Finding Funding for Aging: Does Ageism Matter?

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Does Ageism Matter?

• YES!
• New understanding of the factors in ageism raises new understanding and new hope
• Much of the challenge is on us – those who work in aging
• We must be willing to translate our understanding and language into conceptual frameworks that funders use
• We can’t wait for funders to “get it”
Funding Focus

- Lots of sources of funding for lots of types of program and research
- Most are decreasing as the aging population increases
- Have not reauthorized the Older Americans Act after five years
- NIH/NIA funding is flat or falling; major funding is disease specific
- State and local support is straining to just meet safety net needs
A Look at Aging Philanthropy

• Less than 2% of US foundation support goes to work on aging

• Has not changed in 20 years

• Actually going down – 1.3% in latest report

• Problems with data – what counts as “aging”?

• Actual percentage does not matter. The critical point is that funding will never catch up to the aging population percentage at this point
Multiple Choice Question

- Americans don’t want to think about aging because they are:
  a) Stupid
  b) Delusional
  c) Uncaring
  d) Afraid
  e) All of the above
We Have Met the Enemy...

• The *Gauging Aging* report points out the profound differences between the public’s understanding and those who work in the field of aging

• We must assume that those who work in philanthropy share the public’s understanding, not ours

• It is up to us to find ways to fit our knowledge into the funders understanding of issues; we can’t wait

• We can use the insights of the framing research to better understand and meet our challenges

• As Pogo said: “We have met the enemy…and he is us.”
Public-Expert Differences

• The *Gauging Aging* report identified a number of key gaps between the public understanding of aging and that of experts in the field, including:
  o Opportunities: a need for infrastructure vs. already there
  o Policy Implications: broad vs. absent
  o Attitudes Toward Aging: Embrace vs. Battle
  o Implications of Increased Longevity: collective vs. individual
  o Ageism: important concern vs. absent from thinking

• All of these are directly relevant to our new approach to framing our issues differently.
My Reaction

• We failed
• People really are stupid
• We keep telling them the facts – why won’t they listen?
• Denial is not just a river in Egypt
• Just wait until you get old

None of these help.
Let’s get on with it.
Foundation Examples

• Robert Wood Johnson: “building a culture of health”

• Kate B. Reynolds: “meeting the health and wellness needs for financially needy residents of North Carolina”

• Rockefeller: “building greater community resilience and more inclusive economies”

• California Wellness: “to support and strengthen nonprofit organizations that seek to improve the health of underserved populations”

• California Endowment: “to change those communities most devastated by health inequities into places where all people have an opportunity to thrive.”
Observations

• All are relevant to aging

• None use the age-specific language that we use

• The challenge is how to fit our issues into a very different way of seeing the needs of the nation

• Requires more than a superficial re-orientation of focus and presentation

• Won’t work if this is not what you really do
Community Development

• For those who emphasize creating stronger communities:
  o Older persons are part of every community; building communities for all must include them
  o What is good for older people (better housing, better health care, safer streets) is good for everyone
  o Older persons are a critical resource for community development, not a drain on the economy
  o There are not enough resources to create a separate system for each age group. How can we work together across the age span?
  o Age friendly communities (or livable communities or communities for all) is a framework to integrate all of these pieces
Underserved Populations

• Older persons living in poverty are an important segment of any underserved community

• If you are looking to serve the most vulnerable, some of these individuals fit that category

• Better services and resources for these older persons also improves the whole community

• In lower income communities, resources that go to older people (e.g., Social Security) are critical to providing stable income to families as a whole
Rural Development

• Many local funders work on rural development, but very few focus on older people.

• Ironic because the highest concentrations of older people in the country are found in rural counties. Many are over 50% over 65 currently and rapidly increasing as younger people move away.

• Because of scarce resources, rural development must include older persons. It is not possible to create separate systems for each age group.
Using an Aging Lens

• Any way of framing issues involves focusing on certain factors to the exclusion of others.

• Use aging as a “lens” to focus on a particular sub-population within a broader set of issues (e.g., poverty, rural development).

• Don’t advocate for an aging-only focus when that is not the way the funder has framed the problem.

• Think carefully and deeply rather than superficially using a few buzz words.
Conclusions

• These are examples of ways to start thinking outside of the aging frame of reference and take seriously the funders’ frame.

• It requires re-thinking what we are doing and how we talk about it.

• It is painful. It is natural to resent having to do this. Get over it.

• It will not be immediately successful, but we do it for those we serve.