

Expert Roundtable on Civic Engagement -Summary of Findings-

BACKGROUND

Launched in 2007, the *Age-friendly New York City* initiative is assessing local structures and services in order to develop strategies that will make New York City more accessible to, and inclusive of, older people with varying needs and capacities. This work, which is being carried out by the New York Academy of Medicine in collaboration with both the Mayor and the City Council of New York, is particularly focused on eight domains of city life, including:

- outdoor spaces and buildings;
- transportation;
- housing;
- respect and social inclusion;
- social participation;
- communication and information;
- civic participation and employment; and,
- community support and health services.

Now in the assessment phase, the initiative is collecting information about the advantages and barriers older New Yorkers experience in the eight areas of city living outlined above – and what changes may be needed. To inform this process, the New York City Council and the New York Academy of Medicine are co-convening a series of seven roundtable discussions to talk directly with experts from various sectors. The purpose of the roundtables is to identify the ideas, concerns, and ideas relating to the anticipated growth of the City's older population *and* to identify contributions that these respective sectors can make (and in some instances, have already made) toward bettering the lives of New York's older residents -- and what may be needed to develop/expand these efforts. The seven roundtables, which were carried out in January and February of 2008, focused on the following topic areas:

- 1) *Business*, chaired by Partnership for New York City President Kathryn Wylde;
- 2) *Housing Development*, chaired by Citizens Housing and Planning Council Executive Director Jerilyn Perine;
- 3) *Civic Engagement*, chaired by Wagner School of Public Service Professor Walter Stafford;
- 4) *Transportation and Outdoor Spaces*, chaired by Straphangers Campaign Senior Attorney Gene Russianoff;
- 5) *Tenant Rights*, chaired by Citywide Taskforce on Housing Court Executive Director Louise Seeley;
- 6) *Social Services*, chaired by United Way of New York City CEO Gordon Campbell; and,
- 7) *Health*, chaired by New York Academy of Medicine President Jo Ivey Boufford.

The following provides a summary of the major themes to emerge from the Civic Engagement Roundtable discussion, which was held at the United Hospital Fund offices on Wednesday, February 6, 2008.

PARTICIPANTS

- City Council Member Maria del Carmen Arroyo
- City Council Member David Weprin
- Jo Ivey Boufford, President, The New York Academy of Medicine
- *Chair:* Walter Stafford, Professor of Public Policy and Planning at New York University
- Ruth Finkelstein, Vice President for Health Policy, The New York Academy of Medicine
- Guillermo Linares, Commissioner, Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
- Jamie Bennett, Chief of Staff, NYC Department of Cultural Affairs
- Carin Resnick, Deputy Commissioner, NYC Department for the Aging
- Aviva Sufian, Senior Policy Analyst, NYC Department for the Aging
- Marlon Williams, Policy Advisor, Office of NYC Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services
- Rosa Perla Resnick, United Nations Representative
- Fredda Vladeck, Director of the Aging in Place Initiative, United Hospital Fund
- Anne Shkuda, Deputy Executive Director, United Neighborhood Houses of New York
- Genevieve Cervera, Member of Community Board 6
- Len McNally, Program Director, Health and People with Special Needs, The New York Community Trust
- Molly Krakowski, Director, The Joint Public Affairs Committee for Older Adults (JPAC)
- Claire Haaga Altman, Executive Director, ReServe Elder Services
- Roger Sanjek, Professor of Anthropology at Queens College and Member of Gray Panthers NYC
- Robert McBrien, Associate Director, Collections and Services, New York Public Library
- Gary Bagley, Senior Director, Programs, New York Cares
- Paulette Geanacopoulos, Women's City Club
- Alex Kalache, New York Academy of Medicine
- Joan Jeffri, Director, Research Center for Arts and Culture, Columbia University

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For purposes of this discussion, the working definition of "civic engagement" developed by the American Society on Aging was used and encompasses actions wherein older adults participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community. A community can be a neighborhood, city, county, nation or the world. Late life civic engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to paid part or full time work to organizational/faith community involvement to electoral participation. Discussion questions included:

- How do you foresee civic engagement among seniors (i.e. actions wherein older adults participate in activities of personal and public concern that are both individually life enriching and socially beneficial to the community) being affected by population aging in the next 10 to 15 years?
- What can be done to help keep people engaged longer and in the ways they need/want?
- How are the civic engagement needs/wants of older people being addressed in ongoing initiatives?
- What would be ways to include or expand the voice of older people in decision-making?
- What supports/resources/initiatives are needed to help accommodate the civic engagement needs/wants of older people?
- What steps/changes are needed in the short term? Long term?

MAJOR THEMES TO EMERGE

Participants outlined the many civic engagement opportunities now available to older New Yorkers and identified areas that need to be expanded in order to maximize the use of seniors as resources. Also discussed were the many barriers to social inclusion and participation in civil society among older adults.

I. Expanding civic engagement opportunities

- A. Meaningful work opportunities (both paid and unpaid):** Participants outlined the possibilities for older adults who either have to or want to continue engaging in meaningful work as they age. Many older people continue working beyond the traditional retirement age of 65, some because they find meaning and fulfillment in the work (be they paid, unpaid, full-time, or part-time), others because it is what financial considerations dictate.

Recommendations

- Need for more flexibility in employment opportunities to allow older people to phase into retirement or obtain health insurance through their employer even if they work part-time
- Discrimination in the workplace must be combated to assure that older people are not forced out of their paid jobs and encouraged to accept volunteer opportunities
- Older people should be given added information and support during the critical transition from work to retirement
- Programs like ReServe which allow older people to continue working, often in new and interesting career fields, should be expanded
- Nonprofit organizations should have access to volunteer coordinators to manage the recruitment of older people and make sure older people are happy and fulfilled with the work they are carrying out
- While various volunteer opportunities currently exist for older people in the city, information about these opportunities should be centralized and accessible

B. Life-long learning opportunities

Recommendations

- Many continuing education programs are cost prohibitive and should have a sliding scale fee structure for older adults

- C. Opportunities for advocacy and activism:** Participants explained that there are few easy paths for older adults to connect with the political process in New York City. They outlined the need for more leadership opportunities and involvement in decision-making processes as well as training for the younger-old who will need to replace today's older advocates in the coming years.

Recommendations:

- Leadership training should be provided at the local community level to identify and mobilize older people around the issues they care about most
- All elected officials should have senior advisory councils to guide them in their decision-making
- All Community Boards should have committees focused on aging issues and be given the tools, resources, and knowledge needed to advocate for older people in their districts

- The various Interagency Councils on Aging throughout the city should be supported and more integrally linked to maximize effectiveness and idea exchange

D. Other meaningful engagement: Civil society starts at the community level so participants emphasized the need to broaden the definition of civic engagement to include the informal work and roles of older people in their families and communities.

Recommendations

- The informal civic engagement activities of older people should be recognized and supported, such as grandparents raising grandchildren or involvement with faith communities
- The oral histories of older people in New York should be documented to ensure they are not lost

E. Participants highlighted the need for additional resources to sustain and expand civic engagement opportunities in the City.

Recommendations

- Funding to support the work of nonprofit social service providers should be expanded to increase the civic engagement opportunities they offer older people
- Private donors and foundations should have a more sustained focus on increasing civic engagement opportunities for older people
- Examine possible ways of leveraging existing funds that support civic engagement opportunities to allow more elders to benefit
- Pilot programs and best practices should be identified and widely disseminated among service providers, employers, etc. (e.g. the arts community is thought to have several models to offer)

II. Combating seniors' barriers to social inclusion

A. Lack of information or access to information that is available

Recommendations

- Improve access to information about upcoming events, meetings, and issues of concern to older people, perhaps by centralize this information in one place such as a website
- Information and activities must become more accessible to a wider group of older people: available in various languages; usage of translators and hearing devices at meetings, etc.
- Training in informational technology should be readily available to older people where they need it (e.g. in public places, in the home, etc.) and a helpline/helpdesk should be created to offer technical assistance to older people
- The City's 311 and enhanced 311 telephone information services should be expanded to provide additional information to older people

B. Age segregation

Recommendations

- Civic engagement should be promoted throughout the life span so that such engagement in old age is a continuation of the relationships and meaningful activities people have enjoyed all of their lives

- Intergenerational programming should be expanded
- Senior-only service approaches should be re-examined, as many older people will not utilize such services because they do not self-identify with that cohort
- Programming that targets older people through their prime identifications -- such as artist, LGBT, and ethnic communities -- should be examined and possibly expanded

C. Appropriateness: to engage the greatest number of older people, civic engagement outreach, services and opportunities must be culturally competent, accessible and inclusive.

Recommendations

- Nonprofit service providers should have access to low-cost or subsidized translation services to help them conduct outreach to and serve a variety of populations
- Physical accessibility in buildings must be improved to allow for maximum participation in civic engagement
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older people must be made to feel welcome and fully included in all civic engagement opportunities

D. Health and functional capacity: many older people have health problems that hinder their ability to leave home each day and/or fully participate in civil society.

Recommendations

- Service providers must go to where older people are, especially those who are homebound
- Technology that allows homebound individuals to remain safe and connected to a social network should be expanded

E. Monetary constraints: many older people cannot participate fully in civil engagement that benefits the wider community because their own situation dictates that they must focus on their needs.

Recommendations

- Monetary constraints is one obstacle in getting people involved (they often have to advocate for themselves no luxury of helping others)