

Good Places to Grow Old: **A Framework for Creating an Aging-Friendly Community**

BRENDA MCGREGOR

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The phrase “Good Places to Grow Old” is now a new reality for many older Americans. Yet, the communities in which many people live are hardly good places to grow old. For me, as for many, creating an aging-friendly community is as much a personal concern as it is a professional one. As my later years seem to be approaching at a rapid rate, my overwhelming desire is to live in a community that truly is a good place to grow old. In order to allow older Americans to reside in good places to grow old, our communities must supply the aging population with appropriate services. These services should include affordable housing, transportation, health care, in-home supportive services, public safety, and social opportunities. By having these services in place, we enable the elderly to either function independently or with some assistance while continuing to live their lives within their own homes and communities.

Additionally, to achieve our goal of creating “good places to grow old”, our communities must see the aged as an asset rather than a liability. With sizeable amounts of free time and disposable income, the elderly often act as economic generators, philanthropists, and volunteers in their communities. In other words, when the elderly are able to get out of their homes and actively participate in the community, the areas in which they live prosper. The contributions made by the senior population impact local shops, restaurants, universities, libraries, and all aspects

of a healthy, thriving community. “Contra Costa County for Every Generation” is a movement that creates strategies that foster local communities that enable people to grow old in good, aging-friendly places which would be a benefit to all generations.

Recommendation

The City and County of San Francisco will greatly benefit by facilitating a collaboration between public and private partners to strategize for the future of its aging population, as Contra Costa County has done with the development of “Contra Costa for Every Generation”.

As the baby boomer generation continues to age, the City and County of San Francisco will experience the most profound age shift in its history. This age shift will affect every aspect of life: community; housing, economic growth, health and social systems, transportation, and education. Therefore, in order for San Francisco to properly prepare, it must recognize and address the issues surrounding this demographic shift.

As identified by Contra Costa County, it is critical that the City and County of San Francisco’s Department of Aging and Adult Services anticipate the needs of these aging baby boomers. It must create an aging-friendly community that addresses ba-

**Brenda McGregor, Social Work Supervisor,
San Francisco County Department of Human Services**

sic needs, optimizes physical and mental health and well-being, maximizes independence, and promotes social and civic engagement for all members of the community.

We must be mindful that in order to create true social change there needs to be a collaborative effort; aging isn't someone else's issue, it's everyone's issue. We need the input and commitment from all members of the community, including partnerships with

community-based organizations, private businesses, and other public service agencies.

The investment the residents of San Francisco make to create aging-friendly communities will be well worth the time, commitment, dedication, energy, and resources. It can help to build a national agenda and make the United States a far better place for everyone to live their lives with dignity, worth, and a sense of purpose.

Good Places to Grow Old: **A Framework for Creating an Aging-Friendly Community**

BRENDA MCGREGOR

Introduction

In the United States, it is now the case that both men and women are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. For the first time in history, long life is not a rarity. According to an article in the October 2007 issue of AARP, the senior population will double within the next 25 years. Today, there are more than 35 million Americans age 65 or older which represents a tenfold increase in the 65 and over population since the year 1900. Over the next twenty-five years, this number will double, and one in every five Americans will be 65 or older. What's more, being 65 isn't considered old anymore. Most Americans can count on another eighteen years of life once they reach the age of 65, and more than half will live past 90. The fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is the 85 and older group. In 1900, the average life expectancy was age 47. By 1950, it had reached age 68. Today, the life expectancy at birth is age 78, at age 65, it's age 83, and if you live to age 75, your life expectancy is to live 12 more years beyond that. Hence, if you are 50 years of age, you have half of your adult life in front of you—a tremendous opportunity that most of our ancestors never had.

There exists today, a “longevity bonus” of years that could be spent in good health. There is the opportunity to enjoy a long life; to pursue a cause or purpose, and to help families, the broader community, the country, and the world and make it a better place for everyone.

Having the opportunity to live a longer, healthier life is a blessing; a tremendous gift and an opportunity for us all. This also offers to this generation

real power to change society for the better. With all this being said the question remains “why are most communities ill-prepared to create good places for people to grow old?”

Background of “Contra Costa for Every Generation”

Contra Costa County is a San Francisco Bay Area county that has been quite instrumental in seizing the opportunity to make its community more aging-friendly, thus, more livable.

“Contra Costa for Every Generation” began in early 2004 as a county-wide partnership to create aging-friendly communities. It was a collaboration of John Muir Hospital, Mt. Diablo Health Fund, and Contra Costa County Employment and Human Services Department (EHSD). This collaboration played a crucial role the first few years as investors and creators of “Contra Costa for Every Generation”, also known as CCEG. CCEG is a civic engagement movement that developed a plan to ensure that local communities of Contra Costa County were good places in which to grow old.

The CCEG collaboration projected approximately \$500,000 of initial funding to support CCEG's objectives for the first three years. Fortunately, the contributions totaled \$518,000. In 2007, CCEG received its non-profit status as an independent non-profit 501(c)(3). Mt. Diablo Health Fund recently indicated an interest in providing funding to CCEG to hire a community organizer. Now in 2008, Contra Costa County EHSD has remained a key supporter, contributing resources and hundreds of hours of staff

time to serve on the board and participate in initiatives. For example, the website for Contra Costa for Every Generation (www.foreverygeneration.org) was designed and funded by the county.

CCEG relies on support from individuals, organizations, and corporations to help achieve its mission of creating aging-friendly communities. Contributions can be in the form of monetary donations and/or volunteer services. Contra Costa for Every Generation's primary goal is to help create aging-friendly communities by increasing community awareness. Awareness is created by actively engaging people in training and facilitation or by fostering local action to make communities within Contra Costa County more aging-friendly.

Contra Costa County created CCEG because it recognized the importance of strategic planning for the future, which included anticipation of the needs of its aging community. Through this CCEG collaboration, a vision came to life. A vision that outlined what issues would be paramount to address in order to become more aging-friendly.

The CCEG collaboration gathered data through a survey conducted by the AdvantAge Initiative project. The AdvantAge Initiative is a highly respected organization that helps communities across the nation to identify ways to make their communities more aging-friendly. The results of the survey enabled CCEG to identify six areas of concern for Contra Costa County seniors. The six areas of concern became "action-based initiatives" which outlined three-year goals and six-month strategic objectives in the following areas:

- Housing
- Transportation
- Health Care and Wellness
- Neighborhood Quality of Life
- Involvement in the Community
- Support Services

The creators of CCEG understood in order to promote social change, to understand their communities' needs, or to create strategic planning for the future, they needed to enlist the support from all

members of their community, including: the following constituencies:

- Nonprofit Agencies
- Public Agencies
- Community-Based Organizations
- Local Politicians/Civic Leaders
- Senior Advocates
- Business Leaders
- Private Citizens
- Service Providers

Challenges

As Americans age and boomers swell the ranks of the older population, they will demand more services in their communities to help them maintain their independence. Changes in their environment (personal and public) will be needed to allow them to function with as much independence as possible. Therefore, San Franciscans need to create an environment that makes it easier for people to remain independent and to engage in civic and social life as they get older.

Redefining community is a tremendous challenge. As San Francisco considers taking on this challenge, it can learn from some of the areas of concern that were identified by Contra Costa County. They included:

Housing

- Affordable housing options are limited.
- Homes and building designs are not being tailored to meet all ranges of physical abilities/disabilities.
- Housing and supportive services are not being coordinated.

Transportation

- Older drivers experience specific difficulties related to the driving environment.
- Some road designs can make walking difficult.
- Customer-oriented community transportation options are lacking for older adults.

Health and Supportive Services

- Community information about available services is not appropriately disseminated across agencies, providers, and ultimately to citizens.

- Home-based services are often provided piecemeal rather than in a coordinated manner.
- Poor diets and physical inactivity increase health risks for many older adults.
- Lack of transportation to hospitals and doctors' offices affects access to health care.

Civic Engagement

- Older adults are looking for a broader array of civic engagement options than most communities offer.

Public Safety

- Older adults commonly voice concern about the safety of their neighborhoods.
- Elder abuse is an increasingly recognized problem.

Implications for the City and County of San Francisco

As budget constraints continue to impact service programs, resources remain extremely limited, non-existent, or strained to the maximum. With this in mind, coupled with the needs of a growing aging community, it is imperative that San Francisco County recognizes and strives to implement a plan of action that is cost-effective while enabling it to explore ideas of what constitutes an aging-friendly community.

In order to take the stress off of any particular program or department, the county needs to engage in a collaborative effort. It will need to learn, as Contra Costa County did, that in order to achieve any social change, the responsibility cannot be placed solely on a single individual, agency or department. It has to involve the efforts and commitment from all members of the community to achieve a common goal.

The City and County of San Francisco has to elicit the help of all local residents. These individuals can act as a guide or a roadmap that will aid in creating a vision that can help ensure that all older adults and people of all ages have the opportunity to live their lives to their fullest potential in their own communities. By learning from the ideas and areas of

concerns of its own local community, San Francisco will be incorporating the spirit of "Contra Costa for Every Generation."

Recommendation

According to a February 2008 article in the San Francisco Chronicle, by 2050, 21% of California's residents will be seniors. It also cited 3.9 million seniors resided in California in 2005, the highest total of any state in the nation. As the number and proportion of older citizens increase, so will the percentage of Americans enduring some of the following:

- One or more chronic health conditions.
- A personal concern about pensions, social security, and medical coverage.
- Housing problems.
- Transportation concerns.

Therefore, the City and County of San Francisco must develop policies and programs that will find the right balance between addressing health and security issues on one hand, and maximizing both individual strengths and social networks on the other.

Creating an aging-friendly community will require organizations from throughout the community to identify their strengths, resources and the competencies that can be used to everyone's contributions to this important endeavor. It is equally important to have the involvement of community members from all age groups. By coupling organizational and individual strengths, San Francisco can build a system that supports the successful aging of all parties, from the frail and isolated to the active, healthy, and mobile. In doing so, it will minimize the human and financial costs of aging while maximizing the potential for addressing broader community issues.

Communities can do much simply by paving the way for older individuals to remain actively involved. Research shows the majority of older people of today are healthier, wealthier, and better educated on average than the elderly of any previous generation. They still need to be engaged in their communities, and such engagement helps promote healthy aging and minimizes the health care and social costs often associated with an aging population.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation and gratitude to those who have supported me during my participation in BASSC.

- Thanks to Kitty Barnes, my contact/consultant in Contra Costa County. Your mentoring during this project was greatly appreciated.
- Special thanks to San Francisco County Department of Aging and Adult Services for affording me the opportunity to participate in BASSC. It was an honor.