the protocol for Care of Battered/Abused Older Persons from the National System for the Integral Development of the Family Guadalajara. This action has resulted in an increased capacity to provide immediate care and actions. Key implementing actors have been able to interact more closely with older people and access their homes throughout the pandemic, which has allowed for better implementation of the protocol.●



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Most COVID-19 related deaths in the Region of the Americas have occurred in people aged 70 years and over. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has further revealed the fragility of older adults, as well as of the health systems and communities that support them. However, age-friendly environments and related initiatives have played a key role in the timely adaptation to and mitigation of the effects of COVID-19. Various age-friendly cities and communities in Latin America participated in a survey aiming to understand the role of such initiatives in the Region, the impact of being part of the global network, and to present best practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This publication aims to show that being part of the “age-friendly global network” is beneficial not only to older persons but for all, and it can be especially beneficial in emergency situations. Its intended impact is to increase the quality of planning and concrete actions of age-friendly environments within the Region of the Americas. The primary target audiences of this publication are Member States of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and stakeholders that are involved and have prior knowledge of the practice of age-friendly environments. It also intends to reach age-friendly cities and communities in the Region of the Americas to share good practices that can be reproduced, as well as encourage such initiatives on behalf of older individuals. Its key messages highlight the importance of access to technology for older people and how being an age-friendly city plays an important role in reaching vulnerable populations. It also shows how a multisectoral approach and the involvement of different actors have made a huge impact in the development of activities toward an age-friendly environment and in favor of the protection of older adults.



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