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Seismic Changes Are Ahead for Charities as Americans Age

One in five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030, but too few nonprofits are taking their own pulse to see how fit they are for what's ahead.

By Nicole Wallace



WILFREDO LEE/AP IMAGES

FIGHTING ADDICTION - The number of older adults seeking treatment for substance abuse is growing fast. Here, seniors participate in a support group in Florida.

volunteer with kids.

Robert Egger has been fixated on the explosion in the number of older adults in America for a long time. Now, at age 57, he's taking action.

The veteran nonprofit leader has started L.A. Kitchen to create healthy, made-from-scratch meals for seniors and help people who are struggling to enter the work force. The organization will make the meals from fresh fruits and vegetables that farmers can't sell at full price because of blemishes, funky shapes, and other imperfections, while also providing job training for people of any age. Mr. Egger wants to experiment with using the meals in creative ways, such as an incentive to encourage older adults to

The goal is for L.A. Kitchen to serve as a model for other cities. "Wrinkled food, wrinkled people — everything still has value," says Mr. Egger.

He worries, though, that charities and foundations are ignoring the seismic shift happening around them. "We're so woefully unprepared," says Mr. Egger.

The AARP Foundation awarded a \$1-million grant, and the Nonprofit Finance Fund made a \$2-million loan to help L.A. Kitchen get off the ground. But not all grant makers were as enthusiastic.

"You'd be shocked at how many foundations have said, 'Well, Robert, we love the work you do, but seniors aren't in our interest area,' " says Mr. Egger. "What I try to say with all kinds of love and politeness is, 'They're gonna be.' "

Beyond Baby Boomers

Mr. Egger is right. The number of older Americans is growing fast — 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 every day. But it's the generations behind them that will add to the pileup, as health advances help everyone live longer. By 2030, at least one in five Americans will be over 65.

"This is not a phenomenon that will come and go with baby boomers," says Gretchen Alkema, a vice president at the SCAN Foundation, which focuses on health care for older adults. "We are seeing unprecedented levels of population aging that will continue forward with Gen Xers, millennials, and whatever we call the group that comes after that."

Charities that provide the basics, things like food, shelter, and health care, will definitely see the impact of the aging population. But all nonprofits will feel the reverberations. America's graying demographics will upend both the services that organizations provide and how they seek support.

Arts groups, for example, are already scrambling to attract young people to shore up aging audiences. The Denver Center Theatre Company started an offshoot that works technology and audience participation into its shows, while the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra has added a music school that offers lessons for both children and adults.

Jill Robinson, an arts consultant, says "the question/obsession about who will be the future" tops the list of concerns among cultural leaders, who wonder "what do we have to do to get Generation Xers and millennials to stick with us and love us?"

The proliferation of older adults has profound consequences for fundraising, presenting new opportunities as well as challenges. Charities are putting greater emphasis on seeking bequests. And as they meet with older donors, more fundraisers are struggling with what to do when supporters start to show signs of dementia.

Some Startling Needs

Some of the nonprofits that are gearing up for an upsurge in demand for services are not the usual suspects. Among them: groups that serve older adults seeking treatment for alcohol and drug addiction.

Part of the jump is sheer demographics. As older adults make up a bigger share of the population, they're going to make up a bigger portion of people seeking treatment. But more than numbers are driving the trend: It's also the culture of the generations who are getting old. Baby boomers invented the phrase "recreational drugs." And as knees and hips wear out and require surgical repair, the powerful painkillers older patients are given to help them cope can trigger late-in-life addiction.

Twenty years ago, the average patient was a 45-year-old struggling with alcoholism, says Patrick Feeley, an executive vice president at Caron Treatment Centers. "Now, it's a swell in the population of older adults and youth," he says.

The charity is building a \$10-million medical center on its Wernersville, Pa., campus to serve the more intensive medical needs of older people who undergo addiction treatment.

Caron doesn't expect the increase in older patients to recede any time soon, says Mr. Feeley: "We all feel that we're at the beginning of the wave."

Ignoring the Problem

While organizations like L.A. Kitchen and Caron Treatment Centers are getting out ahead to prepare for the graying of America, many charities and foundations are not doing much at all.



THE ROAD AHEAD - Robert Egger's new venture, L.A. Kitchen, provides healthy, made-from-scratch meals for older adults and job training for people struggling to enter the work force. He hopes it will be a model for other cities as they try to meet the needs of aging residents.

Asked what impact the aging population has had on his organization, one advocacy-group leader answered with blunt honesty: "I don't know. I hadn't given it a lot of thought."

And that response isn't an outlier among people working outside the field of aging. Lots of organizations *The Chronicle* asked to weigh in about the topic ignored the interview requests altogether.

One reason may be the lack of philanthropic support available to groups that work on aging. Grants to support programs that serve older people accounted for 1.2 percent of all foundation funding in 2012, according to the Foundation Center.

Atlantic Philanthropies has long been one of aging's most important patrons in the foundation world. But the fund announced years ago it would discontinue grant making in 2016 to meet the demands of its founder, Charles Feeney, and its departure will leave a gaping hole in support for the cause.

Yet the headwinds that aging advocates face go far beyond the cold reception they get from grant makers. By and large, the American public is also ignoring the imminent spike in need.

To get a handle on how the public thinks about older people, eight leading aging organizations commissioned research carried out by the Frameworks Institute. One of the most striking findings is also the most discouraging. The rugged individualism that

Americans hold dear colors the way they think about older people. There's a very strong sense that if you run into trouble in old age, it's because you didn't plan or save or exercise enough.

"So basically, it's your fault," says John Feather, chief executive of Grantmakers in Aging. "People don't come out and say it exactly that way, but it's sort of like, 'You didn't do the things you're supposed to do, so why am I supposed to help you out?'"

Gray vs. Brown

As nonprofits grapple with the changing age demographics, they must also prepare for an America that is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse.

People of color make up 21 percent of Americans age 65 and older but more than 50 percent of children 5 years old and younger. That sets up the potential for a dangerous narrative of gray vs. brown — the idea that providing assistance to older adults, who are predominately white, comes at the expense of children of color.

To head off that kind of zero-sum thinking, many in the nonprofit world are calling for programs that bring older adults and children together. And there are signs the movement is picking up momentum.

For almost two decades, the Eisner Foundation made grants to programs that serve low-income kids or older adults. In July, the Los Angeles fund announced it would support only programs that serve the two groups simultaneously.

Hope Meadows, a nonprofit housing project in Rantoul, Ill., that provides discounted rent to seniors in exchange for helping families raising foster and adopted children, has won acclaim — and the idea is spreading. Similar communities have been built in Portland, Ore., Tampa, Fla., and Easthampton, Mass., and other projects are in the works that will pair older adults with military families, young mothers aging out of foster care, and people with disabilities.

"If you're segregating people by age, you're also segregating them by race and ethnicity. And why should they care about each other, and why should they care about investments in each other?" says Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, an advocacy group. "But if people are engaged in a community or a program, then it's their kids, it's their grandparents."

'A Stage With No Name'

Another part of the diversity challenge stems from the longevity surge: People with AARP cards can be 55 or 105.

Marc Freedman, founder of Encore.org, a nonprofit that promotes social-good careers for older people, says that's why it is a mistake to categorize all older people with just one phrase or perception.

"We would never talk about people in the first 50 years of life as if that was a monolithic group, as if a 7-year-old and a 47-year-old were in a similar situation."

He especially hopes to see new labels — and more important new opportunities — for people in their 60s and 70s. "They're in a stage that has no name," says Mr. Freedman. "They're a group that certainly has needs but also has an enormous amount to contribute."

Nonprofits that are smart about engaging older volunteers and workers can tap into decades of smarts and experience. And if they're really lucky, they could attract someone like Don Hawley.

Since he retired 15 years ago, Mr. Hawley has taken what he learned as a management consultant and applied it as a volunteer at nonprofits in Boston. He takes his charity commitments seriously: Last year, he put in 630 hours, which is pretty much the same as working one-third time.

For the last year Mr. Hawley has led a team of volunteers from Social Venture Partners Boston that is working with Silver Lining Mentoring, a charity that serves youths in foster care. The team helped the nonprofit write a detailed business plan with three-year financial and staffing forecasts and create a matrix to track the young people's progress in seven areas, such as self-confidence and financial-management skills.

"Don has been a wonderful sounding board for me as a leader," says Colby Swettberg, chief executive of Silver Lining. "He's become a trusted adviser, someone on whom I rely for advice about a whole range of things."

Mr. Hawley gives generously. But he says volunteering is the way he can have the biggest impact on the lives of local children.

"I don't have enough money to make a decisive difference in any of these organizations by what I could give financially," he says. "But I can do that through my skills."

Not a Disease

For baby-boomer nonprofit leaders who have long focused on aging issues, this is an especially interesting moment when personal and professional lives intersect.

Tim Carpenter founded EngAGE, a charity that brings the arts to low-income seniors, with a single writing class in 1998. His goal was to prove to older adults — and the people around them — that aging is an opportunity, not a disease. Today, the innovative nonprofit offers classes in dance, painting, poetry, and other creative pursuits in 36 senior apartment complexes in Southern California. The group has also helped plan new buildings that are designed to be vibrant, creative places to live.

Mr. Carpenter remembers that when he was growing up, old folks' homes were "the last place on earth you would want to be." So he's thrilled when he sees how the kids in EngAGE's intergenerational programs respond to the communities.

"Students come up to me all the time and say, 'I can't wait to be old so I can live in a place like this,' " he says.

Mr. Carpenter was in his late 30s when he founded EngAGE. In February he'll turn 55, old enough to move into one of the buildings where his organization works.

He and his peers have very different expectations about their golden years than their parents did — and he says nonprofits had better get ready.

"We are not going to go quietly into that good night," says Mr. Carpenter. "We're going to be screaming about our Internet speed and that my latte is tepid."

Send an e-mail to Nicole Wallace.

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THE AGING OF AMERICA

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