

GenPhilly: A Strategy for Improving the Sustainability of Aging in Community Initiatives

Kate Clark, MPA 23 January 2018

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Introduction

Many initiatives to enhance the ability of older adults to age in community are being seen as a critical component of strategies to increase neighborhood quality of life (Thomas & Blanchard, 2009). Age-friendly cities, Naturally Occurring Retirement Community Supportive Service Programs (NORC SSP), Villages, and Lifelong Communities, among others, are all examples of such programs. While they often succeed in meeting their goals, a constant challenge can be sustainability (Greenfield, Scharlach, Lehning, & Davitt, 2012). Unlike traditional aging programs and services funded by federal and state mandates, the funding for these programs is often not stable. In addition to financial constraints, another sustainability obstacle is that most professions outside of social services have not traditionally been

concerned with aging-specific issues until recently (Lawler, 2009). If the majority of disciplines are not talking about the needs of seniors, it is probably safe to say they have also not been training the next generation of professionals to think about how an aging population will affect their work. At the same time, aging network administrators must also consider the importance of recruiting, supporting, and maintaining the aging network workforce (Lee, Damron-Rodriguez, Lawrance, & Volland, 2009). These new administrators must learn about the importance of building collaborations with professionals from a variety of fields that affect neighborhood environments, such as housing and transportation planning, which have a significant impact on the lives of people of all ages.

GenPhilly is an innovative, replicable model that was developed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to inspire and engage emerging leaders from a variety of disciplines to promote and sustain an aging-in-community agenda. The group aims to both fill a void in professional support for beginning and mid-level aging network employees in Philadelphia and to inspire peers in organizations outside of aging to learn more about and incorporate older adults into their work. Administrative support is provided by the Area Agency on Aging, Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, yet it was designed by its members to be peer-led. In this way, young professionals in their 20's and 30's can capitalize on popular culture to create unique professional

development opportunities and get younger generations thinking about the type of city in which they themselves want to get older.

Membership

Network members work in urban planning, social work, public health, housing, the arts, philanthropy, and more. Their jobs include advocating for the legal rights of elders, promoting car sharing, creating new city government policies, and running community development corporations and senior centers. Together, they work to achieve GenPhilly's goals through three forms of outreach: (1) social media; (2) bimonthly network meetings where members present their work; and (3) public events open to people of all ages that aim to creatively connect targeted disciplines to the aging network.

The group has two complementary strategies to recruit new members. The first is through professional appeal. The leadership continually strives to illustrate and reinforce the fact that aging touches on every profession in some way or another, yet most professionals are not talking about seniors (Clark & Glicksman, 2012). GenPhilly aims to show young professionals from all fields that there is a competitive professional advantage that results from incorporating knowledge about older adults into their skill set. The second strategy is a more personal appeal. The leadership tries to empower peers to ask themselves: "In

what kind of city do I want to grow old?" and "How can I get there while helping the current population of seniors?"

Impact on Young Professionals Outside of the Field of Aging

Creativity and Aging

Early on, GenPhilly members identified the creativity of older people as a way to make a connection between generations. One of the group's first events was "Rockstars Are Ageless," hosting roughly 70 people at a local senior center. The event centered around a screening and discussion of *Young at Heart* (Walker & George, 2008), a documentary about an elder vocal choir (average age 85) who sing tunes from the Ramones, Coldplay, U2, and more. Soon after, a GenPhilly Network member from the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance, akin to the chamber of commerce for arts organizations, who helped to plan the event, brought an aging and creativity agenda back to her colleagues, which her organization continues to support strongly.

Age-Friendly Parks

In a 2010 citywide survey, 72 percent of older adults reported that they had not used a public recreation facility in the past year (including a park), while only one percent claimed that they did not live near one (Clark, 2011).

These data were used to recruit new GenPhilly members

whose work revolves around public parkland in the city. One new member from the Fairmount Park Conservancy presented on her organization at a network meeting. Subsequently, a working group was formed via PCA's Age-Friendly Philadelphia effort to create the Age-Friendly Parks Checklist that identifies features in a park that might encourage more park usage by seniors. The group then initiated focus groups comprised of seniors to validate whether these attributes were in fact important. The focus groups produced important results that the Fairmount Park Conservancy is now using on park renovations, with park stewardship groups, and on an effort to highlight Philadelphia's "signature" age-friendly parks.

Community Gardens and Senior Health

In February 2011, GenPhilly held an event called "Germinating Partnerships: Connecting Seniors to Community Gardens at City Hall." The unprecedented gathering brought together roughly 100 professionals from both the aging network and organizations that are greening the urban landscape and improving access to fresh food in the community. A toolkit was created to provide resources for starting and maintaining senior-friendly gardens, and maps were generated to show where current community gardens and senior services were located. At the event, several of the garden coordinators from senior centers and senior housing facilities expressed a need for a formal evaluation to

understand the impact of these efforts. PCA's Research and Evaluation Program then worked with a GenPhilly Network member to do a pilot study and focus groups on the topic (Wang & Allen, 2011).

Impact on Young Professionals in the Aging Network

Strengthening the Aging Network in Philadelphia

GenPhilly benefits organizations that serve older adults because it helps to attract, engage, and retain employees in the field of aging. The group serves as a support network for younger individuals whose work relates to the later stages of life. This dynamic can be challenging on a personal and professional level, considering that both getting older and working with seniors traditionally have been stigmatized as depressing. Because of this, and the fact that the financial benefits of directly working with older adults will continue to be minimal, it is important to validate the work of emerging leaders in the field (Frauenheim, 2006). GenPhilly does just that by providing new sources of ideas, technical expertise, and partners. This is especially important because as the baby boomers continue to age, there will be an increase in the need for professionals to join the aging network (Lee et al., 2009).

The Aging Network's Support of Pets

Motivated by various members' love for animals and the

knowledge that pet ownership spans the generations, GenPhilly organized an event in February 2010 to facilitate a groundbreaking meeting of aging and animal welfare advocates (GenPhilly, 2010a). Entitled "Golden Years and Furry Ears: Linking Older Adults to Homeless Pets to Build a Better Philadelphia," experts from the two different fields discussed the importance of pet companionship and the challenges that can occur with pet ownership later in life. More than 80 people attended the event and a discussion about creating a pilot project to assist seniors with their pets in Philadelphia was sparked. One GenPhilly member from the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia issued a request for proposals to create a program to help seniors with their pets. That September, PCA launched a new website (www.phillypetsandseniors.org) for the use of their employees and the public, which provides tips and resources for assisting older adults and their caregivers with the care of their pets.

In summary, GenPhilly has benefited the field of aging by building awareness of aging services in the wider community; facilitating cross-disciplinary learning and innovation around aging issues; stressing the competitive advantage for emerging leaders from all fields to know about aging issues; strengthening the aging network workforce; breaking down stereotypes about working with older adults; and introducing expertise from outside the aging network to benefit older adults. Encouraging the development of similar groups will not only benefit the

field of aging, it will assist the next generation of leaders in many fields to plan better for their communities and for themselves.

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Author Bio

Kate Clark is the Assistant Director for the Center for

Population Health Innovation at Jefferson, where she works with external organizations to build their capacity to address health disparities and manage chronic conditions. Before coming to Jefferson in 2017, she was Planner for Policy & Program Development at Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA). For eight years she worked to develop two nationally award-winning programs. Age-friendly Philadelphia catalyzes new initiatives, policies, and multi-disciplinary collaborations that help our neighborhoods become better places to grow up and grow old. Areas of impact include parks, housing, mobility, and community gardening. GenPhilly (Generation Appreciation Philadelphia) is a network of more than 500 emerging leaders from a variety of disciplines who are advocating for the interest of older adults while thinking about the type of city in which they themselves want to age. During this time Kate completed a two-year Atlantic Philanthropies Health and Aging Policy Fellowship advising the Surgeon General of the United States on healthy aging issues related to the Affordable Care Act's National Prevention Strategy. Kate is also Vice President of one of Philadelphia's oldest foundations, the Union Benevolent Association. Prior to moving to Philadelphia, she initiated and managed the City of Syracuse's first public art program; directed the City of New York's Historical Signs Program; and published a paper as a Fulbright Scholar on public-private partnerships and public space management. She has a Masters of Public Administration from the Maxwell School at Syracuse

University and a Bachelor of Art in Geography and
Archaeology from Clark University.