

# BUILDING COMMUNITY BY BRINGING GENERATIONS TOGETHER



“We have a lot of lakes and trees between people,” remarks Northland Foundation Vice President Lynn Haglin. She is describing the seven northeastern counties of Minnesota, a vast, rural landscape where the Foundation has worked since it was established in 1986. Roughly 325,000 people live there, spread out in one urban hub and 67 smaller towns over an 18,000-square-mile area, including three Indian reservations. Distance and isolation are compounded by the fact that this is a region with pockets of poverty, where many families struggle.

“We want to help strengthen these small rural communities. By giving them just a little bit of help along the way, engaging people, and [providing] some resources—communities can create new opportunities,” Haglin said. Central to this approach is a commitment to leveraging the assets that are plentiful in these communities—including some that have turned out to be hidden in plain sight.

One especially successful strategy that the Foundation has put into action began with the realization that nearly one-third of the population of this region is aged 55 or older. Traditionally, older adults were seen as a population with increasing needs. Despite stereotypes, many of the region’s older residents were healthy, skilled, and interested in making their communities better. What if that pool of talent could be mobilized?

With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies’ Community Experience Partnership, in 2008 the Foundation produced a study that revealed that northeastern Minnesota’s older adults were deeply concerned about young people, and about the future viability and vibrancy of their communities. Too many youth, they feared, were growing up without a sense of connection and belonging in northeastern Minnesota. Youth in this region were twice as likely to be living in poverty as other Minnesotans. There was recognition that without the support of community and nurturing adult relationships, many young people were at risk on the path to adulthood. Additionally, there was growing awareness that youth who left seeking educational and employment opportunities often would not return to their hometowns to live, in part due to lack of community connectedness.

## AT-A-GLANCE

### NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA’S AGE TO AGE INITIATIVE

#### COMMUNITY ISSUE

Helping youth reach their full potential and feel connected to and valued in their communities

#### COLLABORATORS

Ten rural communities (since expanded to 13) including three Indian reservations; community size ranged from 391 to 12,000 people

#### GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

The seven-county area of northeastern Minnesota—more than 18,000 square miles

Total population = 326,000

55+ population = 105,000 (32%)

#### RESULTS (FIRST THREE YEARS)

Intergenerational programs to support youth developed in 10 communities

6,000 people engaged (including 1,800 aged 55+ and 2,800 youth ages 5–18)

300 new opportunities for older adults to engage youth to address important civic needs and build shared community identity

6,720 volunteer hours generated annually (valued at \$421,464 over three years)

\$761,464 in leveraged donations, including volunteer time, across the ten sites over three-year period

Additional \$1.2 million raised to support program expansion and replication through at least 2016

Older adults, many of whom had spent their entire lives in communities that were now at risk of eroding, felt strongly that the future of the region was at stake. They wanted opportunities to do something tangible and lasting to nurture the next generation. Yet there was no clear way for older adults to be engaged in the lives of young people, particularly youth from outside their own families. Older adults wanted to be part of the solution; they just didn't know where to begin.

The Northland Foundation saw an opportunity to help, and in 2008 began work on what eventually became the *AGE to age* initiative. *AGE to age* convenes older adults, youth, and the generations in between in order to tackle important community needs. In particular, the initiative is dedicated to ensuring that children and youth build meaningful relationships with older adults and are supported in achieving their full potential as they transition into adulthood. As importantly, *AGE to age* helps young people to build connection with, and know they are valued members of, their communities—both for their own benefit and for the continued vitality of northeastern Minnesota.

### **Inviting Communities to Drive the Process**

To successfully create connection, strengthen civic participation, and improve quality of life, the Northland Foundation knows it has to address the circumstances and needs that are unique to rural communities. Over nearly two decades, the Foundation has developed and refined an intensive and hugely successful community-centered organizing process. *AGE to age* built on this approach to create intergenerational programs.

The work reflects a belief that no two communities are alike, even if they have similar demographics or share other characteristics. Particularly in smaller and more isolated areas, Haglin states, each community's work is "dependent on who lives there, who comes to the table, how they see the issues, and how they decide upon the solutions." She adds, "There aren't any of our communities that are exactly alike. The beauty of this approach is that it has been tested and works well because it totally engages community and respects their viewpoint and their commitment. You get the richness of a lot of people's thinking—older adults and young people and everyone in between."

To formally launch *AGE to age*, the Foundation invited ten communities to participate (all accepted) and worked intensively with each to develop a core group of stakeholders tasked with developing intergenerational strategies to tackle important community needs. With a focus on engaging people aged 55+ as well as youth, each community's stakeholders met and worked with Foundation staff between seven and ten times over an 18-month period as they developed locally specific program plans. Through a guided process, older and younger community members were given equal voice in devising grassroots solutions to issues they cared about.

While the Foundation initiated the process and provided the resources to make the meetings possible, the communities designed the meetings, provided the ideas, and made decisions about how to take an intergenerational approach to community improvement. In fact, the structure and format of the meetings reflected a wide range of engagement styles. While formal planning meetings were a good fit for some communities, others wanted a less-structured approach: The Indian

reservations, for example, elected to use a "talking circle" approach that they felt created a more comfortable space and broadened participation. "We're always willing to tweak our process," Haglin says. "With this approach we gain the trust of the community."

The Foundation also built grassroots ownership of the work by offering transportation that made it possible for more people to participate. In rural Minnesota, a single community often falls across a wide territory. One of the Indian reservations where *AGE to age* was launched, for example, had population centers that were 60 miles apart. The Foundation alternated meetings between the two locations and provided a bus to bring people from the opposite side of the reservation. It may sound like a simple or obvious step to take, yet, until *AGE to age*, this wasn't common practice.

### **Nurturing Local Investment in the Work**

One *AGE to age* outreach and planning activity that has been especially powerful is the intergenerational "speak out" panel. "We had a 93- and a 95-year-old on one of our speak out panels," Northland Foundation Vice President Lynn Haglin recounts, "along with sophomores and juniors in high school, and [participants from] every decade in between." Panelists described their experiences as teenagers, and offered their perspectives on the most important characteristics of a community where all generations continue to grow and have healthy, happy lives. Usually, participants had more in common than they had realized.

"During the speak outs, a seventh grader often says similar things to what an older adult is saying about activities, feelings, and observations, as well as sharing what opportunities need to be in place for everyone to thrive," Haglin said. The recognition of common feelings and points of view, across generations, was an important precursor that naturally led to collaboration. This activity was designed to be fun and engaging, while ultimately leading to ideas for concrete actions, big and small, that community members could feel excited about working on together.

## Putting Plans into Action

After creating a local strategic action plan, each community was awarded a three-year, \$30,000 grant as well as ongoing technical assistance to support implementation. All participating sites chose the issues they wanted to work on and designed their own ways of approaching the work. More than 300 distinct projects of varying sizes were developed during the first three years of *AGE to age*, including:

- community service and beautification efforts, such as clean-up, park improvement, flower planting, and volunteering at a food shelf or nursing home
- health and wellness activities, such as community gardening, farmers' markets, health fairs, healthy cooking classes, and running and walking clubs for all ages
- youth enrichment and education, such as after-school classes, homework help, reading programs, and writing clubs for children and youth with support of older adults
- culture and tradition activities, such as traditional Native American teachings (e.g., ricing, regalia-making, beading, language), local history projects, genealogy, storytelling, and crafts that elders share with youth
- recreation and community gatherings, such as game nights, dances, community dinners, holiday parties, hay rides, and other activities all ages can enjoy

These locally conceived and driven efforts—many of which have continued organically past the initial three-year program period—are connecting children and youth with caring adult role models; providing safe places to gather with peers and adults; offering productive activities during non-school hours; helping young people develop lifelong learning skills along with knowledge to support their health and well-being; and providing youth with a wide array of opportunities to give back to their communities. At one *AGE to age* site, every graduating youth has gone on to college—an exceptional statistic for that community. At the same time, the intergenerational design of the work is creating avenues for people young and old to overcome age stereotypes, establish friendships, and pool their strengths for civic good.

## Supporting and Sustaining the Work

Although the Northland Foundation is the managing implementer of *AGE to age* and has dedicated staff focused on the work, the program could not succeed without strong local leadership. From the outset, the Foundation understood that long-term sustainability would be possible only with a high level of community involvement and ownership.

Each participating site's work is managed by a local coordinator or co-coordinators who serve as the key link to the Foundation. In many cases, an existing community education coordinator was a logical choice for that job; in another town, the director of the youth center eagerly stepped into the role.

Each of the participating sites also has developed a leadership team to help plan and carry out the local implementation activities. The leadership teams range in size from ten to 20 people and are comprised of community members ages 55 and older, adults ages 19 to 54, and youth. They help guide the

ongoing development of their local projects. Most importantly, they bring energy and enthusiasm to keep the intergenerational efforts in the forefront of community attention and action. Although it is essential to have elders and young people engaged in the initiatives, people of all ages who serve in key positions of responsibility are building awareness of the *AGE to age* program and its benefits, bringing access to new resources, and working to ensure these programs continue.

In addition to providing modest financial resources, the Northland Foundation supports participating communities with ongoing technical assistance and training. Peer-based learning is also a centerpiece of the work. "Long before there was the terminology of 'learning community,'" Haglin remarks, "we began bringing together our participants. Our coordinators said, 'We'd like the chance to get together with the other communities you're working with. We're so isolated. We'd love to learn from each other.'"



## Key Lessons Learned Through *AGE to age*

- Older adults have tremendous potential to support youth by sharing talents, wisdom, stories, and experience; performing volunteer service with youth; providing friendship and mentoring; and offering guidance in leadership and service roles.
- Giving older adults a range of ways to get involved provides options for meaningful engagement that suit unique skills, talents, insights, and interests.
- Extending personal invitations is highly effective for recruitment. Once someone participates in an activity, they become invested.
- The issue-driven approach (e.g., helping youth thrive) resonates well with older adults.
- Local, on-the-ground coordinators serve an integral role.
- Intergenerational strategies are an effective way to build community, strengthen relationships, create partnerships, and address community needs.

For *AGE to age*, the Foundation holds quarterly meetings with the local coordinators and older adult leaders from all of the participating sites. They also hold annual, daylong summits where intergenerational teams from each site give progress reports and receive training on topics such as leadership, teamwork, and intergenerational understanding. The learning community enables participants from across the region to build relationships, acquire knowledge and skills, share experiences and lessons, reduce isolation, maximize resources, and renew energy. The convenings also are a time when the Foundation can gather data to help them monitor ongoing progress and direct support to communities that might be running into unexpected obstacles.

### **Creating Lasting Change**

The success of *AGE to age* during the three-year implementation phase has led the Northland Foundation to commit to replicating and expanding the work into three new rural communities, while continuing in the original ten through at least the end of 2016. With several other private funders coming on board, more than \$1.2 million has been raised to support new *AGE to age* expansion initiatives. Efforts include a summer college intern program, which was piloted in 2012, allowing eight sites to hire college students to assist in developing intergenerational programming; the Reading Pals Program, which engages older adults in three *AGE to age* communities to promote early childhood literacy; and Connect for Health, which uses intergenerational relationship-building as a strategy for improving health outcomes.

Perhaps most importantly, in many communities *AGE to age* has served as a catalyst to “change the way business is done.” The community of Floodwood, for example, renamed their senior center the AGEs Center and reimagined their relationship with the wider community; today, they serve as a welcoming gathering place for youth and elders alike. In Moose Lake, Mayor Ted Shaw credits *AGE to age* for meaningful and lasting change: “*AGE to age* is helping to infuse a multigenerational lens in our city and is rallying our residents around actively engaging older adults and youth to improve our community.”

By taking a fresh look at the incredible pool of talent that already exists, the people of northeastern Minnesota are taking great strides toward addressing urgent needs. Older adults are building new bridges to engage youth in activities that help them thrive and have continuing success in life, as well as a sense of connection to the place where they are growing up. Communities at risk of decline are being renewed, and new energy is being sparked across the region to make “home” a better place not only in which to grow up, but in which to grow older. *AGE to age* proves that the purposeful joining of older and younger generations for community improvement is a strategy that yields powerful results—and that promises to bring benefits to all generations of Minnesotans long into the future.

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