Intergenerational Approaches to Building Healthy Communities

Monograph written by:

Corita Brown, Ed.M, Director of Training
Nancy Henkin, Ph.D, Executive Director

The Intergenerational Center
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgements:

Our gratitude to **The Humana Foundation** for their generous support of our work.

A special thanks to the staff and community leaders at the two sites funded by **The Humana Foundation:**

- **Neighborhood Centers, Inc** (Houston, Texas)

- **Austin Coming Together, Austin Peacebuilders** and **New Birth Christian Center** (Chicago, IL)

We appreciate their efforts to develop innovative, intergenerational approaches to community health issues. We learned a lot from working with you!

For more information on the **Intergenerational Center,** visit our website at *www.templeigc.org*.

Intergenerational Approaches to Building Healthy Communities

A healthy community is one that continuously develops and improves both its physical and social environments, helping people to support one another and develop their fullest potential. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes healthy places as those designed and built to improve the quality of life for all people who live, work, worship, learn, and play within their borders -- where every person is free to make choices amid a variety of healthy, available, accessible, and affordable options. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)

increasingly multi-generational and multi-racial/ethnic society suggests powerful opportunities for engaging people at different stages of life in efforts to develop the social, physical and organizational infrastructure necessary to build healthy communities. At the same time, however, there is the potential for a split over competing agendas between an older white electorate and a younger population that is increasingly Latino, Asian-American and African-American (Roberts, 2007, Pastor, & Carter, 2012).

Generations working together to promote positive health outcomes for people all ages is an approach that can add value to existing efforts to design healthy communities. Policy makers and researchers suggest that social determinants of health, such as high poverty rates (particularly among children), growing stress on caregiving families, youth unemployment and job insecurity, violence and growing social and economic disparities reflect a fraying of the "social compact"-- the exchange of resources and care across generations (Reich 1998). Using an intergenerational lens to build healthy communities can reinforce and reimagine the social compact, foster social connectedness, increase generational empathy, and promote the common good.

Why use intergenerational approaches to build healthy communities?

Although the description above of a healthy community refers to "all people" who reside in a place, the strategies adopted to build such communities often are silo-ed, targeting specific age groups rather than the entire population. The major demographic changes we are experiencing today-- a growing older population and increasing racial/ethnic diversity-- require new, innovative approaches that use a life course perspective and intentionally foster caring, trusting relationships across generations. While the population of adults over 65 is more diverse today than any prior cohorts, whites currently comprise 80 % of this population. In contrast, 47% of youth aged 18 and under and over 50% of children under 5 are of color. The generation gap in the United States is fast becoming a racial generation gap.

What impact do these demographic changes have on national and local efforts to build healthy communities? An

Key Intergenerational Strategies

The following are intergenerational strategies that can enhance many of the important efforts currently underway to improve our nation's health by federal agencies such as the CDC and Department of Health and Human Services, foundations focused on health such Robert Wood Johnson and The California Endowment, and countless other organizations throughout the country.

1. Developing a shared vision

Many of the powerful efforts to create healthy, vibrant communities are age-specific and rarely identify common interests across generations. For example, the CDC creates two separate categories in "healthy communities," one for children's health and the other for healthy aging even though many of the issues are similar across age groups. Planning and health literature suggests that integrating services and facilities can effectively, and perhaps better, meet the needs of people across the life span, and do not pit the old against the young (Warner, Homsey & Greenhouse 2010; Maternal and Child Health Bureau 2010). According to the life course model, linking and/or integrating health services and systems across the life span can help maximize protective factors and minimize risks for multiple generations. Age-integrated services and systems also promote efficient use of resources and social connectedness through "economies of scope"—single solutions that address multiple challenges (Dressel & Henkin 2009).

For example, unlike many communities that create physical exercise initiatives that are targeted at a specific age group,

the organizers of AARP in Richmond developed an intergenerational "walk to school" initiative promoting the idea of getting relatives over 50 to walk children to school. The initiative supported health outcomes for both generations, nurtured intergenerational social connections, and raised awareness for a successful campaign to repair sidewalks, cross walks and intersections near the schools and senior housing (Warner, Homsey & Greenhouse 2010).

How do we create strategies for building healthy communities that reflect an understanding and a vision of "shared fate" across generations? How do we identify the root causes of health disparities for all age groups and examine the effects of cumulative disadvantage across the life course? In order to do so we must develop a compelling vision that looks at health across the life course and reflects shared values. We need new messages and strategies that highlight the possibilities for collaboration and shared interests across generational and often racial generational divides.

Below are key values that underlie intergenerational strategies in the context of building healthy communities:

- **Interdependence:** People feel a sense of shared responsibility for one another. Generations rely on each other for care, support, and nurturing. Elders are viewed as resources to families and communities. Children and youth feel valued as resources for elders and gain a sense of social efficacy.

- **Reciprocity:** People of all ages have opportunities to both give and receive support; to both teach and learn. Age groups rely on each other for support. Advocates for the young and the old are not pitted against each other for limited resources, but work together as allies toward the development of mutually beneficial policies and services.

- **Individual worth:** Each individual, regardless of age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other variables, deserves respect and care, is entitled to equal access to the community's resources, and offers an ability to contribute to the community in some way.

- **Inclusion:** Policies and programs are designed for all members of the community, with the understanding that improvements to overall community quality of life will benefit community members across generational, racial, ethnic and other differences.
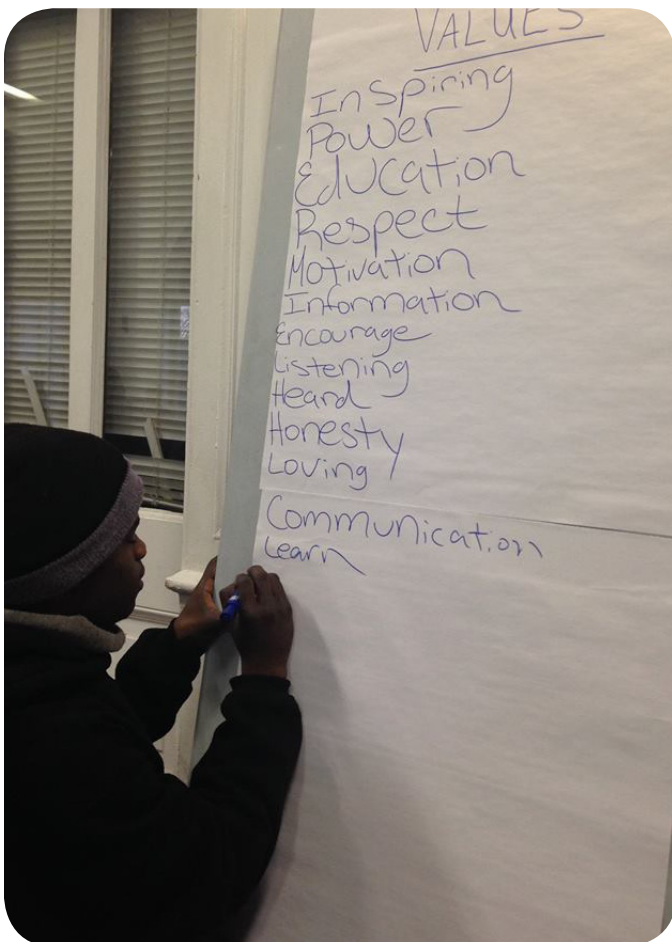
- How can we intentionally gather feedback from all generations about what makes a healthy community?

- What are the key values and interests that different age groups share in our community?

- To what extent do the messages we develop for our work reflect the key values listed above?

2. Fostering alliances across organizations that focus on specific age-groups

Although many health initiatives emphasize the importance of multi-sector involvement, few intentionally foster collaboration across age groups. Age- specific efforts to build healthy communities can deepen their impact by identifying organizational allies that work with other generations. These collaborations have the potential to expand access to resources, build public will for the efforts of respective initiatives, increase organizational capacity, and expand social capital across generations. While there are organizations engaged in extraordinary efforts to build healthy communities, many have not yet focused on building collaborations with organizations that focus on different "target genera-

tions". The absence of these collaborative partnerships can reinforce the social and spatial segregation of generations and diminish the potential influence and reach of these health-focused initiatives. Research indicates that age segregation can lead to increased loneliness and isolation for older adults, decreased protective factors for youth, and negative stereotyping of both older people and youth.

Questions to Consider:

- What potential organizational partners can we identify that may have shared interests but work with a different age group than ours? (e.g. free breakfast program at the local school, senior nutrition program, urban farm, food pantry, advocates for new grocery store, universities, faith-based coalitions.)

- How could our organization and constituents benefit from collaboration with the organization(s) identified?

- How could the potential organization and its constituents benefit from collaboration with our organization?

- What is the most effective way to "pitch" the opportunity for collaboration with these organizations?

3. Engaging residents of all ages in leadership roles

Many place-based efforts take an assets-based approach to building healthy communities. One important way to build on the assets of all generations is developing a continuum of opportunities for involvement and leadership by residents of different ages, particularly youth and older adults to serve as "bridging leaders" who can work across age, race and ethnicity. People of all ages need knowledge, skills and opportunities to work in this way. Some leadership opportunities may include: event organizing, service learning, skill-sharing, advocating and/or community organizing, outreach and recruitment of other residents, and/or group facilitation.

Question to consider:

- Do we create opportunities for residents of multiple generations to become involved as decision makers in our work?

- Do we provide opportunities for reflection, team work, and shared leadership across age groups?

- Do current leadership training opportunities engage residents of different generations together and build their capacity to work across generational differences?

- Are there opportunities for different age groups to collaborate on organizing and advocacy campaigns that address common concerns?

The Intergenerational Center offers an extensive intergenerational resident leadership development training curriculum with an emphasis on building healthy communities. It can be accessed for free here:

http://templeigc.org/sites/default/files/resources_images/leadershipforallages.pdf

4. Developing practices, places and policies that support the development of social capital across generations.

The fabric of a community and the community pool of human resources available to it is often called its "social capital." This term refers to the individual and communal time and energy that is available for such things as community improvement, social networking, civic engagement, personal recreation, and other activities that create social bonds between individuals and groups. Circumstances that prevent or limit the availability of social capital for a community and its members can have a negative effect on the health and well-being of the members of that community. These negative effects on health and well-being can in turn have negative effects on the community as a whole. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)

In order to build social capital successfully across generational divides, it is important to develop practices, places, and policies that foster trust and create opportunities for intergenerational interaction.

PRACTICES: When developing programs/ activities or organizing events, it is important to utilize practices that support trust building and connection across generations. This includes developing targeted recruitment strategies for different generations, intentional opportunities to learn

about different age groups and identify shared interests, program development strategies that engage all ages in planning and decision-making, and activities that build empathy and mutual support. Through intergenerational team building, leadership development, and the creation of meaningful activities, personal connections and a solid base of social capital can be formed.

Questions to consider:

- Do we provide any training prior to intergenerational events/actions/activities to dispel age-related stereotypes and promote intergenerational team building?

- Do we offer a continuum of opportunities that vary in time commitment and intensity for all ages to engage with our work?

- Do we provide opportunities for different generations to build empathy and connection with each other?

- Are our program volunteers and staff knowledgeable about working with different age cohorts?

- Are the activities/programs being planned age-and culturally appropriate and do they foster mutual learning across generations?

PLACES: Numerous communities have developed innovative and imaginative ideas for creating local hubs for intergenerational connection and interaction. For example, the Community Centers in the Neighborhood Centers Inc Network in Houston, TX and the Austin Community Resource Center, *funded by the Humana Foundation*, have sought to develop intergenerational spaces that contribute to civic pride, a sense of history and a sense of place, and can contribute to efforts building healthy, safe communities.

Questions to consider:

- How do we make places/spaces accessible and welcoming to all generations in terms of location, design, programming and space?

- How do we create intentional opportunities for interaction across generations, rather than parallel age use? Will staff be cross-trained?

- How can we collaborate across organizations and residents to finance and sustain intergenerational places and spaces?

POLICIES: Generations United, a national policy organization that brings different age groups together to support a common agenda, has developed an impact assessment for intergenerational legislation that determines the impact of

intergenerational public policy issues across generations. The assessment applies the following four major principles:

- **Make lifetime well-being for all the highest priority:** the extent to which the policy uses innovative or proven approaches to improve lifetime well-being for all generations.

- **Consider the impact of every action on each generation:** the extent to which the policy includes an assessment of both short term and long term impacts on each generation and demonstrates benefits for multiple ages.

- **Unite rather than divide the generations for the greatest social and financial impact:** the extent to which the policy promotes innovative and proven strategies to unite two or more generations.

- **Recognize and support every generation's ability to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities:** the extent to which the policy actively promotes innovative and proven strategies to support and engage every generation's ability to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities.

Applying Intergenerational Strategies to Health Issues

The strategies above can be applied to a wide range of health issues. Below are examples of how intergenerational approaches can be used to create environments that support *healthy eating* and *physical activity* for all generations.

Creating healthy food environments for all ages

Scientific studies have found that low-income and underserved communities often have limited access to stores that sell healthy food, especially high-quality fruits and vegetables. And rural communities often have a higher number of convenience stores, where healthy foods are less available than in larger, retail food markets. Planning for improvement in overall community health should include access to affordable and healthy food. Planners, local government officials, food retailers, and food policy councils are among those who can help ensure a healthy food environment in their community. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)

Many health initiatives target food access issues separately for older adults and for children, youth and families. Food access and healthy eating, however, are issues that affect people at all phases of life. Using an intergenerational approach allows us to strengthen and deepen our efforts to increase access to healthy foods by addressing the challenges and resources of residents at all phases of life.

Below are some examples of communities using intergenerational strategies to address food environments:

Community gardening

In **Chicago, IL,** an initiative funded by the Humana Foundation, youth leaders chose to partner with "The Green Team," an older adult group of community gardeners, to support their greening efforts in their neighborhood. When several older gardeners became ill and were unable to perform some of the physical labor of gardening, the younger gardeners were able to offer additional support. They have now created an intergenerational, interdependent group that supports and encourages each other's leadership efforts.

In **Moose Lake, MN** young families developed agreements to plant and maintain gardens on the residential properties of older adults and then everyone shared the produce.

Farmers Markets

Port Chester, NY developed "Gods Green Market" – a farmers market for the low income residents of Port Chester that is a collaboration of volunteers from different local churches. The churches, which have congregants of all ages,

have helped build a strong intergenerational effort that also unites residents from a range of different denominations, races and ethnicities. The church volunteers, in collaboration with a local school and community organizations, help provide on-going stewardship for the garden as well as organize distribution of food. Churches where people of all ages feel safe and connected function as distribution sites.

In **East Jerusalem, MS** school age youth received small stipends to help manage a local farmers market with supervision from a retired older adult in the neighborhood. As part of their workforce development training they delivered food from the market to homebound low-income adults in the community, and connected these adults with nursing students who provided free health services in the homes of older adults as part of their degree program.

TIPS

- Use an intergenerational team to design and maintain community gardens and farmers markets. This can increase opportunities for intergenerational interaction at all phases of the work, build in workforce development opportunities for youth, and provide meaningful volunteer opportunities for older residents.

- Enhance your community gardens and farmers markets by connecting them to other intergenerational learning opportunities like nutrition and cooking classes, storytelling, physical activity and mentoring. Often there are places with commercial kitchens near the garden that can provide opportunities for cooking and nutrition classes.

- When recruiting for events, encourage youth to bring a caregiver or older adult and adults to bring their children or grandchildren. Some communities organize family dinners to get family members to sit down and eat together. These activities could be enhanced by inviting older adults and creating intentional opportunities for intergenerational interaction at the "dinner table."

Community members of different ages also worked successfully with local organizers to advocate at the city level to eliminate the sales tax for farmer's market sales tax.

Creating environments that support physical activity for all generations

Having access to places for physical activity, such as parks and trails, encourages community residents to participate in physical activity and do so more often. People are also more likely to walk when they feel protected from traffic and safe from crime and hazards. The physical activity you get from walking and biking to parks can have both environmental and personal health benefits (e.g. controlling weight, strengthening bones and muscles, improving mood, reducing risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease). It decreases air pollution and car crashes which in turn can reduce chronic disease rates and traffic-related injuries. (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, nd.)

Healthy communities provide opportunities for people to remain physically active across the life course. An intergenerational approach to community design means taking into account how to support physical activity for all types of abilities and at every stage of life. Intergenerational approaches encourage communities to bring together children, parents, and older adults to advocate for community design that promotes physical activity across all age groups.

EXAMPLES: Here are some examples of communities using intergenerational strategies to create environments that support physical activity for all generations:

Many communities are now experimenting with innovative exercise classes and events that involve all ages. Neighborhood Centers Inc. in **Houston, TX,** funded by the Humana Foundation, have organized a regular intergenerational walking club that brings together older adults from their senior services programs and children from the local elementary school. Another community center in the Neighborhood Centers Inc. network is exploring work force development opportunities by training teens and young adults as physical fitness instructors and having them provide exercise classes for older adults in the community center as part of the training

In the Las Palmas neighborhood of **San Clemente,**

CA, residents age 13-79 joined together to advocate at city council meetings for changes to a local park near the neighborhood elementary school that would make it safer for all ages to play and recreate in the park. Because all ages were included in the planning and advocacy process, the proposed plans included improvements to surrounding sidewalks as well as elements that support recreation and physical activity for all ages including walking paths, soccer fields, playgrounds with a range of equipment that can be used by both young children for recreation and exercise equipment for older adults, park benches near playgrounds that better support supervision of young children and provide resting places for older adults.

Adults/older adults who are not interested or physically unable to participate in physical activity may be interested in roles as coaches for sports and other physical activities. **Itta Bena, MS** sponsored a "fishing rodeo" in which elders worked with the fishing and wildlife department to teach children fishing skills. Sports related activities may also provide good opportunities to get men involved (who are traditionally less involved with volunteer activities).

11

TIPS

- Involve people of all ages in the design or planning of public spaces in order to increase the possibility that these spaces will become places for intergenerational interaction.

- Engage all generations in organizing actions to increase safety in the neighborhood. A safe neighborhood is necessary for people to exercise freely.

- Consider putting both children's playground equipment and adult exercise machines in the same area. Remember to place benches near playgrounds to encourage grandparents to take their grandchildren to the park.

- Create innovative ways of bringing multiple generations together for physical exercise. Consider: one generation teaching another, multi-generational walking groups, older adult coaches, etc.)

Conclusion

The set of strategies and examples outlined above focus on ways that intergenerational approaches can add value to efforts to build healthy communities. As the racial-generational gap grows and immigration trends continue to impact the distribution of resources and the nature of age relations, this approach can help strengthen the social compact, promote understanding of generational interdependence across the life course, recognize the contributions of all ages, and highlight health disparities and inequities across the life course. This approach is about more than services and programs; it is about a sense of *collective* rather than *individual r*esponsibility for the health and well-being of individuals of all ages, and a willingness to work together for the common good. Moving forward will require breaking out of the silos in which we live and work and developing policies that balance the needs of all ages and invest in people at all stages of life. Only then can we build healthy, equitable communities that are good for growing up and growing older.

References

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) *Healthy Community Design Initiative/* [Online] Available at http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/ [Accessed June 3rd, 2015].

Dressel, P. and Nancy H. "The Viable Futures Toolkit: Promoting Sustainable Communities for All Ages." Generations 33, no. 4 (2009): 85-86.

Maternal and Child Health Bureau. (2010) *Rethinking MCH: The Lifecourse Model as an Organizing Framework" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration.* [online] Available at: retrieved from http://mchb.hrsa.gov/lifecourse/rethinkingmchlifecourse.pdf [Accessed 23 September 2014].
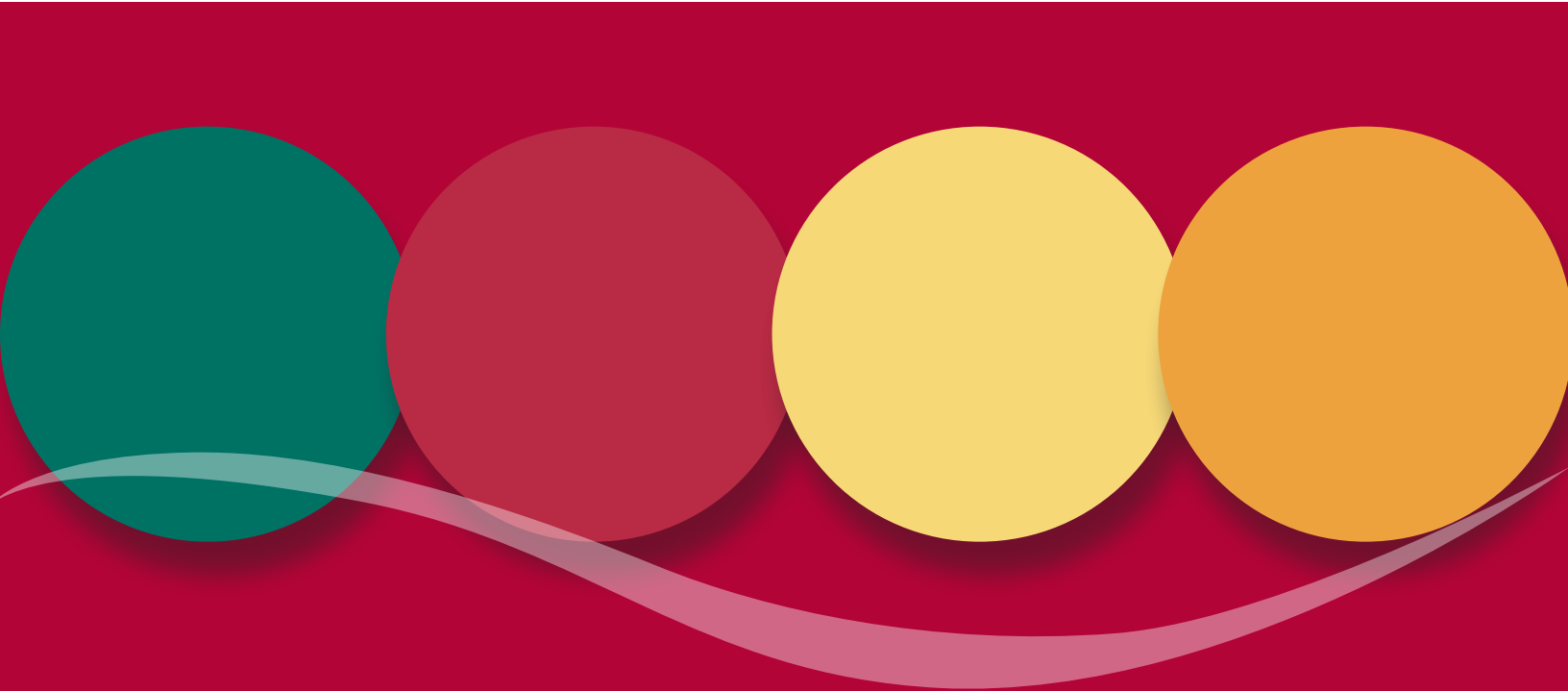
Pastor, Manuel., & Carter, Vanessa. "Reshaping the Social Contract: Demographic Distance and Our Fiscal Future." Poverty and Race 21, no. 1. (2012):5-6.

Reich, Robert. "Why We Need to Renew the Social Compact". Generations, 22, no. 4 (1998):19-24.

Roberts, S. 2007. New Demographic Racial Gap Emerges. *New York Times*, 17 May. [online] Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/17/us/17census.html [Accessed 23 September 2014].

Warner, M., George Homsy, and Esther Greenhouse, (2011.) *Multigenerational Community Planning: Using SmartGrowth and Universal Design to link the needs of children and elders.* American Planning Association: Family Friendly Briefing Papers. [Online] Available at: https://www.planning.org/research/family/briefingpapers/pdf/multigenerational.pdf [Accessed Sept 26,2014]