

The Role of Foundation Grantmakers in Responding to Community Aging:

Maine Community Foundation

by Meredith Jones

The issue of aging is near and dear to my heart. In an earlier life I worked for the Maine Health Care Association, the trade association for long-term care facilities in Maine. Through this work I got to know many of the people who run nursing homes and assisted living facilities and the staff who provide direct care for their residents. I'm also a few years shy of my seventh decade, so I know I should be thinking about the issue as it relates to my own future needs. In addition, my mother moved to my home community of Belfast from Eastport at the age of 91 to be closer to family, and as a primary caregiver (along with a couple of siblings), I learned first-hand about the needs of at least one nonagenarian. She hated the move. She hated leaving her beloved home in Eastport and always referred to her charming apartment on the shores of Penobscot Bay as a prison. But she was no longer a safe driver, and she needed access to medical professionals for the pulmonary and ophthalmologic care her aging body required.

While I don't dwell on the issue of aging in my day job, the facts and figures about Maine's aging population along with our work here at Maine Community Foundation to support older adults suggest this issue, along with many others, will shape the future of Maine communities. Although aging is not one of the Maine Community Foundation's specific areas of focus, it is fair to say that through our donors and competitive grant programs we provide support to an array of organizations focused on the issue.

For example, the foundation's Hospice Fund supports end-of-life and volunteer bereavement services frequently associated with aging. Our community-building grant program has funded senior centers, community action programs, and other social service agencies that provide support to seniors. We have funded Maine's Senior College Network, which is hosted by the University of Southern Maine and includes chapters from one end of the state to the other.

Unlike most foundations that were created by an individual, the Maine Community Foundation boasts hundreds of funds and an even greater number of donors. We administer more than 300 donor-advised funds, each of which has its own interests and focus. Less than 2 percent of the foundation's \$400+ million in assets is available for discretionary grantmaking. We administer 18 distinct competitive grant programs and respond to a variety of compelling issues, approaches, and geography.

Most of our competitive grantmaking programs embrace an assets-based perspective. We care less about the particular issue being addressed and more about the process and inclusiveness of the work being undertaken. Rather than soliciting proposals for projects that solve problems, we look for activities that will enhance or strengthen a community; use the skills, services, materials, and/or time that people and organizations in the community can and will provide; make the community stronger by helping it address current or future challenges; and continue to affect the community after funding is gone. We also have a particular interest in projects that focus on the community foundation's own goal areas of increasing higher education attainment, expanding leadership talent, and encouraging downtown revitalization.

Foundations respond to a variety of compelling needs. How do you reconcile the responsibility of addressing the needs of Maine's aging citizens in light of other compelling issues?

The Maine Community Foundation's mission is centered on Maine communities. We are, after all, a *community* foundation. Our hope for Maine communities—large and small, rural and urban, east and west, north and south—is that they will be vital and confident about their future, and that their residents enjoy a high quality of life.

Communities need a thriving economy to remain vital. A thriving economy requires people with skills and knowledge to take and create tomorrow's jobs. To remain vital, communities need to welcome new residents of all ages, embrace change and diversity, and support local amenities (such as restaurants, walkable downtowns, hiking and walking trails) that attract new people and retain others. Communities also need to ensure that Maine's unique natural resource assets are conserved for generations to come. The needs of Maine's aging citizens are no different in many ways from the needs of all Mainers.

No foundation can solve all of the challenges the state faces. According to the most recent *Giving in Maine* report issued by the Maine Philanthropy Center, Maine foundations "give a fraction of the money spent each year by state government. For instance, the Maine Department of Education expenditures for 2012 were \$2.1 billion. Total Maine grants equal 8% of that budget—enough to operate the DOE for less than 30 days" (Maine Philanthropy Center 2015: 1).

Three years ago the Maine Community Foundation developed a 10-year framework to help focus our work. A board and staff team began the planning process by identifying long-term trends that will shape the future of Maine communities; assessing the needs, gaps, and opportunities where philanthropy can make a difference; and determining the most important role the foundation could play in the next decade to shape the future success of Maine communities to ensure a high quality of life for their residents.

The outcome of the planning work was compelling and clear and resulted in three primary areas of focus:

1. Help more Maine people to pursue education and training beyond high school since the majority of the jobs of the future will require post-secondary-education credentials.
2. Increase the depth and capacity of current and emerging community and policy leaders since we know from experience and example that one person can make a difference.
3. Help create and support community centers that bring social and economic benefits to towns and cities throughout the state since we know that the strength of our communities will dictate the strength of the state.

And while our three areas of focus do not specifically include aging, there is no question that the issue of aging is important to all of Maine, and the issues of aging Mainers are not unique to them. They want safe and affordable housing, walkable town centers, places to shop, and public transportation. Maine has the highest concentration of mature and elderly people in the nation and ranks among the top three states, along with our northern New England neighbors, in having one of the lowest birth rates in the country (Weil 2013).

Maine also has more second homes than any other state. In 2000, Maine had 650,000 housing units. More than 15 percent of them (100,000) were for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use. The national rate is 3.1 percent. This suggests an opportunity to tap part-time and/or financially secure older adults to become more engaged in their communities.

Maine is known for its relatively high levels of civic engagement. Our voting rates are above the national average, and AARP surveys show that Maine people are more likely to write a letter to or call a legislator than the national average. With a fairly homogenous population of 1.3 million people and with average wages always hovering at 85 percent of the U.S. average, Mainers long ago learned to work well with one another and to do more with less.

A number of years ago, the Maine Community Foundation participated in a national social capital community benchmark survey. The John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University sponsored the survey in partnership with a consortium of 36 community foundations and a few private foundations. Some key findings from our survey of the Lewiston-Auburn area include a significant positive relationship between having a baccalaureate degree and volunteering more often, a higher sense of efficacy in the community among women, and a lower sense of efficacy in the community by people in middle age (50 to 64 years old). These findings support the need for new ways to engage older adults in community activities.

The statistics prompted the Maine Community Foundation to submit a proposal a number of years ago to the global foundation Atlantic Philanthropies. The funder wanted to work through community foundations throughout the United States to change attitudes about aging. Rather than thinking about older people as needy, frail elderly, the funder wanted to start viewing older adults as community assets with time and talent to give back to their communities. More details about

ENCorps, a partnership with the University of Maine Center on Aging, appears in a companion article in this issue (Crittenden and DeAndrade 2015).

Is there a special role that you see philanthropy playing in promoting the experience of positive aging in Maine communities? If yes, what is it? If not, why not?

The most valuable roles philanthropy can play in promoting positive aging is to achieve greater effectiveness by encouraging more collaboration among the nonprofits serving this population and to encourage innovation by investing in promising programs and activities that respond to the changing dynamics and needs of today's elders. While there is a link between being successful in securing funding and the ability to demonstrate impact, the truth is that over time the tendency is toward redundancy, greater irrelevance, and increasing overlap of services. With increasingly finite public resources and growing demand, now is the time to encourage greater collaboration and coordination.

What strategies, broadly speaking, do you think are likely to be most successful in promoting the well-being of older adults in Maine, the oldest most rural state in the nation? And, does philanthropy have the power to create age-friendly communities?

Aging is important to all of Maine—to the entire Northeast for that matter. The issues we aging Mainers face are not unique. Irrespective of our age, ethnicity, or economic status, we want to live in communities that offer safe and affordable housing and ready access to quality health care. We want town centers that have places to shop, eat, and provide entertainment. We want communities that are safe, have diverse houses of worship and social clubs that encourage volunteerism, and good schools to educate future generations. We want access to quality employment opportunities—if not for ourselves, for our friends and neighbors. So yes, the work of many Maine-based foundations supports the creation of age-friendly communities since our foundations focus on many of these issues.

If an anonymous benefactor wrote your foundation a blank check to address the challenges of aging in Maine, what would you consider doing?

In addition to inviting members of Maine's aging community to tell funders what they want and need, I would place my biggest bets on supporting leaders at all

levels who have the knowledge and skills to help make our communities vibrant and sustainable over the long term. We all want to live and thrive in supportive communities. And one person can, indeed, make a difference. 🐟

REFERENCES

- Crittenden, Jennifer A., and Lelia DeAndrade. 2015. "Never Too Old to Lead: Activating Leadership among Maine's Older Adults." *Maine Policy Review* 24(2): 80–85.
- Maine Philanthropy Center. 2015. Giving in Maine: 2015 Update of Foundation Giving. Maine Philanthropy Center, Portland. <https://www.maine philanthropy.org/sites/default/files/resources/2015%20Foundation%20Giving%20Report%20Final%201.pdf>
- Weil, Gordon. 2013. "Maine, the Oldest State: Causes and Possible Cures." *Pine Tree Watchdog*, Maine Center for Public Interest, Hallowell.



Meredith Jones is the president and CEO of the Maine Community Foundation, a statewide public foundation. There, she previously served as the vice president of programs and helped create the Maine Compact for Higher Education and ENCorps, a volunteer leader program for civic-minded baby boomers. Before joining the Maine Community Foundation, she worked for the Maine Health Care Association and for the Maine Development Foundation.