Is This What Change Feels Like?
The State of Aging in America: The 2012 Conference of Grantmakers in Aging

Several partners from Connecticut’s EngAGEment initiative attended the Grantmakers in Aging Conference in Cleveland, Ohio in October, 2012. They included Gertrude O’Sullivan and Nancy Heaton from The Foundation for Community Health, Debbie Stein, part time EngAGEment Initiative consultant for the Council and wearing a dual hat of Senior Services Program Officer for Connecticut Community Foundation; and Deb Werner, also with the Council. Here is a quick review of a few of the major topics:

Communities for a Lifetime -- also known as communities for all ages, lifespan communities and age-friendly communities -- were the most discussed subject at this year’s conference. The focus was on successful aging from a community development perspective, understanding local assets and needs, and collaborating across generations to strengthen communities. Model programs included Baltimore’s "Neighborhoods for All Ages" and Atlanta’s "Lifelong Communities." Although the national EngAGEment project is wrapping up, a spinoff called Community AGEnda will be funded by Pfizer Foundation. The five regions selected for Community AGEnda will pursue varied approaches to creating age-friendly communities.

Aging in Place: Designing Elder-friendly Environments, delivered by former U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros, stressed the importance of paying attention to the physical places that older adults call home. 70% live in single family detached houses and many are not designed for the safety and maximum function of their aging dwellers. According to Secretary Cisneros, deterioration of their homes, impediments to mobility and to accomplishing the small tasks of everyday life are key concerns of older adults. He emphasized home modification as a powerful intervention and recommended fashioning 'lifelong home packages' to retrofit homes on a large scale.

GPS for Health: Guiding Adults to Their Best Health Care Solutions was presented by Dr. Mark Lachs, geriatrician, author and professor. Dr. Lachs' research-based prescription for quality longevity: a strong social network; 'thick skin' to bounce back from life's challenges; positive attitudes toward aging; and just the right amount of health care. Dr. Lachs highlighted the importance of non-professional players in achieving successful medical outcomes. Family members are being trained as care transition coaches and volunteers run structured programs to normalize life and speed discharge of hospitalized older adults. Grantmakers are supporting the development of these intersections between social networks and the medical system.

AARP Experience Corps received the Eisner Prize for Intergenerational Excellence at the conference. Experience Corps trains older adults to tutor at-risk elementary school students in 19 communities across the country. The program has demonstrated significant increases in literacy skills by tapping the time and talents of experienced adults. Experience Corps was founded in 1995 and affiliated with AARP in 2011. It can now benefit from the resources of AARP and a major expansion, beginning in Chicago, is planned.