

A Call to Imagination: Aging Matters in Oregon ***A Synthesis of Summits***

In 1940, Oregon's total population was just over 1 million. By 2040, the number of Oregonians age 65+ will total 1 million. Although the state has long been recognized as a leader in innovative long-term supportive services for older persons, this profound demographic shift calls for innovative responses. As a part of the Aging Matters: Locally and Globally initiative* of the Institute on Aging at Portland State University, faculty and graduate students recently conducted a series of four summits designed to envision a new future for aging Oregonians and to develop the strategies needed to attain that vision. Attendees included academicians committed to education and research on issues in aging, leaders in aging services and policies, and forward-thinking leaders from a broad range of fields and interests outside of gerontology. This brief summarizes what we learned from this novel planning process.

Age is simultaneously important and irrelevant.

- The members of our society are interdependent, with many similar needs regardless of age. These include access to housing, services, meaningful work and social engagement.
- The use of age as a marker for access to services or programs is limiting and may foster ageism.
- We need to re-think the meanings of aging, life span, long-term care, frail, disabled, and elderly.
- There are real and pressing needs among older persons that need to be addressed.
- Our aging services system has emphasized the values of independence, choice, dignity, and privacy. How relevant do these values remain? For example, do we wish to enhance independence or interdependence?
- Older persons are not a homogenous group, and diversity is increasing in terms of income, education, race, ethnicity, and country of origin.

We must be reasonable and innovative.

- Our approaches need to be realistic and, at the same time, be capable of embracing complexity and fostering innovation.
- We need to resist simplistic thinking, generalities, and dualities.
- Equal access to programs and services will not result in equal outcomes.
- We need to capture the public's interest, recognizing that "aging" is not a marketable topic.
- There is a growing gap between those who have and those who do not.
- New health and social systems need to be sustainable beyond the current "age wave."
- We should capitalize on technology in meaningful and cost effective ways?
- Rapid innovation is needed, and we must be willing to test new ideas in the marketplace.

"The success story of population ageing and longer lives is often accompanied... by tales of doom and gloom; but...there are also enormous opportunities that must be seized." – World Economic Forum, 2012

To move forward, we should:

Identify and incorporate the thoughts and values of younger persons.

- Invite younger persons into thoughtful conversations about the meanings of age, aging, vitality, and frailty. We need to change our “mental model” of aging from one focusing only on disability and loss, to one focused on opportunity and innovation.
- Create an understandable menu of age-aware topics, such as Medicare spending, advantages and disadvantages of retirement, and health across the life course, and integrate these topics into high school and college education.
- Encourage policies and programs that support the desire of many older persons to act with and on behalf of younger generations.

Promote novel communities, programs, products, and services.

- In Oregon, create the most age-friendly communities in the United States.
- Incorporate population aging into sustainable development policies and programs.
- Promote accessible and affordable housing, near services and transit.
- Create innovative policies, programs, and services that integrate individuals, public agencies, and corporations in strategic new ways.
- Capture the creative and experiential assets of older adults in the same way Portland has promoted the “Creative Class.”
- Identify strategies for incorporating technologies that improve the lives of older persons, their families, and their communities.
- Integrate health, social service, and housing systems that, at present, create silos based on age.

Develop a positive language for aging and life course.

- Re-visit, re-articulate, and re-assert our values by asking what we can do with the “extra years” people now live, and consider those years as assets to our communities.

Summary

Based on the active participation of over 75 individuals, core values emerged, a vision was shaped, and ideas were generated. We have possible action items for the next five years, and we now need to set an agenda in collaboration with our community partners. Where there’s a will, there’s a way – and there is certainly a *will*. As one participant said,

“Planning begins now, with our grandchildren in mind.”

**The Aging Matters, Locally and Globally Initiative was created through a gift by PSU alumni Drs. Keren Brown Wilson and Michael DeShane for the purpose of finding innovative responses to population aging, locally and internationally, amidst a time of declining public resources and underutilization of the talents and skills of elders.*