Good morning and welcome to the 2013 Annual Conference of Grantmakers in Aging. My name is John Feather, and I have the honor of being GIA’s Chief Executive Officer. I’m delighted you’re here with us for “Growing Up, Growing Older: Working Together for Better Communities.”
This morning I’ll offer a few reflections on the state of aging, then I’d like to discuss the exciting work GIA has been doing this year in the field of age-friendly communities, and some of the lessons we’ve learned from this effort.
First, a few thoughts about aging. Right now, you and I are living through one of the most significant demographic events in human history: the permanent aging of our population.
As a thousand newspaper articles have noted, the Baby Boomers have begun coming of age ... causing the aging of our population to **accelerate**. About 11,000 Americans will turn 65 every day from now until the year 2029. By 2050, older Americans will make up 21% of the population. This will not always look the way we may think. For example ...
Hispanic elderly will grow at a faster rate than any other group, even though we think of this as a “young” community.
This is the first generation of lesbian and gay people who have lived most of their adult life “out of the closet.”
Boomers are twice as likely as their parents never to have been married or have children. What does “family caregiver” mean for them?
And while many Boomers have ample means, this generation will also include many poor older people. How poor? The average Boomer will take less than 50-thousand dollars in total assets into retirement. Not annual income – total ASSETS of less than $50,000.
Population aging is a major fact of life around the world as well. By the middle of this century, China will have nearly 500 million older people. To put that in perspective, China’s ELDERLY population will include 180 million more people than the ENTIRE population of the United States.
Around the world, whether it’s Brazil … South Korea … India … … or Kenya … places we don’t usually think of as “old” are aging. And while we are aging fast, these and many other countries are aging much FASTER. It’s also true that very few places anywhere in the world are well-prepared for this massive change.
But there is good news: I believe that one of the most promising responses we can make is to join and support the age-friendly communities movement.
At GIA, we joined last November, when we launched Community AGEnda – Creating Great Places to Grow Up and Grow Old.
Community AGEnda receives funding support from the Pfizer Foundation, and is working with communities in five places:
Miami-Dade County, Florida; Greater Atlanta; Greater Phoenix; Right here is the greater Kansas City area; And in three communities in the state of Indiana.
What are these communities doing? Each project is different, but some core elements of age-friendly work include: Influencing municipal and regional planning; Promoting health and improve access to care; And improving transportation and promoting walkability and accessibility;
For instance -- THIS is not just a traffic light.
It’s a public safety upgrade for everyone from parents pushing strollers to people in wheelchairs. And it’s an invitation to older people to go for a walk, because they now have extended pedestrian crossing times, audible signals, and visual countdowns in many places.
Age-friendly development can also include strengthening social services, such as meal delivery programs and adult day programs,
And making housing more affordable and accessible. This, incidentally, ties in to another new GIA initiative, our Funders Forum for Affordable Housing with Services, which I invite you to learn more about.
Does this sound familiar? Your foundation or community is probably doing similar work already. It’s just not designating it as an “age-friendly initiative.” And that raises an important point. Many of these programs, taken individually, are the bedrock of a strong aging portfolio. But how well integrated are our efforts? And if they’re not well-integrated, are they as effective as they could be? Unfortunately, this part of the age-friendly puzzle – integrating efforts in a systematic way -- can be much harder.
A case in point: These photos were taken in a wonderful senior community in Kingsland, Texas (pop 6,000), in the rural center of the state. Each building has four independent living apartments, all on the same level. It features universal design throughout. There are sidewalks on both sides of the street to encourage walking, including color coding on the curb cuts. At the community center, there are exercise classes and congregate meals. This is also where my 82-year old mother lives. That’s her unit in the center. It’s about as “Age-friendly” as it could be.
Unfortunately, this is the “sidewalk to nowhere.” Once you leave my mother’s community, there ARE no more sidewalks. If my mother goes to the pharmacy - next door - this is the “sidewalk” she has to walk on. Since she has balance problems, she is understandably reluctant to do so. You can also see in this picture that a 4-lane highway, with no street lights or crosswalks, separates her building from her grocery store, her bank, and her church.
So she ends up – very reluctantly - taking the senior bus. My point is that, without integration of various systems, age friendliness literally stops at the gate. So what do we need to do to take it beyond the gate?
Based on our experience at GIA, working with some terrific grantee communities, I’d like to offer a few observations on what it takes to build an age-friendly community.
First, **Rule #1 Dream big, but work small.** This work is ambitious, and that’s great. The problem is, when we’re setting visionary goals, it can sometimes feel so amorphous, so vague, and so gushy that it sounds like we’re talking about ...
...unicorns and rainbows” — a wish list that it would take several lifetimes to achieve, and leaves out all the realistic compromises we will have to make. So I offer a few real-life examples of working small.
THIS is not just a pizza. It’s dinner for an older lady who is a member of one of The Villages, a prominent aging-in-place model. But what this lady REALLY wants is someone – probably a Village volunteer - to STAY and eat it with her. She needs company, not just Domino’s.
THIS is not just a bench. It’s a senior center. An informal one, to be sure, but when the New York Academy of Medicine conducted its “Toward An Age-Friendly New York City” survey in 2008, two out of three respondents said that benches for resting are “very important” to the well-being of older New Yorkers. In fact, the lack of places to sit in public areas was the main reason older people did not walk for exercise.
Rule #2: Reach out as widely as possible.
The benefit of the age-friendly moniker is that it constructs a “big tent” for great projects, puts them in a larger context, and helps us recruit new supporters. But to be really well-integrated, an age-friendly initiative needs buy-in from politicians, city planners, providers of public transportation and public housing, private developers, universities, and the business community. And you have to stay with it, consistently, over time.
That leads me to Rule #3: **Sustainability should be on your agenda from the very beginning.**

These programs take time and patience and cooperation and they need long-term backers. This, in turn, means that everyone involved needs to be flexible. The support you need can and will take many forms, and can come from many sources.
For instance: THIS is not just a community garden.
It’s a community CENTER, an oasis in a food desert, and, as a growing body of research now suggests, a source of moderate exercise, social stimulation, and perhaps even cognitive protection for older adults.
But keep in mind... that community garden may have funding from a local chamber of commerce – the land may have been donated by the town or the school district – and the Rotary Club or PTA may help maintain it. These may be people you’re not used to working with.
#4: **Plan long-term, act short-term.**

To put it another way, you should be both patient and impatient. In New York City, they’re providing new benches in the short term, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg has talked about full implementation of the city’s age-friendly plan … in a 50-year time frame.
The city of Mableton, Georgia, outside of Atlanta, another great role model ... has a **35-year plan**. That is because most of the infrastructure and redevelopment will take place when the current structures are replaces, and that will take time. Those are daunting time lines, but if we don’t start, even in 50 years we will not have age-friendly communities.
Finally, Rule #5: Don’t forget about social justice.
One of the great things about an age-friendly community is that EVERYBODY wins. Advantages like walkability and better services are great for everyone, old and young, rich and poor. But there’s a fine line between improving neighborhood conditions for residents – and gentrifying the place so much that you’ve priced them out. We want to improve access to services, not access to latte.
Finally, the process of creating better communities for all is messy. You take two steps forward, 3 sideways, spin around, and try again. But as the baby reminds us, messy can be good — and fun!
In the past year at GIA, we’ve had the pleasure of meeting and working with some of the leaders in this growing field and we’ve learned a lot. We’ve also compiled a set of online age-friendly resources for anyone interested in pursuing an age-friendly initiative. They include:
An overview document of the age-friendly movement;
A toolkit called “Aging Power Tools”
And a searchable online database. These resources are available at GIA-ging.org and can help you locate programs, thought leaders, and other funders, see what they’re doing, and how they’re doing it. A few last thoughts: The age-friendly movement is both local ...
and global, as we saw earlier this fall when we attended the World Health Organization’s Second International Conference on Age-Friendly Cities, in Quebec...
We also travelled to Turkey, to the International Federation on Aging’s Istanbul Initiative on Aging, where we co-hosted a lovely dinner with IFA for international leaders and dignitaries from 13 countries. It became clear that age-friendly goals are relevant in any language, any society, and any institution.
That's just one of the reasons that I believe this is a golden opportunity for philanthropy. Age-friendly communities can be a great fit whether you work on transportation, intergenerational issues, the arts, health, or smart growth.
There is a huge opening here to make a vital contribution, and not just by writing checks. Being an advocate – a knowledge generator – and a convener can be enormously helpful. Community foundations of any size, for instance, know everyone in town and can have a lot of impact by bringing people together.
Philanthropy can also be very helpful by promoting the integration of goals and efforts I mentioned earlier. Helping to ensure that those sidewalks in Texas go SOMEWHERE, not just a few blocks then into a ditch.
In conclusion, what is the state of aging and where do we go from here? I would offer that the challenges before us are considerable and continue to grow, but the age-friendly movement is gaining momentum, too.
More and more people in all walks of life are taking note of the aging of our population.
More people realize this is something we must work on together. This is the Mayor of Phoenix speaking at a meeting put together by our grantee there. By broadening our contacts and our goals, we can in turn call on more people, find new supporters and make new allies, and draw on their resources and talents, more creatively and proactively than ever before.
It’s an exciting time, and I thank you for the extremely important work that you do.