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TRANSFORMING ENVIRONMENTS: HOME AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS

Age-friendly Philadelphia: Bringing Diverse Networks Together around Aging Issues

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Age-friendly communities are committed to improving the physical and social environments that surround older adults to facilitate independence and neighborhood cohesion. The movement to create these places is being facilitated by policy makers, planners, and researchers from a variety of disciplines who are collaborating under the premise that traditional aging services must be seen within the context of the wider community. Although not a panacea for all the challenges faced by community dwelling elders, this approach will be an important component of the future of environmental gerontology because it rests on acknowledging the effect of the environment on health outcomes.

KEYWORDS age-friendly, urban policy, partnerships, aging-in-place, environment

OVERVIEW

Since January 2009, a new effort in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has transformed the city’s traditional approach to serving older adults. Called Age-friendly Philadelphia (AfP), the new initiative is being administered by the Area Agency on Aging, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA). AfP is an integrated policy, planning, and research effort focused on the wider social and physical environments in which seniors live. The purpose of this article is to introduce this new strategy and to identify the

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ways in which it can augment current and future efforts in environmental gerontology.

THE AGE-FRIENDLY MOVEMENT

Traditionally, most service provision and research in the field of aging have focused on interventions that affect the individual rather than the wider community in which that individual resides. Studies on the effect of factors that influence social interaction and independence, such as sidewalk conditions, accessible public transportation, and the policies that determine the scope of these environmental features (i.e., zoning codes and city planning documents) have been left in large part to policymakers and researchers outside of aging. This is especially true in regard to how multiple environmental factors interact with one another to affect health outcomes. As the population lives increasingly longer and becomes more diverse with respect to a variety of personal preferences, a multi-sector, cross-disciplinary approach must be initiated to support the older adult population. Therefore, professionals in the field of aging must reach out and collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines.

One prime opportunity for professionals to initiate this new approach is through the popular age-friendly efforts. Today, many communities are beginning to recognize the importance of thinking about traditional aging services in the context of the wider communities in which they operate. These new initiatives focus on improving both the physical and social environments that surround elders to facilitate independence and neighborhood cohesion. A survey by the University of California at Berkeley identified approximately 300 such efforts in the country. Many of these initiatives use guidelines established by organizations such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2011), American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), the Visiting Nurses Service of New York, or the World Health Organization, which provide a framework for individual efforts.

THE PHILADELPHIA EXPERIENCE: AGE-FRIENDLY PHILADELPHIA (AFP)

Philadelphia’s age-friendly effort was created in response to the fact that Philadelphia has the highest proportion of older adults of any of the 10 largest cities in the United States (Hetzel & Smith, 2001). In addition, in 2009, 55% of all older adults (age 60 and older) in the city were minority, foreign born, or both and 45% were low income (American Community Survey, 2009). PCA’s award-winning initiative, which has been lead by a Planner
(K.C.) and supported by the agency’s Research Program (A.G.), aims to help these older adults remain healthy, active, and engaged in their communities for as long as possible. The agenda has received awards from two national bodies, the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. It also received a grant from the National Institutes of Health’s National Institute of Nursing Research and has been written about in national and local publications (Neergaard, 2011). Four aspects of the agenda set it apart from other national age-friendly efforts:

1. The creation of a formal model called Supportive Age-friendly Environments (SAFE) based on the Environmental Protection Agency’s Aging Initiative’s framework.
2. A focus on catalyzing the effort rather than building another program with its own budget, staff, and services.
3. Special emphasis on working with emerging leaders in their 20’s and 30’s to build support for seniors.
4. Ongoing integration of research with policy and planning.

Each of these four aspects of AfP is described below.

Creating a Model: Supportive Age-friendly Environments

AfP is based on the understanding that supportive physical and social environments create more opportunities for healthy living, vibrant neighborhoods, and community engagement. Acknowledging this intimate connection, PCA selected the Environmental Protection Agency’s Aging Initiative framework as the basis for a new model called SAFE.

The original Environmental Protection Agency framework is grounded in uniting active aging and smart growth. Active aging is a term that signifies both the opportunity for and the willingness of older people to be involved in maintaining their own health and well-being. Smart growth is based on a set of principles that guide urban planners and designers to make communities healthier, more economically vibrant, socially connected, and environmentally safe (Smart Growth America, 2011). The framework breaks down barriers between professions, such as social work and city planning, by embracing terms and concepts that are usually discipline specific. It features four principles that integrate active aging and smart growth, each of which will be reflected in the projects that are outlined in the following section. These principles are:

1. Staying Active, Connected, and Engaged: Where and how we choose to live can affect our health and well-being.
2. Development and Housing: Healthy neighborhoods offer diverse housing choices, gathering places, and ways to connect.
3. Transportation and Mobility: We can build choice back into our transportation system—and make it easier for people of all ages to get around.
4. Staying Healthy: Finding healthy food, keeping active, and getting healthy when you need it can be easier in an age-friendly community (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2009).

PCA adapted each of the four principles to create the SAFE model, and each revised principle fits well within the context of current city-wide and regional efforts. The new principles can be operationalized using data on older Philadelphians that PCA currently possesses.

1. Social Capital: Being active and connected in one’s neighborhood.
2. Flexible and Accessible Housing: Having the option to remain in one’s home and/or community.
3. Mobility: Having access to public transportation and a walkable environment.
4. Eating Healthy: Having fresh fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods available.

By transforming the original four principles into the SAFE model, PCA has been able to identify new partners whose goals parallel these principles, catalyze specific initiatives for AfP, create champions for the effort, and use research to consider the interaction among these four principles.

Catalyzing the Effort: New Partners & Projects

Unlike many age-friendly efforts that administer programming, PCA primarily functions as a catalyst that identifies partners and innovative ways to collaborate, serves as a matchmaker between the aging network (organizations that serve older adults) and other networks, and provides technical information. In certain cases, the agency has taken the lead in identifying new policies that would move the agenda forward, and in others it has assisted organizations to incorporate older adults into their policies, plans, and programs. PCA defines AfP’s success when current collaborators independently take the initiative to promote age-friendly practices and when new collaborators are identified for future projects.¹

AfP’s goals are achieved by bringing together a wide array of organizations to affect the environment in which older Philadelphians live and alter the way in which aging is perceived within the wider network of planners, advocates, and researchers. To do this, PCA’s cross-disciplinary approach promotes the importance of government policies that provide a high quality
of life for individuals of all ages; a built environment that facilitates healthy lifestyles, safety, and social connectedness; an aging network that considers the effect of the environment on the well-being of consumers; universities that partner with the community to create cutting-edge research; and emerging leaders from all fields who incorporate older adults into their work. Over the past three years, PCA has conducted more than 150 face-to-face meetings to introduce aging issues to organizations that do not traditionally work with older adults. It was discovered that although organizations have significant interest in considering the needs of the older population, there is often a lack of knowledge about networks to connect to for pursuing those interests, such as the aging network; innovative models to support seniors in the community; and research and data about the city’s older adults.

PCA aims to provide this type of information and technical support and connect organizations to new networking opportunities so partners do not have to reinvent the wheel. PCA staff serves on numerous committees at a variety of organizations, which has helped to develop new collaborative projects and shows commitment to working with organizations outside of the aging network. It innovatively uses research data, maps, and evaluation expertise to support its practice partners’ projects and grant applications, which will be described in detail below. Through these experiences, PCA has identified the motivations behind new interest and commitment to aging:

- AfP projects benefit everyone served by many of these organizations, not just older adults; the phrase “What is good for seniors is good for people of all ages” has been helpful making this point
- Some organizations rely heavily on older adults as donors and volunteers, and participating in AfP illustrates their commitment to this demographic.
- Older adults vote, so knowing where senior centers are located and where the highest proportion of seniors live can be key to a successful campaign.
- Health outcomes are the newest trend in funding; the health of seniors and the willingness of PCA to provide information is key to securing future funds.
- Evaluating projects that affect health outcomes is integral to most grant proposals; PCA’s Research Program assists in this process.
- Seniors are often the caregivers of children in Philadelphia, so if the seniors stay in the community, the children receive more supervision.
- Staff at many of these organizations is caring for elder relatives; therefore, AfP appeals to them on a personal level.
- Integrating older adults into policies, plans, and programs helps organizations broaden their scope to look at the entire community rather than at just certain age segments; this contributes to the sustainability and continuity of their efforts.
AfP has facilitated various collaborative practice initiatives based on the SAFE model, four of which are discussed below.

**SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS: THE “AGE-FRIENDLY PARKS” CHECKLIST**

City parks can provide seniors with the opportunity for social interaction, relaxation, and passive and active exercise. They can also serve as venues to build intergenerational cohesion within neighborhoods. Despite Philadelphia’s wealth of open space, seniors are underutilizing parks. In 2010, 72% of older adults in the city reported not attending a public recreation facility (including a park) within the past year, whereas just 1% said that there was no public recreation facility near their home (Public Health Management Corporation, 2010). Mobility issues, transportation to and from parks, perception of safety, lack of shade, and other factors play into this.

In the summer of 2010, PCA and the Fairmount Park Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that fundraises for Philadelphia Parks & Recreation (the Parks Department), partnered to examine these issues and to reach out to other organizations for help in encouraging seniors to use the parks. The organizations jointly created an Age-friendly Parks Checklist, which details the features in a park that would encourage use by seniors. Examples include creating more shaded areas, adding railings along stairways, and ensuring that sidewalks are both wide enough for a wheelchair and firm enough so that it does not sink into the dirt. Philadelphia Parks and Recreation and two environmental advocacy groups, the Next Great City Coalition and the Philadelphia Parks Alliance, provided feedback on the checklist. The list was intended to be used as a tool by seniors, park designers, volunteers, and administrators to evaluate and enhance local green spaces and identify progressive ways to design parks. In December 2010, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote an article about the checklist; in March and April 2011, AARP noted the initiative in its news bulletin; and in July 2011 the Associate Press discussed the initiative in an article that was picked up by over 300 news outlets nation-wide.

In April and May 2011, the working group approached the Philadelphia Association of Senior Service Administrators (PASSA) to assist with its effort to conduct focus groups at three senior centers and one senior housing complex to evaluate and adjust the checklist. It is anticipated that this information will be used along with the checklist for future capital improvement projects and to highlight Philadelphia’s signature age-friendly parks.

**FLEXIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE HOUSING: THE CITY’S NEW ZONING CODE**

Many of Philadelphia’s elders are active community members, serving as the eyes and ears of their blocks and caring for their grandchildren. Therefore,
enabling seniors to age in the community benefits the individual and the neighborhood as a whole. A total of 208,429 Philadelphians aged 60 years and older are homeowners, and 66% of them wish to remain in their current homes for at least 10 more years. Of these older homeowners, 23% report using a cane and 22% report using a railing. In addition, 38% report that it is difficult to cover housing costs (PHMC, 2010). If seniors cannot use their homes to the full extent due to mobility restrictions or they cannot maintain their homes financially, both their homes and their streets can be negatively affected. For example, seniors who cannot use their homes’ second and third floors will not be aware of leaks or broken windows, which can affect the structure’s integrity and increase housing and maintenance costs. Unfortunately for many elders, moving into a senior subsidized housing facility is not an option because there are long waiting lists for such apartments and for many, these facilities are not located in the community in which they have built their social contacts.

In 2008, Philadelphia began the process of modernizing its zoning code for the first time in 40 years. According to the City of Philadelphia Zoning Code Commission, zoning “seeks to protect public health, safety and welfare by regulating the use of land and controlling the type, size and height of buildings” (Zoning Matters, 2012). Prior to the rewrite, the words “aging,” “elders,” and “senior citizens” were not mentioned in the code. However, for the past 2 years, PCA has worked with the Zoning Code Commission, the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, Temple University’s Department of Community and Regional Planning, and various aging network and environmental organizations to integrate aging-in-community features into the code.

Accessory dwelling units are one such feature that allows for an alternative way to remain in one’s home and are now mentioned in the new zoning code. Accessory dwelling units are subordinate, additional residences that are constructed within a residential property or garage. They can benefit seniors by providing the opportunity to downsize and to live in the same building as caregivers without having to leave the community or go to an institution. Some Philadelphians have built accessory dwelling units illegally, which poses a great challenge for emergency personnel who cannot identify the units. PCA also worked with the Zoning Code Commission to include requirements for at least some new private housing developments to be “visitable.” When a home is visitable, it is a place where people of all ages and abilities can enter, circulate, and enjoy; it features three key requirements:

- One entrance to the home at grade-level (i.e., zero steps). This is a critical matter because the majority of Philadelphia’s homes are row houses that feature front steps.
- One half-bathroom on the first floor.
All hallways and doorways on the first floor should be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair.

These features are important to people of all ages, including older people who have difficulties with stairs, disabled persons who use wheelchairs, parents with children, bicyclists, and those with temporary disabilities, such as a broken leg.

MOBILITY: AGE-FRIENDLY BUS STOPS

In Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs, seniors have the benefit of riding South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) bus, subway, and trolley lines for free. Since the discount began in 2000, more than 200,000 seniors have signed up. Programs like these are extremely important to older adults and to low-income seniors in particular, 50% of whom do not live in a household with an automobile (Ruggles, Alexander, Genadek et al., 2010). The use of public transit by older persons has many benefits, including:

- Providing easy access to senior centers, libraries, shopping, the homes of friends and family members, doctors, and other amenities to help older persons maintain their health and social well-being.
- Walking to and from transit stops increases physical activity and benefits health.
- Interaction with others while taking public transit can reduce isolation and increase a sense of community.
- Public service advertisements available at transit stops and on bus, trolley, and subway cars can provide valuable information and access to needed services.
- Public transport gives independence to older adults who might not feel comfortable driving a car.

All bus stops in Philadelphia are the responsibility of the City of Philadelphia, and their maintenance and upkeep are contracted out to a private vendor. In 2010, PCA collaborated with the Next Great City Coalition to promote the need for more bus stops that are age-friendly, meaning they provide shelter, seating, and lighting. These features benefit people of all ages, yet they can make the most difference to people with mobility problems who may not be able to stand for long periods of time and who can be especially vulnerable to foul weather. In fact, the presence of age-friendly bus stops could be the deciding factor in a senior’s decision to use public transportation, get behind the wheel, spend money on a taxi cab, or go to a doctor’s appointment.

In March 2010, the City of Philadelphia, through the Mayor’s Office of Transportation and Utilities, released a Request for Proposals for a street
furniture program, which would require the redesign, expansion, and installation of new, age-friendly bus stops. However, because of the state of the economy, the City did not get an adequate response and will rerelease the Request for Proposals in the near future.

EATING HEALTHY: COMMUNITY GARDENS AT SENIOR CENTERS AND HOUSING COMPLEXES

An alarming 65% of older Philadelphians report being obese or overweight. Approximately 91% eat five or less of the Harvard School of Public Health’s recommended nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, and 56% eat two or fewer servings per day. Seniors who want to make healthy dietary choices may find that factors outside of their control prevent them from doing so. Low-income elderly are more likely to be overweight or obese than those with higher incomes, and report eating out often at fast food restaurants and having to travel outside of their neighborhood to a supermarket. They also report needing a meal program, which indicates having problems shopping and preparing meals (PHMC, 2010).

In a new effort, PCA is now encouraging community vegetable gardens at senior centers and senior housing complexes. Being active with a community garden can help promote socialization, physical activity, and better eating habits. Gardens run by organizations that serve as a resource for reliable information can also be a way of sharing knowledge about social services and programs. In February 2011, GenPhilly (a PCA supported, and subsequently adopted, program discussed more in the next section) held a groundbreaking event at City Hall called Germinating Partnerships: Connecting Seniors to Community Gardens, which fostered new collaborations around the topic and resulted in an online toolkit to promote more such gardens (GenPhilly, 2011). PCA is now giving technical support to many gardens city-wide that are either involved with a senior center or a senior housing complex.

One example is the Nationalities Senior Center garden, which won a Nutrition Services Grant (with the support of PCA) through the Pennsylvania Department of Aging in 2009 to build three gardens at Our Lady of Hope Catholic Church. Volunteers of all ages donated more than 1,000 hours of labor to build the gardens, which feature raised beds that allow people of all ages and abilities to participate. Today, the seniors at the center plant, harvest, and cook the produce, both at the center and at home, and will soon be selling it at a nearby farmers’ market. Many new partnerships and increased exposure have resulted from this effort. For example, through AfP, the Environmental Protection Agency, decided to use the project as a case study for creating senior-friendly gardens on Brownfield sites (U.S. EPA, 2011). In addition, the garden director has spoken at PCA’s M. Powell Lawton Conference on Urban Aging, PCA’s panel on age-friendly cities
Emerging Leaders as Champions of Age-friendly Philadelphia

The success of AfP rests on professionals in the field of aging reaching out to and connecting with professionals whose disciplines have not traditionally addressed the needs of seniors. These disciplines, such as city planning, environmental advocacy, and transportation policy, significantly affect the lives of elders (Lawler, 2009). PCA has approached this challenge by supporting a grassroots effort called GenPhilly (GenPhilly, 2010).

GenPhilly is a peer-led network of emerging leaders who are taking a personal and professional interest in aging issues. Started in 2009, GenPhilly is an award-winning group of professionals in their 20s and 30s who work in a wide range of disciplines, such as urban planning, the arts, social work, government, philanthropy, and marketing. Together, they create professional development opportunities related to aging that tap into popular culture. Unlike traditional “young friends of” groups designed to create a new leadership cadre for an existing organization or conventional intergenerational programming that aims to bring young and old together, the GenPhilly model is organized and run by members who are asking themselves and their peers—“In what kind of city do I want to grow old?” and “How can I get there while helping the current population of seniors?”

Through social media, bimonthly meetings, and public events, GenPhilly shows emerging leaders that there is a competitive professional advantage that results from incorporating knowledge about older adults into their skill set. GenPhilly also serves as a support network for younger individuals whose work relates to the later stages in life. Events break down existing stereotypes about working with seniors and make this topic appealing and cool. Themes have included popular issues such as community gardening, pets, urban planning, contemporary music, women’s studies, and environmental sustainability. Events bring different professional networks together to catalyze innovative partnerships that will assist people of all ages and, in most cases, they have sparked new initiatives that other organizations are now spearheading.

GenPhilly has taken off in popularity in ways unimagined since its inception, boasting more than 250 members, 18 public events, 14 bimonthly networking meetings, and an event listserv of roughly 450 people. It was mentioned in the AARP March Bulletin (Abrahms, 2011), an Associated Press article (which was featured in the New York Times, Huffinton Post, and other widely read Web sites), won a 2011 National Associations of Area Agencies on Aging Aging Achievement Award, has been written about in the Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal (Groves, 2010), received a local award for its local advocacy regarding pets, and is being recognized by other peer-led young professional groups as a unique, relevant, and valuable resource.
GenPhilly plays an important role in the sustainability of AfP and served as an essential component in its national awards. At the same time, emerging leaders benefit from being a part of AfP because they become the champions and catalysts of programs and policies for their own organization. For example, at PCA’s 2010 M. Powell Lawton Conference on Urban Aging entitled *Laying the Foundation for an Age-friendly Philadelphia*, nearly three-fourths of all speakers were GenPhilly members representing their organizations’ new interests in aging. In addition, the new collaborations mentioned previously in this article relating to age-friendly parks and bus stops, housing, and community gardens are all being led by GenPhilly members. In summary, GenPhilly benefits AfP by:

- Building support for and awareness of policy, plans, and programs that relate to aging services in the wider community.
- Facilitating cross-disciplinary learning around issues that relate to older people.
- Creating opportunities for professional development that stress the competitive advantage to know about aging issues.
- Strengthening the workforce in the field of aging.
- Breaking down stereotypes about working with older adults.
- Introducing expertise from outside the aging network to benefit older adults.

The Collaboration of Research, Planning, and Policy

The close cooperation of the Research Program at PCA with the AfP initiative may be unique among age-friendly efforts. The Research Program was created in 2001 to focus on the effect of the urban environment on the experience of aging Philadelphians; its support for AfP is an extension of this agenda. The program has contributed to the AfP effort in four ways, outlined below.

**SELECTING AND TESTING THE FRAMEWORK**

First, it has worked closely with the policy and planning portion of AfP to develop a Philadelphia-specific framework for collaboration. The process of creating the SAFE model illustrates how the partnership between the AfP effort and the Research Program works. The original framework, developed by the Environmental Protection Agency, was selected based on criteria set by the Planner taking the lead on the AfP agenda. Once selected, the Research Program was asked if it was possible to determine whether the elements in the framework were related to positive health outcomes and other AfP goals. The Research Program was able to operationalize the four principles
of the Environmental Protection Agency framework and test the relationship of those four principles to measures of health outcomes, health behaviors, and the desire of older adults to remain in their current homes (PHMC, 2008). The analyses demonstrated that the four operationalized principles are related to positive health outcomes, even when accounting for the effects of minority status and income. This is especially important for illustrating the importance of this approach in Philadelphia, where there are a significant number of low income and minority elders.

**Providing Information**

Second, the Research Program’s support for AfP extends to the stakeholders in the effort by providing information that can be used in their planning, policy development, grant writing, and advocacy. This information is often shared in the form of geographic information system maps that show the distribution of various characteristics of the city’s population (such as functional impairment) in relation to some aspect of the physical environment (such as parks). The Research Program has also assisted with the development of new initiatives by providing technical support. For example, it facilitated the four age-friendly parks focus groups previously discussed. The Research Program has also supported GenPhilly through participation in its programs, conducting surveys on its behalf and providing information and resources as requested.

The Research Program also brings stakeholders together. In 2003, it developed the first M. Powell Lawton Conference on Urban Aging to connect professionals in research, policy, practice, and related fields to examine topics related to older adults who live in large metropolitan areas. The conference has since evolved into a platform to highlight achievements of AfP and to move that agenda forward.

**Connecting AfP with Universities**

Third, the Research Program has involved both students and faculty from local academic institutions in the work of AfP as in the case of inviting a university-based researcher to evaluate the community gardens effect on the health of older adults.

**PCA Research Projects**

Finally, the Research Program has initiated its own research projects to further the goals of AfP. A grant was recently awarded to PCA by the National Institute of Nursing Research entitled Walkability’s Impact on Senior Health (WISH). This project, which involves a local university and a community development corporation, will test hypotheses regarding the effect of walkable
neighborhoods on the health and health behaviors of older adults. One of the goals of the WISH grant is to create tools that are constructed based on identifying environmental factors that are related to positive health outcomes, which will be used by AfP to further the goals of the initiative.

IS REPLICATION POSSIBLE?

In considering which aspects of this initiative are unique to Philadelphia and which can be transferred to other urban contexts, it is important to understand the opportunities and barriers that PCA has identified in trying to actualize age-friendly projects and to enlist and maintain partners.

In general, each city’s age-friendly effort has a similar goal in mind, regardless of geography. PCA’s strategy can be applied in other cities because the SAFE model and its principles are based on popular urban trends: social capital, flexible and accessible housing, improving mobility, and healthy eating. Although cities will vary in using this approach, the objectives—meaning the individual projects—will be catalyzed with partners. Projects should be based on the priorities of cities (their citizens, municipal government, and funders) and should be current initiatives that have multiple stakeholders. Therefore, these projects represent the opportunities that arise due to the unique circumstances that each urban area possesses.

Barriers that have interfered with project and partnership continuity can be attributed to a variety of factors. The first has to do with challenges created by trying to align institutional priorities among PCA, members of the aging network, and organizations outside of the field of aging. In Philadelphia, aging network organizations have legitimately questioned whether it is appropriate for both the Area Agency on Aging and the aging network agencies to provide resources to AfP activities while budgets are strained to the limit. The response has been two-fold: minimal resources (as measured by dollars) are allotted to AfP and staff time is the only true cost. In fact, AfP creates new resources for the aging network via access to technical and alternative financial resources and support for aging issues from the wider community. The majority of these organizations are now supporters of the initiative; however, not all are actively involved with the effort in the form of serving as advocates, project initiators, or ambassadors for AfP to other organizations. This is simply because agencies do not have the staff time to dedicate to projects outside of the primary scope of their funding. In these cases, PCA has assisted the organizations with projects by expending their own staff time to further the goals.

Outside of the aging network, there have not been a lot of friction points about being involved with aging issues (except the occasional case in which an individual appears to have a personal anxiety about growing older). AfP
has primarily experienced conflicts when aging issues intersect with other organization’s priorities, such as construction costs (i.e., building a “visitable” home on a slope or installing a bathroom in every park can be prohibitive). In these cases, alliance building and public education have been the keys to helping organizations understand the AfP perspective. It is also important that these stakeholder understand that PCA is considerate of their priorities and that one of the agency’s long-term goals is to ensure that aging is always a variable in their decision-making process.

Although AfP is a fairly young initiative, the agency has not been able to maintain each partnership at the same level over the period of the effort, which is another barrier that PCA has faced. People leave their jobs; organizations rethink priorities; funding gets cut; political administrations change; and life happens. How catalysts of these efforts can maintain momentum given these constant changes is something to always keep in mind. PCA has realized that working with organizations so that AfP becomes integrated into their institutions missions can help create continuity. At the same time, AfP staff must continue to remain involved with these organizations current trends, projects, and staff.

MEASURING THE EFFECT OF AFP

One of PCA’s roles in AfP is to measure its effects, and there are two primary questions that must be answered to do this. First, have the various efforts of AfP met the desired goals? Have they had other, unplanned effects that benefit or damage the goals of AfP? Second, even if the goals are being met (such as more older adults using public parks), how can the role that the AfP effort played in that change be determined?

The first part of this question will be answered by looking for indications of change over time, such as greater ridership of public transportation by older adults or a growth in the proportion of older Philadelphians who report being physically active. Although it may be difficult to determine exactly how much of this change is due to AfP, the change itself is the goal of the project. Furthermore, identifying changes in policies, procedures, and programs to include seniors, especially when these are initiated without AfP staff encouraging the change, are measures of the success of the effort.

The second question will be answered through the formal evaluation of specific projects designed to move the AfP agenda forward. One such project has to do with getting seniors more involved with community gardening. PCA’s research arm is now evaluating individual efforts that other organizations (including senior residential facilities, senior centers, and greening organizations) are taking the lead on via building gardens and educating and recruiting volunteers.
MOVING FORWARD

Transforming physical and social environments to improve health outcomes for older individuals is becoming an important public health priority nationwide, as seen through the popular age-friendly efforts. Involvement with these initiatives is an excellent opportunity for professionals in the field of environmental gerontology to expand their networks and collaborate with new disciplines. It is also a chance for those involved with research to become involved with studies of specific communities to determine which types of interventions will have the maximum benefit for seniors. Such studies will also expand the understanding of the relationship between the individual and the environment, which is core to the field’s foundation. In Philadelphia, AfP has helped to increase citizens public discourse around aging issues, expose funders and policymakers to AfP projects, and show elected officials why this demographic matters; it has also opened new possibilities for researchers to collaborate around aging issues. The age-friendly movement is one that deserves continuing attention from environmental gerontologists because its effect on the future of every discipline is just beginning.

NOTE

1. Much of the description that follows is adapted from “Laying the Foundation for an Age-friendly Philadelphia: A Progress Report” which was published by PCA (Clark, 2011).

REFERENCES


