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12-1-2015

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Recommended Citation

Fox, S., Davie, L., & Rataj, A. (2015). Building an Aging Advocacy Network: Findings from the New Hampshire Senior Leadership Series. Policy Brief. Center on Aging and Community Living. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH

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Building an Aging Advocacy Network: Findings from the New Hampshire Senior Leadership Series

Executive Summary

Public policy related to senior issues has not kept pace with the changes called for by an aging population. Advocacy is an important part of the policy landscape as it promotes a united effort to create change and encourage legislative action. Effective advocacy helps inform and educate policy makers, allows individuals to have their voices heard, builds stronger communities, and allows people to live more fulfilling lives. However, policy makers are inundated with causes to support, and it is easy for certain populations or causes to be lost in this process. This has been especially true for advocacy efforts around the needs of an aging population. At the legislative level, the older adult advocacy network is disjointed, underrepresented, and drowned out by groups that have stronger, more formidable advocacy networks. The lack of a strong grass-roots advocacy network for older adults is of growing concern as our population ages. This is a particularly important issue in New Hampshire as we are one of the oldest states in the nation (US Census, 2014).

This paper examines the lack of advocacy for senior issues in the Granite State and explores strategies that can be employed to grow grass-roots leadership among older adults. The New Hampshire Senior Leadership Series, a program that provides support and training in advocacy and leadership skills, is highlighted as a promising practice to address this need.

“Fortunately I am still able to speak out on issues that concern me and/or the people I love. The Senior Leadership Series made me aware of the gifts I have.”
–Senior Leadership Participant

The series educates seniors in leadership skills necessary to advocate for legislative and policy changes that promote healthy aging, livable communities, and options to allow seniors to live and age in the communities of their choice. In order to ensure that New Hampshire residents have access to services and supports as they age, advocacy and leadership is a critical need. To determine the value of the Senior Leadership Series, a survey was developed and distributed to all Senior Leadership Series graduates. The survey aimed to determine how effective the series was at preparing participants to be community leaders and advocates.

Background

The United States faces a unique challenge in responding to a rapidly aging population. Currently, people aged 65 years and older represent 12.9% of the population (Administration on Aging, 2009). However, with more baby boomers reaching the 65-year benchmark every day, and older adults living longer due to medical advances, projections show that by the year 2030, the older adult population will be hovering at about 72.1 million or 19% of the U.S. population (Administration on Aging, 2009). Between 2000 and 2050, the number of adults age 65 and older is projected to increase by 135%. Further, the population aged 85 and older, which is the group most likely to need health and long-term care services, is projected to increase by 350% (Wiener & Tilly, 2002). Northern New England is aging more rapidly than the rest of the country with Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire boasting the oldest populations in term of median age (US Census, 2014).

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Additionally, New Hampshire is expected to be the fastest aging state in New England through 2030, with nearly one-third of its population being over the age of 65 (Norton, 2011). This phenomenon is anticipated to place substantial pressure on publicly funded health programs and long-term services and supports in the Granite State. There has never been a more important time for advocacy around the needs of an aging population.

The advocacy movement for older adults in the United States has significantly lagged behind other constituent groups, such as the advocacy network for persons with developmental disabilities (DD). On both a state and federal level, the DD network is a coordinated, vast, and streamlined entity, as compared to the older adult network that is underrepresented and disorganized. Rother (2004) identifies a number of factors that contribute to a lack of older adult advocacy:

- First, the older adult population is growing in diversity, which muffles its potency; meaning that as the older population becomes more economically, ethnically, culturally, and geographically diverse so will their politics.
- Second, the elder advocacy community is a “collection of self-seeking interest groups that, on occasion, form a partial or total coalition depending on common goals and common threats to their objectives” (Callahan, 2004, p. 36). For example, advocates within the community could unite against the cuts to state and federal budgets for aging services, but split over whether to spend money to upgrade nursing homes or expand home and community-based care.
- Third, there is little leadership support at the state or federal level to build grass-roots advocacy.
- Fourth, advocates for the aging population have neglected the intellectual resource base including think-tanks, technology, and communication tools (i.e. internet, social media, etc.) and have continued to rely on solutions from previous eras. It is critical that creation, development, and promotion of new ideas be utilized.
- Fifth, the younger generation has not been included in order to build cross-generational solidarity; however, it is critical to acknowledge problems that the younger generation faces if they are expected to support initiatives for older adults.
- Finally, support needs to be built and maintained on both sides of the political landscape, which means flexibility, compromise, and working on a long-term basis across party lines.

New Hampshire is faced with many of the roadblocks identified by Rother in its efforts to develop advocacy related to the aging population. However, New Hampshire does have a number of organizations and grass-roots associations that have made strides to enhance advocacy efforts in the state. NH AARP, in particular, is a non-profit lobbying group that advocates for broader issues (i.e. Medicaid, Social Security, Medicare etc.) that older adults face. While NH AARP is a major asset to the advocacy network for aging issues, it has been difficult to develop sustained action around specific issues pertaining to health and long-term care services including: access to home and community based services; cost, delivery, and quality of care; regional variations in how the state is aging; state budget constraints; and workforce development. There is an enormous need to develop greater leadership among older adult advocates to sustain these efforts.

“The [Senior Leadership Series] experience is extremely valuable to those who have not had an opportunity nor have knowledge of the importance of constituent participation in the legislative process in NH. I am personally concerned that there is not a strong advocacy presence in the lawmaking process for those issues dealing with elders, and the myriad issues involved with creating a secure future for our aging population. The Senior Leadership series is an important learning tool to address this phenomenon.” –Senior Leadership Participant

The New Hampshire Senior Leadership Series

The purpose of the Senior Leadership Series is to provide support and training in the advocacy and leadership skills necessary to promote livable communities, including community-based systems of support for New Hampshire citizens as they age. The Series has trained over 75 participants that have become involved in a range of community, state, and national organizations. The Series organizers also created an “alumni network” to keep graduates connected and to form the beginning of a community level advocacy network. The envisioned benefit of the Series is a stronger, more unified advocacy system to improve the lives of older adults in the Granite State.

The Series is a collaborative effort led by NH AARP, the University of New Hampshire Center on Aging and Community Living (CACL), and the Dartmouth Centers for Health and Aging. The Series was fashioned after the Family Leadership Series, developed by the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire, to educate parents of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and self-advocates. The New Hampshire Senior Leadership Series includes five all-day sessions held over an eight month period. Participants receive training on a wide variety of educational and community topics by respected leaders in community organizing, leadership development, and best practices in older adult advocacy. Topics covered include aging demographics, service delivery and financing mechanisms, community organizing, the legislative process, and healthy aging. Participants are also tasked with working on a group project that incorporates one area of aging they are particularly interested in (e.g., housing, employment, fraud/scams, etc.). Each group is responsible for researching, planning, and developing an initiative that will result in a product, policy change, or some action that enlightens, informs, or educates individuals about a topic that will have high impact for older adults in NH. Participants are then asked to present their projects at the final session.

The series utilizes a variety of educational methods including discussions, simulated scenarios, tours, web-based learning, small and large group sessions, independent research and application, and video and audio resources.

“It is a great opportunity to, not only learn about resources, the legislative process, effective advocacy efforts, but also to network among peers.”
–Senior Leadership Participant

Further, professionals in the field, caregivers, and family members join the sessions to provide information and offer strategies for collaboration and implementation of learned skills. The Senior Leadership class represents individuals from diverse backgrounds, ages, and geographic regions of the state. For more information about the series visit:

<https://chhs.unh.edu/cacl/new-hampshire-senior-leadership-series>

Senior Leadership Series Alumni Survey

To evaluate the efficacy of the Senior Leadership Series, a survey was developed and distributed to past participants. The survey was designed to ascertain the effectiveness of the Senior Leadership Series in preparing participants to be community advocates. Specifically, the survey aimed to gauge how effective graduates were in utilizing and applying the skills they gained through the series; how active they are within local, state, and national advocacy organizations and activities; and what types of supports they need to continue to develop as effective leaders and advocates in their community.

The survey was sent out to graduates from the 2010 through 2013 series cohorts, with a total of 21 alumni responding. The 27-question survey was offered both online and through postal mail and incorporated multiple-choice responses, hierarchical rating scaled responses, and open-ended questions. Participants were informed regarding anonymity and confidentiality and the survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Survey questions included demographic data; activities of Senior Leadership graduates prior to their involvement in the Senior Leadership Series as well as over the past year (pre- and post-test); and skills, knowledge and motivation gained from the series. Notable results included participants’ responses to questions regarding involvement in advocacy activities in general and particularly in aging related advocacy efforts.

Results indicated that participants increased the number and type of advocacy activities they were engaged in after participation in the Senior Leadership Series. The types of organizations that participants were engaged with also expanded following their involvement in the series. Further, results indicated that the Senior Leadership Series increased participants’ leadership skills, knowledge regarding aging issues, and motivation to continue advocating for older adults. As indicated in Figure 1, below, participants responded that the series was effective or very effective in empowering them to be more involved in aging issues (85%), the skills they learned were relevant (85%), and skills acquired were applicable to their current leadership roles within their community (79%).

“The [Senior Leadership Series] motivated me to become more involved along with a sense of personal empowerment to help, and the vast wealth of information presented is so applicable to our aging population.” – Senior Leadership Series Participant

Additionally, the survey queried respondents regarding whether they were able to apply or utilize the skills or knowledge gained from each session. As presented in Figure 2, below, the majority of participants reported that they have used the skills or knowledge from all the sessions. The largest percentage of participants (89%) reported that they utilized the skills they learned in Session 3, which focused on the legislative process. Seventy-four percent reported utilizing skills from the community organizing and healthy aging sessions and 68% reported utilizing skills learned from the first session on aging demographics, service delivery and financing mechanisms.

“I think the program content is excellent because it covers the broad spectrum of issues on aging.”
 –Senior Leadership Series Participant

Figure 2: Utilization of Skills/Knowledge by Session

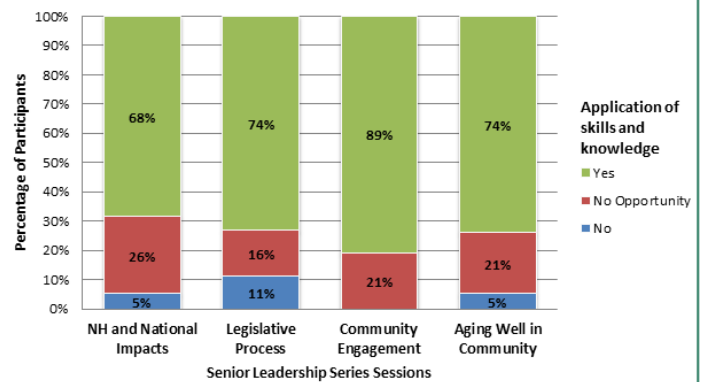
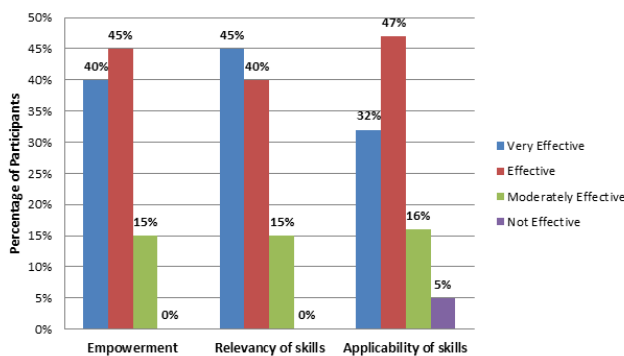


Figure 1: Skills Attained



Results indicate that participants of the Senior Leadership Series are politically engaged in local, state, and national aging issues; are motivated to continue to be engaged in advocacy efforts; and effectively use the skills and knowledge they learned from the series. While this study demonstrates the value of the Senior Leadership Series as an effective training tool for preparing community advocates, the small sample size limits the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Despite this limitation, the findings are promising in informing future development of the series as well as promoting further advocacy and leadership development.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Advocacy efforts for issues related to health and long-term care services for an aging population have lagged behind similar efforts in other constituent advocacy groups. As the population ages, there is a critical need to develop strong advocacy and leadership networks to ensure that service systems are adequate to meet the needs of older adults who need support to remain living in the community of their choice. The Senior Leadership Series appears to be a positive foundation for the development of the skills needed to strengthen leadership and advocacy efforts in New Hampshire. The current graduates provide a foundation from which to build a strong advocacy network, however more needs to be done to support current graduates as well as to recruit future participants.

Recommendations to enhance the NH Senior Leadership Series include:

- Continue to survey Senior Leadership Series graduates over time to measure program effectiveness and their engagement in leadership and advocacy efforts.
- Seek additional resources to develop and support an enhanced alumni network.
- Pursue private and public funding sources to support the sustainability and growth of the Series.
- Target outreach efforts to recruit more diverse program participants.
- Identify opportunities to partner with other organizations in Northern New England with similar interests to develop new and innovative programming and alumni events.

Results from this survey provide important information to support the value of leadership training to help develop a strong, grass-roots advocacy network for older adults. Findings indicate that leadership training is effective in teaching skills that are applicable in a variety of leadership and advocacy roles and that participants are motivated to use these skills by becoming involved in a broad spectrum of local, state, and national organizations. These findings indicate that an advocacy training series is a useful tool in developing grass-roots leaders to build a stronger advocacy voice for the needs of an aging population.

“I feel very fortunate that this opportunity found me (through an email offer from AARP), as it was a very enriching experience. Through what I learned in the workshops, I have been able to focus my goals on what is attainable rather than wasting my energy on worrying about goals that aren’t. I think this is what gave me the greatest value...I learned that there are many opportunities for me to impact my community that are within the scope of my capabilities.” - Senior Leadership Participant



CLASS OF 2014



CLASS OF 2013



CLASS OF 2012

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CACL is a collaboration between the Institute on Disability (IOD) and the New Hampshire Institute for Health Policy and Practice (NHIHPP) at the University of New Hampshire (UNH). CACL constructively engages partners within and outside the University in applied research that advances sustainable, person-centered options for aging and community living

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