

Finding Funding for Aging: Does Ageism Matter?

John Feather, PhD
Grantmakers in Aging

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:
 - Opportunities: a need for infrastructure vs. already there
 - Policy Implications: broad vs. absent
 - Attitudes Toward Aging: Embrace vs. Battle
 - Implications of Increased Longevity: collective vs. individual
 - **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:
 - Older persons are *part* of every community; building communities for all must include them
 - What is good for older people (better housing, better health care, safer streets) is good for everyone
 - Older persons are a critical resource for community development, not a drain on the economy
 - There are not enough resources to create a separate system for each age group. How can we work together across the age span?
 - 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.