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In the past year, older adults have faced challenges due to COVID-19, yet many have also shown great resilience. This qualitative study explores older adults' experiences and perceptions of adaptation, social connection, and coping across the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on unique resilience factors among rural older adults. A Midwestern sample (35% rural) of 70 older adults aged 70-97 completed three phone interviews (April, June, and October 2020) about their experiences with social distancing due to COVID-19. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses identified themes of resilience including: 1) purposeful and flexible social connections, 2) positive psychological mindset, and 3) hardiness and life experience. Strains related to the loss of community connections were evident, yet older adults demonstrated signs of adaptability and coping as compensation. Implications and future directions will be discussed in the context of change over time and geographic variation.

#### EXPERIENCES WITH PHYSICAL DISTANCING: COPING STRATEGIES AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

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A representative U.S. sample of adults completed an online survey (N=360) about perceived changes in social health and wellbeing since the implementation of physical distancing restrictions in April. Analyses are conducted on a subsample of adults aged 60+ (n=93; m=65.7 years; SD=4.7). Baseline bivariate descriptive analyses showed no geographic-based differences in self-rated health, resilience, perceived financial wellbeing, or family/friend support measures. Content analysis of rural residents' (n=20) responses about coping strategies and positive experiences across three time points (April/July/November) revealed aspects of resilience. Individuals coped via acceptance and planning; engaging in activities; and keeping with routines. Positive experiences were relatively stable over time, with individuals describing improved health habits and enhanced social connectedness with family/neighbors. Individuals identified societal betterment and saving money as unintended benefits of the efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. When faced with adversity, identifying positive experiences may help individuals cope with challenges in the long-term

#### COMMUNITY-ENGAGED OLDER ADULT-LED POLICY, SYSTEMS, AND ENVIRONMENT INTERVENTIONS IN THE MS HIGH OBESITY PROGRAM

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Older adults in rural areas are at unique risk for poor outcomes due to social isolation and limited access to resources. The Mississippi High Obesity Program (HOP) aims to enhance access to social connections and resources like community gardens, food pantries, and physical activity as part of its broader objective to prevent and reduce obesity. Through policy, systems and environment strategies, development of

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) between aforementioned entities, and community based participatory research approaches, Mississippi HOP efforts enhance food systems improvement efforts; grow multi-sectoral collaboration; and evaluate the effectiveness of new policies, and specifically MOUs, in reaching these goals. Older adults represent more than 40% (n=27) of all coalition members and stakeholder leaders (n=61); they are essential for the success of these initiatives. This presentation will highlight the work done during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of and benefits to older adults, especially ones in rural communities.

#### PEER MENTORING TO FOSTER RESILIENT AGE-FRIENDLY RURAL COMMUNITIES IN MAINE

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Maine has a growing number of age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs); 116 communities are actively working to adapt the social, service, and built environments for aging and 71 have formally joined the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. During COVID, rural municipalities were faced with dynamic changes that limited older resident's access to services and social engagement. To overcome these limitations, it is critical for emergent AFCIs to have tools and strategies to maintain and further enhance healthy environments and resilient communities. This study uses group interviews with 6 leaders of established AFCIs and 6 leaders of emergent AFCIs to explore how the Lifelong Fellows Program, a peer mentoring model that matches experienced leaders with newly formed initiatives, was able to spur development of new strategies to build community resilience. Prominent themes were (1) engaging new local and regional partners; (2) intergenerational volunteerism; (3) fun and flexibility; and (4) relationship-building.

#### FEATURES OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN LATIN AMERICA AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA THAT INFLUENCE WELL-BEING OF OLDER PERSONS

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In their recent volume, *Critical Rural Gerontology*, Skinner et al (2021) challenge us to set aside unidimensional notions of rural communities as bypassed vs very supportive; and to identify the elements of rurality that empower or exclude older people and how these differ across cultures and settings. Covid-19 has highlighted the need for safe and inclusive communities. Given that LMIC will be home to the majority of older adults (Gonzales et al. 2015), we undertook a scoping review of features of rural communities that influence wellbeing of older people in countries across Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. The review included literature in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, using