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The Role of Foundation Grantmakers in Responding to Community Aging:

Maine Health Access Foundation

by Wendy J. Wolf

Foundations respond to a variety of compelling needs. How do you reconcile the responsibility of addressing the needs of Maine's aging citizens in light of other competing issues?

As the oldest state in the nation, Maine serves as the tip of the spear in determining how our society will meet the needs of our aging population. We typically view the issue of aging in terms of the increasing proportion of elderly (or retired) people plus the growing number of very old persons who may require individualized and community supports, depending on their state of health. However, the International Social Security Association helps broaden this lens so that addressing aging also means how we cope with the change in the balance of all age groups. This is a phenomenon that we are already talking about in Maine. Throughout human history, older people have comprised a relatively small proportion of the population, yet the United States is just one of many industrialized countries where the proportion of older people is projected to grow to a point where it may equal the proportion of younger, working adults. This demographic shift has profound implications for the future of our economy that reach far beyond planning for the higher demand for medical, social, and safety net services that older people may require.

Under our bylaws, the Maine Health Access Foundation (MeHAF) is required to focus our funding and program work on health and health care. Two years ago, MeHAF started a new initiative, called “Thriving in Place” (TiP), which aims to improve the health and community supports for people with chronic illness (which includes many older Mainers) so they can live healthy and independent lives in their community. TiP was not designed to focus solely on Maine’s aging population, but the people served by TiP grantees are disproportionately older Mainers. TiP serves as a complement to the activities that many other public,

private, governmental agencies, and other funders are advancing to help address the needs of Maine’s aging residents.

Through TiP, we are part of a larger movement to address aging, with a primary focus on how health and health care can evolve to meet these needs. Other funders may be compelled, either by their mission or donor wishes, to complement our health-related efforts by promoting other issues, such as working to eliminate food insecurity, promoting senior-friendly affordable housing, or combating social isolation. For example, the Maine Community Foundation can direct grant funding and resources across a broad array of focus areas that support positive aging such as providing intellectual engagement and learning through senior colleges or promoting the best use of the skills and talents that seniors bring to communities through their ENCorps program. This diversity of mission and program focus among funders can make it challenging for foundations to work together, but it can also enhance and leverage our impact because we approach issues from a variety of perspectives.

Is there a special role that you see philanthropy playing in promoting the experience of positive aging in Maine communities? If yes, what is it? If no, why not?

When you talk about the role of philanthropy, most people will assume that providing grants and other funding support is our primary role. Grants can be catalytic in promoting innovation and helping spread good ideas. Yet philanthropic organizations can do much more than grantmaking to address the complex issues that can shape a culture that supports positive aging.

Funders can support environmental scans and policy research to inform and guide our approach to positive aging. We can also tap our convening power to invite disparate groups together and support and facilitate work on common issues. Although many public,

private, and governmental groups are highly vested in working on aging issues, MeHAF is one of the few participants at the discussion table who doesn't "have a dog in the fight." Our revenues and spending are not affected by the outcome. Foundations can therefore serve as honest brokers to push the tough conversations that are required to drive fundamental change that leads to better alignment and collaboration between organizations for the more efficient use of resources and better impact.

One of philanthropy's most important roles is to ensure that the voices of everyday Maine people inform how we think about positive aging and what it will take to reach this vision. For example, our TiP initiative (see related articles by Bradney [2015] and Boober [2015]) requires that grantees routinely solicit the advice and input of people who are the intended recipients of this work. At the beginning, we assumed the community members served by TiP grantees would be most concerned about limited access to health care services and home care supports. But we were wrong. People felt that access to health care services was generally good, but gaps in support services such as assisting with adequate food and transportation options, helping with routine home maintenance (like shoveling snow off walks and driveways), and combating social isolation were the issues that community members felt were essential for positive aging.

Funders should ensure that community voices are at the center of our work. In particular, we need to encourage and support input from people with lower incomes who may be less likely to attend community forums or sign up for consumer advisory groups. If our efforts to promote positive aging work for the most vulnerable, they are likely to work for us all.

What strategies, broadly speaking, do you think are likely to be most successful in promoting the well-being of older adults in Maine, the oldest and most rural state in the nation?

Too often the issues surrounding aging are viewed as problems that can be solved by narrow, technical fixes, but older people have skills, expertise, and experiences that make them valuable assets to our communities and state. MeHAF strives to build on these assets by identifying and amplifying what currently works well. As a statewide organization, we've seen first hand that there are innovative, creative people across our state who are designing and implementing

strategies to promote the well-being of older people, but there are few ways to share and build upon these success stories.

To share strategies and learn about what's working (and what's not), MeHAF routinely brings grantees together to learn from both national and local experts and from each other as well. These quarterly learning sessions help knit together organizations that are working on common issues so good ideas can spread across the state. We also work with grantees to identify public policy issues that need to be addressed so this work can be supported and sustained at the state and federal levels.

Advances in technology can also help spread innovation and connect people, particularly those in rural areas. However, building a culture that promotes positive aging goes far beyond deploying technology and focusing on meeting the health needs of older Mainers. Funders need to invest in initiatives that promote opportunities for continued learning, engagement in meaningful paid and volunteer work, and promote healthy and vibrant communities that encourage cross-generational interactions as a counterpoint to the social isolation that many older Mainers feel.

Does philanthropy have the power to create age-friendly communities?

Philanthropy can be a catalyst to start communities on this course, but creating age-friendly communities requires a shift in our culture that goes far beyond philanthropy's reach and resources. However, funders are ideally positioned to help bring people together to have the conversations about what being an age-friendly community means. I suspect if younger people were asked to define this, their vision for the community might differ from that of older adults (think skate-board park vs curb cuts), yet communities should strive to be age-friendly across the lifespan. The things that make shopping easy for a young mother with an infant in a stroller may be equally important to an 80-year-old, but we need to solicit opinions from both. Funders can help turn those conversations into community-wide plans and action steps, but it is unlikely philanthropy will have the staff or grantmaking resources to bring this transformation to full fruition.

If an anonymous benefactor wrote your foundation a blank check to address the challenging of aging in Maine, what would you consider doing?

The most strategic investment would be to convene and support cross-generational conversations about what our communities should look like in the future and how this vision will be mutually supportive of children, families, and older people. These ideas should serve as the framework for an advocacy and public policy agenda that holds municipal, state, and federal officials accountable for helping achieve that vision. 🐟

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