

Strategic Vision Panel Discussion

April 24, 2018

Attendees: **Len Kaye**, University of Maine Center on Aging; **Dyan Walsh**, Eastern Area Agency on Aging; **Marilyn Gugliucci**, Professor and Director of Geriatrics Education and Research at the University of New England; **Peter Blake**, Program Director Alzheimer's Association of Maine; **Cynthia Sproul**, Resident Cony Flatiron Residence, Retired Teacher and Program Director

Older adults want independence and value what most of us do. What's different is the caution they take or fear they feel in making the effort to achieve or keep that independence particularly if it requires asking for assistance. Once upon a time an older person was seen as possessing wisdom, power and influence. Over the past 100 years that respect has declined and with it more negative perceptions of aging (ageism) have emerged.

- **Older adults are diverse and want independence.** They work full time or part time or they're retired. They stay at home and keep to themselves or want to go out with company. In either case most want someone like a friend or family member near to them.
- **Each older adult is unique.** Every older adult has a different background. Some are more intellectually or physically capable than others.
- **Respect.** Like most of us, older adults want respect and want to be heard. They believe they have, and they do have, something worth saying.
- **They are hesitant to ask for and even fear to ask for assistance or resources because they believe that may lead to the loss of what they value.** Independence and respect are seen as being jeopardized by requests for help. Asking itself, is akin to admitting vulnerability. The assistance itself is seen as necessitating some sort of tradeoff between what they value and what they need.

Older Adults need to network with family, friends, and people of other age groups more now than ever. Social networks are critical to good physical and mental health in older age.

Isolation, the worst experience possible that plagues over 40% of older adults, can be deadly. The chances of it taking hold, are not only minimized through continued socialization alone, but through socialization with a wider range of people and groups.

- **Networks within a community or outside that are comprised of friends, family and others gives much needed purpose.** Talking with these different groups of people gives individuals a chance to provide input that results in an increased sense of belonging and subsequently, purpose. The more diverse the network the greater the the chance the older adults participating in it will gain that needed sense of purpose.
- **Networks associated by name with aging, may not be a great idea.** Older adults are wary of being labeled. Groups, activities or programs labeled in such a way as to

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suggest they are for *SENIORS* or older adults might discourage participation due the negative perception associated with growing old.

- **As the baby boomers age into older adulthood, the fear and hesitance may wane.** There will likely be an easing of the fear older adults feel as the baby boomers age into the older adult world. This will, in part, be due the fact that baby boomers have watched their parents age, understand it, and have become accustomed to the notion and validity of public assistance.

Regardless of the medium of communication used, repeat the message often. If at all possible it would be best at some point to leave your office and get out into the field as an activist and learn about your constituency. This can build trust and knowledge of the program in addition to trusting other messengers regardless of the medium of communication.

- **The HEAP program has an inherent timing problem when it comes to communication with older adults.** Older adults see a stigma attached to receiving benefits and therefore do not like to ask for assistance. Subsequently, they don't ask for help until it's absolutely necessary. As a result, they ask when it's too late or nearly too late to receive assistance. Because the HEAP program is seasonal, early and repeated messaging and recruitment is critical to prompt this audience to consider and apply to utilize the program.
- **A community champion can be a critical asset.** Someone local who already has the trust of the older adults in the community can help a great deal. Utilize the champion in timely manner proximate to the release of other messaging. Make sure the messages are succinct. Utilize existing organizations, programs and activities such as meals on wheels and repeat it again at the right time.
- **In addition to learning what the best medium might be, explore what terminology is effective in messaging.** Stay away from using only one medium of communications, especially e-mail. It would be wise for organizations such as MaineHousing to hold focus groups of older adults to learn what words/terms/phrasing will elicit substantive responses from older adults.

Older adults need that which they've had throughout their lives and have grown accustomed to. As we grow up and move through life we grow use to having access (by whatever means) to things we need and an ability to obtain what we need. We have lived in a home conducive to our way of living.

- **When we design homes for older adults we need to continue the provision of access to the services they need at this time in their lives.** Though walking access should be encouraged access to transportation needed for services beyond walking is also needed. Encourage transportation services to and from the homes and ensure that properties have safe and warm waiting areas for those using the service.

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- **Rooms good for essential living and warmth.** Kitchens, where we spend so much of our lives should be carefully considered for mobility as well as comfort and fun. A spare bedroom for guests or a caregiver would be very helpful.
- **Bring in the Community.** Use the Age Friendly Communities networks and their model for engaging the community and keeping those in home networked with the community at large. Consult with experts about how best to design projects, engage the community and suggest strategic locations.

There are many generalizations about older adults including their capacity to utilize technology. The capacity of older adults to use technology ranging from computers, e-mail, texting, and more is as wide ranging as is the number of older adults.

- **Providers need to have technological capacity more so than the older adults.** Be capable of utilizing as many mediums of communication as possible if you want to optimize your service to older adults. Not just to provide services but also facilitate the older adult's capacity to communicate with those in their networks.
- **Aging is scary for all of us so we need to be aware of the nuances and stereo types that further misunderstanding of aging.** Just as alzheimer's is not an inevitable part of aging, neither is dementia of any type. Though we all slow down a bit as we grow older, growing old itself is in no way nor should it be automatically associated with decline.
- **Engagement, engagement.** Another unfortunate myth that underscores so many others, is the idea that as we age we disengage with others. And conversely, others disengage with us. This falsehood fosters ageism.

In reality there are many programs and services older adults can utilize to keep that vital sense of purpose but none perhaps is as critical as transportation. Many services and programs will simply require some means of transportation. Pharmacies, groceries, and everyday products and services are often within walking distance if you're in town but more critical health care needs may not be.

- **Transportation is the number one need.** Not only is it necessary to make sure you can see a doctor or specialist as often as necessary, it is also important to maintaining social networks.
- **Other services and programs in need.** As with all people, some older adults will need access to mental health professionals. This access needs to be timely. Food insecurity and even hoarding are areas where services and programming is needed to eliminate potentially disastrous outcomes. There is a need to simply keep moving through walking and maintaining balance all of which have programming available but not everywhere.

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- **More specialized service needs.** Unfortunately for older adults and their loved ones, lack of an advance directive can create considerable anxiety particularly when needed. Too many older adults in Maine lack having an advance directive (living will, medical directive, etc.) and subsequently their wishes as to what actions should be taken for their health if they are no longer able to make decisions for themselves, are not met.

Questions/comments from audience

What's the best age to considering decisions about housing?

- About 62 because at that time there are many options possible.

What about Uber as a model of transportation?

- It's being used in Kennebunk now and seems to be workable.

When screening someone for HEAP screen them for other services as well.

We need youth to bridge the gap in technology.

Create buddy networks

Build communities.