How to Thrive Together: A Toolkit to Sustain, Grow & Fund Your Age-friendly Neighborhood Organization

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BACKGROUND

New York City is home to a robust network of grassroots organizations run by and for older adults. Many older New Yorkers rely on these grassroots organizations for social connection, intellectual stimulation, access to food, and more. The New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) has been working with these organizations since the 2007 launch of Age-friendly NYC, a public–private partnership between the Mayor’s office, the New York City Council, and NYAM. As part of this initiative, Age-friendly Neighborhoods (formerly Aging Improvement Districts) were established to apply an “age in everything” lens to improve the quality of life for older adults who live in urban neighborhoods.

Today, there are approximately 20 age-friendly neighborhood organizations of various sizes that offer a range of programs and services. They have positively impacted the way that older New Yorkers vote, shop, learn, socialize, and connect and use technology. They support and demonstrate the success of age-friendly neighborhoods and the older adult leaders in these communities. The information in this toolkit is primarily gleaned from the six months of meeting with and learning from the leaders of these organizations at the Age-friendly Neighborhoods Convening.
Beginning in the spring of 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, age-friendly neighborhood organizations played a pivotal role in keeping older New Yorkers informed, socially engaged, and healthy. NYAM recognized an urgent need to connect leaders from these neighborhood groups in order to provide a space for them to share information and best practices on adapting to the new circumstances.

Leveraging generous funding from the New York State Health Foundation’s (NYSHealth) COVID-19 Response Grant, the Center for Healthy Aging at NYAM convened 20 age-friendly organizations in New York City every month from July through December 2020. With an average of 30 participants at each virtual meeting, the leaders of these organizations discussed the challenges that they and their older neighbors were facing, and shared ideas and exchanged resources that were helping them. A number of external partners who have been staunch supporters of age-friendly initiatives also attended. Among them were Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, along with professional staff from local nonprofit organizations such as LiveOn NY, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), United Neighborhood Houses, and Public Health Solutions.

During these convenings, discussions centered on how these organizations quickly adapted to the changes brought on by social distancing. We talked about both the challenges and opportunities with technology—how they can connect us to each other but only if we have
the proper access and training to do so. We discussed the analog ways that neighbors were checking in on each other: with phone calls, masked walks, and newsletters in the mail. Members of the Age-friendly Central Brooklyn group shared their successes with age-friendly businesses, including an “Elder Wednesday” program with discounts for older consumers, and ways that the Manhattan Borough President’s Office has encouraged supermarkets to cater to their older shoppers. In anticipation of the 2020 presidential election, LiveOn NY led a lively discussion about how to remain civically engaged in the time of COVID, whether through mail-in voting, calling local representatives, or accessing election information in one’s native language.

Four of the groups—Bloomingdale Aging in Place (BAiP), Harlem Advocates for Seniors, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, and Senior Advocacy Leadership Team (SALT)—shared their history, organizational structure, funding model, and strategic planning processes, as well as their current challenges and opportunities. The range of the presentations highlighted the diversity of models available for other age-friendly neighborhood groups. For instance, BAiP and Harlem Advocates for Seniors are registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations. Lenox Hill Neighborhood House and SALT, on the other hand, operate under the umbrella of United Neighborhood Houses (an association of settlement houses) as self-directed “neighborhood teams,” each connected to a settlement house.

AGE-FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOODS SURVEY RESPONSES

“Bloomingdale Aging in Place has been a miracle of connection, both before and during the pandemic.”

“The Sirovich Center for Balanced Living was very instrumental in offering support to me when I needed it most.”

“Good Neighbors of Park Slope has been a godsend. Groups are numerous, well managed, well resourced.”

“The Bay Ridge Center has been GREAT! They offer so many classes online and I have met so many nice people, both participants and staff.”
In November, NYAM provided an online survey to the convening participants for them to distribute to their respective memberships. Nearly 180 older adults responded in total. The survey asked about the respondents’ involvement with their neighborhood group, their biggest struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how their neighborhood group has supported them during this time. The results were clear: age-friendly neighborhood groups have a remarkable impact on the lives of older adults.

For example, over half of respondents shared that their greatest concern at the moment was social isolation, and another 30% reported that one of their greatest concerns was boredom. Yet age-friendly neighborhood groups offer a remedy: 78% of respondents reported feeling more connected to their neighbors since joining their age-friendly neighborhood group, and many commented on the value of the programming offered and the social network they’ve developed through participating in their group.

In addition to supporting the monthly convenings, NYSHealth, with additional generous support from UJA-Federation, enabled NYAM to provide grants of $2,500 to nine organizations. These grants supported short-term projects or initiatives that alleviated COVID-related needs in their communities. The funded projects addressed two broad themes: digital access and outreach. Specific projects included developing lending libraries of tablets for affordable housing residents, creating an online newsletter about virtual events and healthy aging strategies, and creating digital programs in music therapy, support groups, and current events discussions.
**AGE-FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOODS SURVEY RESULTS**

Top 3 reasons older adults join age-friendly neighborhood groups:

1) **Social connection**

   - 78% of respondents reported feeling more connected to their neighbors since joining their age-friendly neighborhood group.

2) **Intellectual stimulation**

   - 46% of respondents reported that their age-friendly neighborhood group helped them access food.

3) **Physical activity**

   - 54% of respondents reported that their greatest concern right now is social isolation.

4) **Events hosted**

   - 84% of respondents had attended an event hosted by their age-friendly neighborhood group.

5) **Length of membership**

   - 59% of respondents had been part of their age-friendly neighborhood group for more than four years.
PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit serves as a companion piece to “Creating an Age-Friendly NYC: A Toolkit for Establishing an Aging Improvement District in Your Community,” published in 2012, and provides tools to support age-friendly neighborhood organizations in the following areas of their development:

A. SUSTAINING
   1. Managing Projects
   2. Running Meetings
   3. In-person & Remote Events
   4. Inclusivity & Accessibility

B. GROWING
   1. Evaluating Your Efforts
   2. Identifying New Partners

C. FUNDING
   1. Public Funding
   2. Foundations
   3. Local Business Sponsorship & Support
   4. Other Funding Options
The pandemic has affected the way people socialize, use technology, connect with family, and care for their physical and mental health. At this moment, there is much uncertainty about how age-friendly neighborhood organizations will operate in the coming years, so this toolkit includes suggestions for hosting both remote and in-person meetings and events.

Yet the pandemic also highlighted the increasing needs that older New Yorkers have as they age in place. The 20 organizations that we convened vary in their membership size, organizational structure, and types of activities offered, but one theme that came through was that these organizations were ready and eager to reach more older neighbors and provide additional programming and support to them.

This toolkit provides a Factsheet Series on Sustaining, Growing and Funding one's organization. This grew out of the work and design of the monthly convenings. As a convener, we modeled organized and structured meetings that aimed to be
accessible to a range of attendees. We funded grants on a short timeline that required strong project management skills to be successful. We implemented midway and final evaluations for our convenings and for the grant-funded projects in order to better shape future ones. And in our convenings we explored potential partners and funders to help grow the work.

A. SUSTAINING

Grassroots organizations take significant effort to sustain. Many do not have paid staff and typically rely on volunteers to carry out the work of the organization. At our November convening, volunteer burnout was cited as one of the greatest challenges facing these age-friendly neighborhood groups.

We know that these groups have a major impact on the lives of the older adults that participate, so keeping them up and running is essential for maintaining the quality of life of New York City’s older population. Developing a system of project management that is efficient, transparent, and in service of a clear shared vision will help prevent burnout among staff and volunteers alike. Running productive meetings, hosting memorable events, and achieving mutual goals are all ways to boost morale and sustain motivation among your group.

1. Managing Projects

- Set goals
- Assign roles and responsibilities
- Establish deliverables
- Agree to deadlines

When the Shorefront YM-YWHA was deciding how to disseminate tablets from the Age-friendly Neighborhoods grant, they methodically sought input from members, volunteers, and Senior Advisory Boards. They held three Zoom meetings to discuss potential recipients and narrowed the list down from 75 to 19. Then they conducted a lottery using a random numbers generator to choose the final 12 older adults who ultimately received the tablets.
2. Running Meetings

- Have purposeful meetings
- Develop an agenda
- Send materials in advance
- Set ground rules and expectations
- Take good notes and send a summary after the meeting

3. In-person & Remote Events

- Choosing a venue for in-person events
- Hosting remote meetings
- Choosing a platform for remote meetings

Bloomingdale Aging in Place (BAiP) organizes breakout groups after their virtual events to allow members to process the content and make connections with each other.

4. Inclusivity & Accessibility

Hosting truly inclusive events takes some careful planning and forethought. Making an event accessible and inclusive improves the experience for everyone. It also signals to your attendees that you have taken care to make everyone feel welcome.

Visit Factsheet Series I: Sustaining Your Organization for helpful tips on organizing and managing your efforts.
**B. GROWING**

Over the six months, convening participants exchanged ideas on how they could reach more neighbors, enhance their services, and of course adapt to a changing world. To help inform how their groups were currently faring and what their members wanted going forward, NYAM implemented a survey for all members of the age-friendly neighborhood groups. With nearly 180 responses across all 20 groups, leaders received specific feedback from their members as well as collective feedback from older New Yorkers on how these organizations can best serve their needs. With this knowledge, leaders can make informed decisions about the types of new partners to seek and the ways that they can grow their funding, advocacy and programming efforts.

1. Evaluating Your Efforts

West Side Federation for Senior and Supportive Housing (WSFSSH) created a manual for case managers to use when running their grant-funded iPad lending library. The topics include: Promotion, Training, Lending, Cleaning/Storing, Troubleshooting, and Evaluation.

2. Identifying New Partners

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House recognized a need to train some of their members in using technology, so they established a partnership with Hofstra University where they created an intergenerational tech support program with students in the Occupational Therapy program.

Harlem Advocates for Seniors is seeking municipal support around internet access by advocating for Wi-Fi discounts for low-income and/or disabled older adults.

Visit [Factsheet Series II: Growing Your Organization](#) for helpful tips on evaluation and identifying partners.
C. FUNDING

Securing funding is a common challenge among age-friendly neighborhood organizations to sustain and grow their work. Most, if not all, members are volunteers who donate their time, but there are still always expenses. It costs money to create newsletters, conduct surveys, hire speakers, serve refreshments at meetings, and send out mailings. Larger initiatives cost even more money—for creating virtual programming, providing digital access to members who need it, and renting space for in-person programming, to name just a few.

Age Friendly Central Brooklyn received a grant in 2020 from the Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People to assist with publishing costs of their newsletter, which features group events as well as strategies on healthy aging and community building.

One way that Good Neighbors of Park Slope secures funding is through annual membership fees. To join, individuals pay $30 or households pay $50 per year.

In 2020, nine age-friendly neighborhood organizations who attended NYAM’s Age-friendly Neighborhood Convening applied for and received grants in the amount of $2,500 each to address pandemic-related needs of their members and communities. Grantees developed creative and relatively simple, low-cost ways of facilitating social connection during the pandemic, such as purchasing tablets and data, creating virtual senior center programming, and expanding the readership of their digital and print newsletters.

Visit Factsheet Series III: Funding Your Organization for helpful tips to secure funding.
Factsheet Series I

Factsheet Series II

Factsheet Series III

Statement of Responsibility

The views presented in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of The New York Academy of Medicine, or its Trustees, Officers or Staff.

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About the Center for Healthy Aging

The Center for Healthy Aging works to improve the health and well-being of aging populations. With equal concern for both today’s older adults as well as tomorrow’s, the Center works to make both immediate and long-term systemic changes to ensure equity and a healthy life for generations to come. For more information, visit NYAM.org/center-healthy-aging.
The New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) tackles the barriers that prevent every individual from living a healthy life. NYAM generates the knowledge needed to change the systems that prevent people from accessing what they need to be healthy such as safe and affordable housing, healthy food, healthcare and more. Through its high-profile programming for the general public, focused symposia for health professionals, and its base of dedicated Fellows and Members, NYAM engages the minds and hearts of those who also value advancing health equity to maximize health for all. For more information, visit NYAM.org.