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Community education and the older adult

by Sidney Lynn Miller and Gladys D. Falconer



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The purpose of this article is twofold: a) to acquaint the reader with some factual information relating to the older American; b) to familiarize the reader with the community education philosophy and based on this philosophy how local communities can plan and implement programs and services for and with older adults.

Statistics Relating to the Older American

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare publication entitled *Facts About Older Americans 1976* (1976), includes information and statistics concerning the number, life expectancy, geographic location, living arrangements, income, employment and education of older Americans. This information is summarized briefly in the next few paragraphs.

Definition

Those persons aged 65 years and over are considered older Americans. This chronological designation is convenient for the purposes of reporting, but tends to obscure the fact that aging is a continuous process from birth to death, and is a process that varies with the individual. A person can be physically and psychologically "old" at the age of 30, and likewise, a person age 65 may be physically and psychologically much younger than his chronological years might indicate.

Life Expectancy

The life expectancy of a person born in 1900 was 47 years. The life expectancy of a person born in 1974 is a projected 72 years. Because of a reduced death rate in children and young adults, more people now reach old age, but once there, they do not live much longer than their ancestors.

Women reaching age 65 can expect to live another 18 years; men reaching age 65 can expect to live another 13 years.

Number

Older population trends in the twentieth century are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Older Population Trends in the 20th Century

	1900	1975	2000
Number in millions	3.1	22.4	31
Percent of total population	4.1	10.5	10.7-11.7 (depends on birth rate)
Ratio of women to men	98/100	144/100	154/100

The above table clearly indicates that the older population is increasing and that women in this population outnumber men at an increasing rate.

Geographic Location

In 1975, about half of the older population lived in the six most populous states of California, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas; and in Florida, the eighth most populous state.

Nine states had 12 per cent or more older persons in their total population: Florida, 16.1 per cent; Arkansas, 12.8 per cent; Iowa, 12.7 per cent; Missouri and Kansas, 12.6 per cent; Nebraska, 12.5 per cent; South Dakota, 12.4 per cent; Oklahoma, 12.3 per cent; and Rhode Island, 12.2 per cent.

Living Arrangements

In 1975, about one million persons, five percent of the older adult population, lived in institutional settings. Table 2 shows the living arrangements of the non-institutionalized population.

**Table 2. Living Arrangements, 1975
(Noninstitutional Population)**



Source: *Facts about Older Americans*, 1976, p. 7

Income

In 1974, about 20 per cent of the couples, where there was a husband age 65 or older, received an annual income less than \$4,000; approximately 24 per cent of the elderly couples received incomes of \$10,000 or more. Half of those elderly persons who were living alone, or with non-relatives, received \$3,000 or less.

Employment

In 1975, more than 2.9 million (14 per cent) of the older Americans were in the labor force, working or seeking employment. Of this 2.9 million, 1.9 million were men, and 1 million were women.

Education

"In 1972, almost half of the elderly population had not completed eight years of elementary school. About seven per cent were college graduates" (Special Committee on Aging United States Senate, 1974, p. xxi). The level of educational attainment is increasing as the more highly educated younger age cohorts reach their 65th birthdays. This is evidenced in Table 3.

Table 3. Projected Education Attainment of U.S. Population 65 Years and Older: 1970 to 1990.

Year	Percent of High School Graduates
1970	28.3
1975	35.2
1980	44.0
1990	49.4

Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1976.

Social and Economic Problems of Older Adults

Harris, et al. (1975) conducted a study to determine attitudes toward and expectations of aging in this country, of both the general public and older Americans. The introduction to this study states the following:

The social and economic opportunities available to any group in this society depend not only on their own resources, capabilities and aspirations but, as importantly, on the resources, capabilities and aspirations that the public at large attribute to them. Americans 65 and over are no exception. The potential contribution that older people can make to this country depends not only on their self-confidence and belief in their abilities and desire to remain active and useful members of society, but also on the confidence that the public at large places in them as contributing human beings (p. i).

Data from the study shows that most older people in this country want and have the potential to be productive contributing members of our society and that their condition in life is better, both economically and socially than the general public believes it to be. However, the Harris Study cautioned that low percentages in certain categories must be translated into numbers of persons affected. For example, 15 per cent of persons 65 and over, report not having enough money to live on as a personal problem. This 15 per cent translates to some three million older persons.

Older Americans in the Harris Study were asked the seriousness of certain problem areas for them personally. Table 4 lists some of these areas and their responses.

The authors suggest that community agencies and organizations serving older persons may, through cooperative efforts, have an impact on many of the problems reported in Table 4.

When the data are presented by income, it is worthy to note that the lowest income group, the 23 per cent of older persons with household incomes less than \$3,000, "suffer much more seriously from every problem than the more affluent" [emphasis added] (Harris et al., 1975, p. 130).

Responses to other questions relating to general mobility were reported as very serious problems for approximately 15 per cent of the older adults, again with the lowest income group being most seriously affected.

Recurring indications throughout the survey pointed to the need for such in-home services as cooking, cleaning, laundry, personal care, grocery shopping, minor home repairs, help in getting to medical services and so on.

Table 4. Personal Experience: Serious Problems of Older Americans

	Very Serious (Percent)	Very Serious Plus Somewhat Serious (Percent)
Fear of crime	23	47
Poor health	21	50
Not having enough money to live on	15	40
Loneliness	12	29
Not enough medical care	10	23
Not enough education	8	25
Not feeling needed	7	19
Not enough to do to keep busy	6	17
Not enough friends	5	16
Not enough job opportunities	5	12
Poor housing	4	11

Source: Harris et al., 1975, pp. 31, 32.

The Harris study provides a wealth of information not only for those working with older persons, but also for those interested in developing and implementing programs and policies for the aging.

Community Education

"Community Education is the process that achieves a balance and a use of all institutional forces in the education of the people—all of the people—of the community" (Seay, 1974, p. 11).

There are two key phrases in the above definition: "balance and a use of all institutional forces" and "education of the people—all of the people." The remainder of this discussion will examine each phrase as it relates to the older adult.

Cooperation of Community Agencies, Organizations and Other Resources

Every community has a variety of resources residing in, or responsible for providing various services to the community. These resources are physical, such as facilities and materials; and human, including both individual community members, and community agency personnel, who have various talents and skills. Frequently found in communities are governmental units, Area Agencies on Aging, educational institutions, health and welfare agencies, service organizations (such as the Optimists

and Kiwanis clubs), recreational programs, law enforcement, fire and other safety agencies. It is through the cooperation of such resources that many solutions to problems, and improvements to the community, can be effected. Such resources, working together in a sincere effort, should certainly be able to improve the lives of older adults in their respective communities.

Many community education programs have community education councils, which work along with the community education coordinator or director, to assist in the activities of the total community education program. There is a strong need for those involved in both the council membership and the total community education program to be representative of the entire community. This includes representation from various ethnic backgrounds, race, sex, age, geography, interest groups, agencies, organizations, business and industry. Such representation on a community education council can, through the bringing together of these various resources, lead to the beginning of cooperation and understanding of the roles each resource can play.

Education

Throughout most of the problems identified as those affecting the older adult, the need for education is apparent. There seems to be a need of education for older adults; education of agency and community persons about the older population is also necessary. Listed below are several of the problems commonly identified with the older adult. Following the listing of each problem is a brief commentary on how community resources might begin to cooperate and provide the necessary education and services to help alleviate these problems. These are but a few alternatives. The key is commitment and innovation. It will be up to the members of each community to develop the most appropriate means of cooperating with their community.

Finance

Employing older adults where part or full time help is needed, and where there is a match between the older adult's capabilities and the job requirements, is one way to supplement the income of older Americans.

In addition to the locally sponsored positions, several programs administered by federal agencies provide funding for older adult positions. These include: Comprehensive Employment and Training Programs (Department of Labor); Senior Community Service Employment Program of the Older Americans Act (Department of Labor); Older Persons Opportunities and Services (Community Services Administration); Foster Grandparents Program (ACTION); Volunteers in Service to America (ACTION); Senior Companion Program (ACTION).

The following federal programs provide some kind of remuneration for out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers in the programs: Retired Senior Volunteer Program (ACTION); Action Cooperation Volunteer Program (ACTION); Service Corps of Retired Executives and Active Corps of Executives (Small Business Administration).

Providing instruction for the development of skills which can lead to part or full time employment, or to other money earning activities, is another way to assist older adults in a financial way. This may involve offering formal education or vocational classes, or providing enrichment programs in which the learner may develop such skills as upholstery, candle making, jewelry making and other

skills that may result in salable products. Information sessions relating to the development of small businesses may be appropriate for some older adults.

Other information which will assist the older adult in managing his finances can be sponsored cooperatively by community agencies. Such information may include some of the following topics: "Social Security Benefits," "Budget Planning," "Cooking and Shopping Economically," "Investments" and "Free and Low Cost Services for Older Adults."

Health

Local school facilities may be available for other community agencies to work with older adults. This might mean that health education programs are taught in the school by a variety of community resources ranging from medical personnel to nutrition specialists. Blood pressure clinics and various other diagnostic examinations may be coordinated through school and community agencies.

Personal safety and fear of crime

Classes and information programs can be arranged regarding personal and home safety. There are currently a variety of films available on both topics. Police officers can be invited to give presentations on related topics, as can be fire department personnel. These informational programs may be organized for the community as a whole, or for the special audience of older adults. In either case, recruitment for older adults' participation is necessary.

In addition to informational programs, efforts can be made to organize and work with block club organizations, police personnel, school personnel and others, to develop strategies and services that will both lessen the fear of crime in older adults and actually improve situations that might justify this fear. Innovative ideas are needed in this area. Participation of such public servants as police officers, firemen and others, through informal visits or calls may not only reduce the fear of crime but also provide a contact with the outside world for lonely homebound older adults. The community council may accept the responsibility of identifying those older persons in the community who would desire such a service and also keep this list current.

Leisure (uncommitted) time

A common area of concern for the older adult is the satisfactory use of the often increased amount of uncommitted time after retirement from gainful employment. This has created a need for more than just time filling activities, such as watching television. There is a need to fill this time with activities that are useful, productive and meet the personal needs of the individual. There are many ways this can be done. The following are but a few suggestions.

Older adults can be included in the regular K-12 classrooms as teacher aids providing interesting and educational information in the areas of history, business and home economics, to name just a few. They may bring slide presentations from their vacations to the classroom and discuss the various aspects of geography. Serving as chaperones for class trips can be both enjoyable to the

older person and at the same time provide a service to the school, as well as provide a positive model of older adults for the younger generation.

Older adults can also be encouraged to take an active role in various community activities, including community education council membership, planning committee activities and others. Enrollment in school and/or community agency sponsored programs and class activities should also be encouraged.

Transportation

Many older adults are unable to avail themselves of community services due to the lack of transportation or fear of leaving their homes alone. Here again, innovation is needed. There are some monies currently available for financing transportation for older adults, but these are limited. There is a need to explore other methods of transportation for older adults, for example, developing "Senior Transportation Clubs," where high school seniors who attend school activities after school on a regular basis take one or two older adults to and from the school with them. Programs would have to be scheduled so that programs of interest to the high school student and older adult run concurrently, and at the same or nearby facility.

Various community organizations, such as the Optimist Club, might sponsor a one year project of transportation for older adults, while the community education coordinator works with the various other community organizations to see that each year another organization accepts the transportation responsibility, until a more permanent solution is found to meet this need. Exploration of joint agency funding alternatives to providing vehicles, drivers, insurance and other related expenses may lead to a solution of this problem.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the percentage and number of older adults is increasing. There are numerous problems facing America's older adults. Suggestions have been made as to some ways community resources can be brought to bear on these problems. Where there is a high degree of imagination and commitment, other solutions are simply awaiting development according to the uniqueness of the individual community.

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