

## Age-Friendly Communities: Cross-sector Collaboration at Work

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**W**e live in a time of great change. Disruption has become the norm. New technologies and methods of communication seem to pop up every day. And new business models challenge established practices.

So, too, for our philanthropic models. In recent years, foundations and funders have begun shifting from the traditional approach of investing in programs or projects to a model that operates on principles of engagement. This new approach stresses investment in communities rather than “grantmaking” to foster collaboration. It invites perspectives from individuals and groups not in our field of work, and often looks at tackling social problems from the community’s point of view.

### **MOVING TOWARD AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES**

When Tufts Health Plan Foundation was founded in 2008, we followed a traditional philanthropic approach. Based on research and a planning process, we focused our giving around health issues confronting older adults. Research from the Home Safety Council indicated that falls were the number-one cause of unintentional home injury deaths, so early on we focused on fall prevention. We funded community-based organizations to conduct home assessments, provide information, and teach classes to help people understand and prevent falls and injuries. Experts from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation were reporting that as many as three of four Americans 65 and older had multiple chronic conditions. This led us to invest in evidence-based programs to help older adults learn how to modify their behavior and manage their conditions.

Soon we grew beyond these initial efforts. We invited state and local government leaders, experts from agencies working with older adults, and older adults themselves to be thought partners with us as we considered issues facing older adults in Massachusetts. These conversations led to the formation of the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative. As we learned together, we saw an opportunity to share what we were learning. Over the next few years, we hosted statewide conferences that brought together like-minded colleagues. You get the picture: we were gaining some traction.

Under new leadership, we leveraged the work that we started with a renewed commitment to impact. In 2014 we

took a closer look at what we were doing and why. We saw an opportunity to take a broader view, to honor community work and build on work already being done, and to engage others—unusual collaborators—to get a cross-sector perspective. As we shifted our approach, we recognized connections and possibilities that had not been apparent. We were able to bring seemingly disparate groups together to tackle issues on multiple fronts. We saw synergies developing among collaborators who were working on regional issues. We saw communities reaching out to other communities to pool resources, sharing assets and “intelligence” on the best ways to address community concerns. We began to understand that lasting change can happen when more voices—with their unique, yet similar harmonies—are brought into the mix.

We started to explore various frameworks. One example was the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities. This model focuses on local action that fosters the full participation of older people in community life. We quickly identified community allies who were working within some aspect of the WHO “domains,” which include social participation, housing needs, transportation, outdoor spaces and buildings, access to community supports and services, communication and information, civic engagement, and respect and inclusion. Our “ah-ha” moment came when we began to understand that for our communities to thrive and work for residents of all ages, we needed to promote and support inclusive processes for engagement—processes that focused on improving communities for everyone as they aged. This was a better path forward as we looked to improve our impact.

### **RECOGNIZING THAT CHANGE IS NOT EASY**

We recognized that we’d have to think differently—and fund differently—in order to achieve the kind of change we hope to see. After conversations with stakeholders, communities, and organizations doing this work, we formalized our goal of advancing age-friendly communities by working collaboratively toward systems change, policy, and advocacy efforts—and met with current and prospective grantees to explain what that meant. We transitioned our existing grantees by extending their current grants, giving them time to assess where they fit in the new strategy. And while we believed that funding

individual programs was a great place to start as a foundation, we understood that it would not move the needle on issues facing older adults in the way we wanted. These conversations weren't always easy. Some grantees were receptive and excited about the possibilities. Others struggled with what it meant for their organization, understanding this new framework would not necessarily bring them direct funding.

After a year under these new strategies, the outlook is promising. We've found communities already working on age-friendly initiatives. Age Friendly Vision 2020 Task Force, for example, is focusing on a rural area of Massachusetts that is aging rapidly. They are one of our first grantees under our new focus. In partnership with AARP and using the WHO model, the task force is mobilizing and aligning Berkshire County's 32 cities and towns around a common vision. So far, the group has completed a survey of those over age 50 to learn about their priorities and has begun crafting an action plan (<http://www.iberkshires.com/story/49293/Berkshire-Task-Force-Plans-For-Aging-Demographics.html>). They are working collaboratively to bring about the policy and systems changes necessary to accommodate the needs of a rapidly aging population, which by 2020 will be more than 60 percent over the age of 60.

But not all communities were at the point where the Berkshires were, and so we also grappled with how to support capacity building and training. For this we turned to FSG, a mission-driven consulting firm that promotes collective impact and helps collaborations assess where they are in their work. Through a collective-impact approach, collaborations bring different actors together to solve social issues by using a common agenda, aligning their efforts, and developing shared measures of success. Initially, the foundation funded three age-friendly efforts in Massachusetts. FSG developed workshops and trained the core teams from each initiative to set them on the path to reach their goals through self-assessment, visioning, concrete collective action, and, most important, communication.

## KEEPING EYES ON THE BIG PICTURE

This work is not easy. As one of our board members stated when discussing our new focus, "This will require a deeper commitment to engagement by the staff, a more profound understanding of community and where they are." Too, we've learned that it's not always easy for organizations to come to agreement, that collaboration takes time, and that we must begin by honoring our communities and their vision. System change is hard, but we believe it's essential to achieving long-term impact.

We are committed to investing in initiatives that make communities work for *everyone* as they age. For us this means supporting collaborations and partnerships that include the usual and unusual suspects, investing in a range of efforts, and making multiyear commitments to our community partners. We find ourselves working on a range of issues, from social isolation to walkable sidewalks to technology—and working with a range of partners, from government officials to social service agencies to private entities.

During a meeting with local nonprofits focused on caregiving and social isolation, one participant put our work in perspective by noting that age-friendly work is really about making communities work for *all* ages: the young mother pushing a baby carriage through a neighborhood needs the same things as the 90-year-old taking an afternoon walk: even, walkable sidewalks, benches to sit on when they are tired, access to public restrooms, and an overall safe environment. Who wouldn't want that for their community?

## AGE-FRIENDLY RESOURCES

### [MAHealthyAgingCollaborative.org](http://MAHealthyAgingCollaborative.org)

- [Age-Friendly Tool Kit](#)

### [GIAging.org](http://GIAging.org) (Grantmakers in Aging)

- [Age-Friendly America Database](#)  
*Searchable database of more than 200 programs, to find out what's going on in your area and nationwide*
- [GIA's Community AGEnda](#)  
*Resources to help funders, nonprofits, governments, planners and citizens*
- [Guiding Principles for the Sustainability of Age-Friendly Community Efforts](#)
- [The Case for Age-Friendly Communities](#) (2016)  
*Report and Executive Summary available*

### [AARP.org](http://AARP.org)

- [AARP Livable Communities](#)  
*Resources for local leaders and influencers*
- [2015 Age-Friendly Report: Inspiring Communities](#)  
*16 case studies from the U.S. and around the world*

### [WHO.org](http://WHO.org) (World Health Organization)

- [WHO Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities](#)
- [Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide](#) (2007)

### [N4a.org](http://N4a.org) (National Association of Area Agencies on Aging)

- [Making Your Community Livable for All Ages: What's Working](#) (2015)

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