Planners and aging professionals collaborate for livable communities

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to share the findings from a learning intervention aimed at facilitating more regular and effective collaboration across the planning and aging sectors in order to advance Livable Communities for All Ages (LCA).

Design/methodology/approach – A half-day summit that convened over 250 aging sector professionals and planners. Data from these conversations, as well as a pre-event survey, post-event evaluations, and a six-month post-event follow-up survey provide the findings for the discussion.

Findings – The results revealed that the participants increasingly recognized the value of cross-sector relationships to their work on LCA. Further, the success on current projects was highly attributed to the trust gained from a previous experience of aging and planning professionals working together.

Research limitations/implications – Researchers relied on a purposive sample of respondents already registered to attend the Livable Communities Summit, who were likely to be somewhat knowledgeable about the topic of age-friendly planning. While not generalizable to the broader professional fields of the aging and planning sectors, the results inform on the importance of cross-sector collaboration in the context of planning communities supportive of individuals across the lifespan.

Practical implications – Existing challenges to the local residents in a broad swath of areas including housing, transportation, social isolation, purpose and more, are exacerbated in a rapidly aging world that does not advance policies, practices, and built environments to make communities more livable for residents of all ages.

Originality/value – The intention of this research is to contribute to the limited existing literature on collaboration between professionals in the planning and aging fields and to stimulate the increased and improved cross-sector relationships.

Keywords Intergenerational, Planning, Built environment, Ageing, Age-friendly, Livable communities

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The aging of populations, due to lower birthrates and greater longevity, is a global phenomenon. Nearly 20 percent of the US population will be over age 65 by 2030, and European countries are on average approximately five years ahead of the US aging curve. Japan is the only country in the world where those 60+ already represent 30 percent or more of the population; by 2050 it is projected that 62 countries will reach this milestone.

One of the most consistent features of older adults around the world is their strong preference to age in their home or community for as long as possible. In the USA, nearly 90 percent of older adults surveyed by AARP supported this preference. Therefore, it is both critical and urgent that professionals in key roles work together to put in place effective policies and programs that will make communities more livable for all ages. Livable Communities for All ages (LCA) are communities that ensure appropriate physical infrastructures (i.e. housing, transportation, built environment, access to healthy foods) and social infrastructures (i.e. health care, support services, engagement opportunities) for residents throughout an expanding life course.

Two professional groups that are essential to this work are planners, who envision and help to implement the form of future growth of communities, and professionals in the field of aging, who often create plans to help people live well in their homes and communities for as long as possible.
Local planning frameworks, including comprehensive, general, master, and site-specific plans, all provide opportunities for planners to facilitate community connectivity and to specifically address the needs of the aging populations that comprise their constituency base. A built environment that is designed for accessibility can ensure continued involvement in the community by residents with increasing mobility challenges and age-related sensory changes. Planners can help to minimize barriers that exist in building and zoning codes and otherwise promote regulatory or institutional frameworks that support residents in accessing human services, healthcare, and appropriate housing alternatives. LCAs[1] beckon planners to use land-use strategies, zoning, infrastructure, transportation, and open spaces as vehicles for creating enabling environments that raise the level of independent functioning of older adults.

For aging professionals, the paradigm is one of planning and providing services that help older adults to live independently. The Older Americans Act of 1965 (as amended) created the primary vehicle for organizing, coordinating, and providing community-based services and opportunities for older Americans and their families. The National Aging Network is headed by the Administration on Aging and includes 56 state agencies on aging, 622 area agencies on aging, and more than 260 Title VI Native American aging programs. It functions through the support of tens of thousands of community-based nonprofit and for-profit service providers and volunteers. These entities seek to make a range of options available so that older individuals can choose the services and living arrangements that suit them best.

One critical area where the planning and aging professions must intersect is housing. In the USA, older adults comprise the fastest growing homeless population. While aging professionals seek to provide affordable and accessible housing options to older adults, planners and local councils may unwittingly put into effect discriminatory rules or practices that undermine the potential for innovative housing arrangements. For example, limited definitions of "family" and "maximum unrelated" restrictions narrowly define who may live together and may thwart creative options such as shared housing. In the area of transportation, even communities with state-of-the-art transit systems might as well not exist from the perspective of those with mobility limitations, if these systems do not address the first and last mile challenge that prohibits residents from reaching their destination or moving from one mode of transportation to another. Moreover, older adults make up almost 13 percent of the population yet account for nearly 20 percent of pedestrian fatalities (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2015). Falls account for nearly 68 percent of older adult hospitalizations (Tomczyk et al., 2017), with about half of all falls occurring outdoors (Kelsey et al., 2010; Li et al. 2006; Nyman et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that planners must address the mobility needs of people across the lifespan, including: well-maintained sidewalks, no-skid surfaces, good lighting, bus shelters, benches, traffic islands, and crossing signals with adequate time to cross the road (Brewer et al., 2014; Lynott et al., 2009; Doherty et al., 2010; World Health Organization, 2007).

This paper summarizes relevant theories on collaboration and highlights specific challenges and opportunities for organizations collaborating under the LCA paradigm. The paper presents findings from an initial learning intervention with professionals from the aging and planning sectors around four age-friendly issue areas: housing, food access, health, and socialization. The paper highlights the ways that members of each profession have begun to see their places within the LCA paradigm across these four examined issue areas and to establish the relationships across the aisle. Finally, the discussion presents recommendations aimed at stimulating collaboration across these sectors to advance more LCA.

**Relevant factors influencing collaboration**

Community planning typically serves as the framework that facilitates the collaborative discussion and engagement among stakeholders to address local issues. The participation between government and the public as it relates to community planning is realized through partnerships, citizen representation on advisory councils, and collaboration (Green and Haines, 2015). Previous scholars have found evidence of successful outcomes of services for older adults resulting from varying forms of collaboration in localized age-friendly planning efforts (Garon et al. 2014; Neal et al. 2014; De La Torre and Neal, 2017; Keyes and Benavides, 2017; Warner et al. 2017). For example, a higher
level of municipal involvement in planning with aging services professionals to create communities supportive of the needs of older adults resulted in positive outcomes such as public funding allocation toward necessary services (Garon et al, 2014).

Although recent research on age-friendly planning efforts considers collaboration through various forms of relationships resulting from participatory planning processes or continued learning, it does not consider the theoretical assumptions underlying collaboration. Collaborative management is a strategic approach to creating solutions for complex social issues in our communities (Weber and Khademian, 2008). This paper considers collaborative management literature to expand our understanding of the association between cross-sector relationships of aging professionals and planners and the resulting community achievements in planning efforts toward LCA.

The concept of collaboration in the public sector has been defined by some scholars as a strategy or tool for government service delivery (Agranoff, 2001; McGuire, 2006; O’Toole, 2015). A decision to collaborate necessitates a commitment to group goals alongside some marginal costs associated with the relationship (Feick and Scholz, 2010). The result of the decision to work together may include relinquishing individual agendas. Ostrom (1998) argues that individual decisions about group cooperation and coordination relate to levels of uncertainty and risk that someone else in the group will not participate for the good of the group. The author posits that individual self-interest is softened by trust, reputation, and reciprocity among the members of a collaborative group addressing a problem. The influence of these factors on group decision making ultimately reduces uncertainty and leads to the best outcome for the group.

This paper posits, therefore, that understanding the collaboration relative to the planning of LCA is threefold. First, collaboration relates to the level of trust developed among aging services professionals and community planners due to joint work on prior projects. Second, it relates to the extent that organizations (reflecting the two sectors) have reputations as community leaders on the topic. Third, it relates to the level of reciprocity that exists, as exemplified by a culture of collaboration between the municipality and the nongovernmental sector. Taken together, trust, reputation, and reciprocity are the important factors in examining the strategies to engage both professional sectors in collaborative LCA planning efforts, to leverage resources, and to achieve LCA milestones.

Methods

The research design is a combined approach including both quantitative and qualitative methods. These techniques allow for testing the theoretical assumptions of collaboration management while exploring the theoretical underpinnings of our findings.

Participants

The half-day LCA Summit convened over 250 aging sector professionals and planners on March 24, 2017, as part of the American Society on Aging’s, 2017 Aging in America Conference, in collaboration with the American Planning Association and with sponsorship by AARP. Breakout tables included representation from both planners and aging services professionals, fostering input from both disciplines through facilitated small group discussions. All registered participants of the LCA Summit received the event evaluation and the pre- and post-event surveys.

Data collection

The data are derived from learning intervention participant responses. The final response rates for each instrument are as follows:

- a pre-event survey (n = 140);
- table summaries from breakout group discussions at the event (nearly all registered participants);
- post-event evaluations (n = 97); and
- six-month, post-event, and a follow-up survey (n = 46).

The pre-event survey questions asked the participants to identify their profession, organizations in their community providing leadership for LCA work, the extent their work focuses on LCA,
professions with which they currently collaborate on LCA, and barriers and challenges for planning LCA in their community. The event evaluation specifically focused on measuring knowledge gained on LCA concepts and assessed the importance of cross-sector professional relations in their LCA work. The six-month post-event survey assessed progress made in post-summit work efforts relative to new cross-sector relationships as a result of this initial summit. The post-event survey also examined the theoretical characteristics of collaboration including trust, reputation, and reciprocity reflected in practical applications.

Analysis

Correlation and difference of means tests were used to explore the assumptions of collaborations. All open-ended responses and event table summaries were coded. Themes were developed based on the representativeness of the concepts derived from on-code comparisons across responses. The process included a comparison of code findings from three researchers to assess inter-coder reliability.

Findings and discussion

This research explores collaboration specifically across planning and aging professions to advance planning efforts for LCA. The data gained from the three different survey instruments inform the factors that influence collaboration and their association with LCA. Following Ostrom (1998), this research suggests that uncertainty and risk are barriers to collaboration in LCA planning efforts and that those constraints are reduced through the factors of trust, reciprocity, and reputation. These three factors are captured in this research as: any experience where aging and planning professionals worked together; a community’s recognition of the profession as a leader on the topic; and a culture of collaboration within the municipality. The findings provide four strategic lessons learned, which can help support the efforts of leaders seeking to secure change in our communities using LCA as a platform for collaboration.

Lesson 1: a relationship with a planner is within reach

Most attendees (61 percent) responded that they are already conducting LCA planning efforts to a moderate (34 percent), high (18 percent), and very great extent (9 percent). The literature often identifies the initiation of age-friendly work in local communities under the leadership of the local office on aging or advocacy groups of aging policy (Greenfield et al., 2015). Although they may not be extensively collaborating with the complementary professional, identified here as an aging professional or planning professional, planning is a recognizable attribute of LCA. Over 11 percent of non-planner participants indicated an area of planning as a primary focus of their work, while only 4 percent of planners indicated aging policy as a primary focus of their work. These findings provide evidence that while there is some recognition of the issues overlap, there is an enormous amount of work to be done and this should serve as a call to action for municipalities to bring these two sectors together in order to address the needs of rapidly aging populations.

The participants also recognized the importance of the planning field as a primary leader for the LCA work in their community. In pre-event survey findings, 14 percent of respondents highlighted their city or regional planning agency as the lead entity in their community’s LCA planning efforts. Further, the event evaluations provide evidence of a significant difference between the considered relative importance of cross-sector relationships in LCA work held by summit participants before and after the event ($\chi^2 = 8.41, \ p < 0.000$). The expressed level of importance of these relationships increased from 73 to 86 percent after the educational intervention. Based on six-month post-summit survey responses, almost 60 percent of participants indicated that they returned to their communities and initiated a relationship with a planner. There was a desire among many individuals in both professions to find ways to work together. The findings also suggest some level of effectiveness of the LCA summit for understanding the importance of collaboration and relationships in advancing LCA work efforts and, importantly, as a potential catalyst. Aging services and the planning professions sit well within the domains of age-friendly communities (e.g. outdoor spaces, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and...
social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community and health services), which are often used to frame areas of activity in LCA efforts (Lui et al., 2009). Thus, LCA can serve as a catalyst for de-siloed work and a vehicle for a lifespan focus.

The summit and surveys also revealed existing challenges and potential solutions for successful LCA collaboration. One event evaluation survey respondent who identified as an aging professional requested “Talking points to approach planners,” adding: “I am in aging (profession) and I am intimidated by the planners in my community.” Educational interventions such as the summit provide opportunities to introduce the fields to each other. Another participant raised the importance of issue framing and using language that resonates across professions to help facilitate collaboration. Discussion at the event helped illuminate the potential for partnerships between professions. For example, the aging sector is directly aware of the problems the older adults they serve face in the area of housing, and is therefore in a unique position to help frame the sufficiency problem in a community (across size, option, and price point). Planning plays an important role in facilitating the availability of housing across all age groups and overcoming some specific policy constraints for the community (e.g. zoning barriers).

Similarly, the importance of a built environment designed to respect needs across the lifespan and ability continuum is relevant to both professions. Environments that are overly demanding may push citizens to an artificially lower level of functioning, causing them to require additional care and services, a crucial concern for aging services professionals (Lawton and Nahemow, 1973; Greenhouse, 2012) and for municipalities. Planners can alleviate this preventable burden by promoting and supporting enabling initiatives such as “visitables” homes, walkable communities, and Complete Streets (Smith et al., 2008; Ball, 2012). Our results suggest examining goal alignment across the two professions and launching policy action in the context of common areas of professional interest.

Lesson 2: find points of commonality

Points of commonality can and should be identified for goal alignment and collaboration in LCA planning efforts. The pre-event survey instrument asked professionals to identify the most common characteristics of LCA central to their professional work as illustrated in Table I. A correlation analysis between profession type and LCA characteristic shows aging and planning professionals both identified access to health as a uniquely important LCA characteristic relevant to both professions.

Based on these findings, communities may find it productive to have each profession identify which characteristics are central to their work and look for overlaps. This commonality/ies could serve as a starting point to identify goals and serve as a foundation for moving forward into other areas of focus.

Certain factors may create barriers for the professions to identify these points of commonality. Pre-event survey findings identified recognizable barriers for communities including the lack of

| Table I | Correlation analysis between aging and planning profession type and LCA characteristics |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **LCA characteristics** | **Planning** | **Aging** |
| Mobility | 0.134 | 0.058 |
| Housing | 0.074 | 0.102 |
| Built environment | 0.144 | 0.256* |
| Programs and services | 0.111 | 0.316* |
| Access to information | 0.095 | 0.301* |
| Public security | 0.202* | 0.043 |
| Civic participation | 0.019 | 0.063 |
| Volunteerism | 0.019 | 0.287* |
| Leadership | 0.081 | 0.264* |
| Access to health | 0.198* | 0.265* |

*Note: *p < 0.05
financial resources (71 percent), little focus by community on needs of older adults (52 percent), LCA not being a priority for elected leadership (52 percent), and LCA not being a priority for city staff (43 percent). These results tend to indicate that the participants sense a lack of leadership on the issues surrounding LCA in their communities. However, previous research indicates that leadership matters in moving the needle on age-friendly policy action at the community level (Lehning, 2012; Keyes and Benavides, 2017). One innovative approach to engaging leadership, described by Warner et al. (2010), demonstrated economic savings from creating built environments, the creation of policy decisions that work across the lifespan, and the provision of services (i.e. common transportation needs). The findings from the pre-event survey relative to current research suggest that future educational interventions should create opportunities for both collaboration across fields and effective engagement with high levels of community leadership.

Lesson 3: previous relationships matter

Activities yield results – but it is people who drive activities. Therefore, LCA advocates must invest time in building individual relationships in key sectors, with stakeholders who will drive the work (Firestone, 2014). A prior relationship from working together on community projects influences trust and reduces uncertainty and risk in jointly engaging in LCA planning. The group identified as most actively working on LCA planning efforts in the respondents’ communities was the local Area Agencies on Aging (24 percent), followed by the local AARP chapter (11 percent). “Other” (32 percent) included such groups as citizen-led councils and nonprofit organizations. Pre-event survey findings revealed the types of professional groups in which participants are already collaborating with each other to achieve their LCA work objectives. Those professional groups include business (61 percent), nonprofit (88 percent), planning (74 percent), housing (73 percent), transportation (77 percent), health services (80 percent), nutrition (51 percent), aging services (81 percent), and citizens (80 percent). Survey respondents indicated the primary reason for partnering with other organizations related to the organization’s leadership on the issue (26 percent). This was followed by the organization’s ability to leverage resources (17 percent), and the organization’s direct contact with citizens (11 percent). Events like this summit can serve as a vehicle for engaging with stakeholders in other sectors on specific common priorities, and fostering connections that can lead to relationship-building.

Over 83 percent of the six-month post-event survey respondents indicated that in cases where they successfully collaborated across the planning and aging sectors, they attributed this success to previous collaborative work. Conversely, the respondents indicated that in cases where they were not successful in collaborating across these professions: over 62 percent indicated that there was not a previous relationship between aging and planning, over 50 percent indicated the municipal leadership does not support LCA efforts, and over 50 percent indicated a culture of collaboration did not exist in the municipality. AARP’s Network of Age-Friendly Communities program requires a letter of commitment from municipal leadership, recognizing the importance of leadership from the top for ensuring successful outcomes (AARP, 2017). Thus, participating in this program, and this requirement inter alia, serves as an important vehicle for addressing these issues.

Lesson 4: tools for collaboration are staples for both professions

A solid foundation for collaboration exists. Thanks in part to the World Health Organization’s creation of the Global Network of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities and development of a clear framework and accompanying tools, both professions are already using similar tools to create Livable Communities. Such tools include hosting visioning sessions with community residents, developing a steering committee, auditing existing programs and services, and performing walkability assessments. Pre-summit survey findings revealed that over 51 percent hosted visioning sessions and over 52 percent developed steering committees. Initiating engagement with the community is a fundamental value of each profession and an overall responsibility to the public (American Planning Association, 2017; National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, 2017). Six-month post-event survey findings also revealed that
performing a needs assessment (78 percent) and knowing the community’s demographics (60 percent) are crucial components in LCA work – and, in fact, both are key tools commonly utilized by both professions.

Given these foundational commonalities, the takeaways from this research can help each profession’s leaders to know when to engage the other profession and in what capacities engagement will support goal alignment of both professions relative to LCA. When asked, “With respect to planners, or if you yourself are a planner, what strategies seem most effective in engaging planners to participate in community LCA efforts?” almost 25 percent of six-month post-event survey respondents selected the act of hosting participatory meetings with planners and community residents on LCA. The next most important strategies identified were: providing information on the changing demographics and aging issues and hosting training or seminars on LCA. Finally, almost 20 percent of respondents revealed the relative importance of participating in a locally derived age-friendly community initiative. The aforementioned represent standard engagement processes identified in Sherry Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation. These are long-standing techniques used by the planning profession and could be leverage points for engaging planners in LCA.

This research also considered the relative importance of certain catalysts for motivating planners to undertake age-friendly planning. Incidents such as an older pedestrian fatality at a dangerous crosswalk and the overall ability for older adults to cross the street are sometimes thought of as a strong influencers of policy action (Langlois et al. 1997; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2006). Six month post-event survey findings suggest otherwise. No participants reported a dangerous incident as a catalyst to proceeding with LCA, though it is not clear whether such incidences had not occurred or whether there was simply no clear correlation. Findings suggest that leveraging a project or program already underway (23 percent) is the most important catalyst for engaging a planner in LCA, followed by a policy window (20 percent) and a new funding or programmatic opportunity (20 percent). These efforts may serve as constructive opportunities to integrate the contributions of both professions.

Conclusion

Communities around the world were designed and built largely for able-bodied young people and, therefore, in many ways are unsuitable for rapidly aging populations. By 2050 the global population of those 60+ will reach 2.1 billion, and the 100+ population is expected to increase by 1,004 percent from that in 2010.

The two sectors of planning and aging must increasingly collaborate in order to address this expanded longevity and shape communities so that they are livable for people of all ages and abilities. The planning sector manages the development of comprehensive and other types of plans for communities, all of which represent opportunities to incorporate policies that achieve the objectives of LCA. The aging sector facilitates the planning and delivery of services to help older adults maintain independence in their communities, also an objective of LCA.

These research findings indicate the importance of proactively creating opportunities, such as learning interventions, whereby professionals from both sectors can learn about and with one another as well as establish relationships that build trust and reduce risk. Key to the effectiveness of such interventions is breaking down barriers to understanding and engagement, such as professional jargon and intimidation.

The findings also illustrate the importance of identifying the areas of commonality across the two sectors. The fundamental value of community engagement, for example, is embedded in each profession. Additionally, certain LCA characteristics are common to both paradigms. Access to health, for example, emerged as the most common LCA characteristic that both sectors identified as central to their professional work; thus, access to health can serve as a starting point for identifying joint goals. More recent conversations in the context of planning for the second LCA Summit in March 2018 have also identified access to health as a common thread that runs through other age-friendly domains. These findings illustrate the continued importance of access to health as an effective lens for bringing these two sectors together in many communities.
The findings from this limited intervention emphasize the importance of better understanding how to effectively engage planners in LCA and promoting increased and improved collaboration between planners and aging professionals. Therefore, this area is ripe with opportunities for further research. For example, AARP and the American Planning Association’s International Division have launched a limited initial research effort to identify what motivates planners around the world to apply an aging lens to their ongoing planning work, as well as to collect and assess best practices in LCA; the findings will be available in Spring 2018. It will also be important to understand what kinds of tools and resources the planning community would find helpful in order to successfully engage in this work. Thus, continued research in this area as well as the creation of further cross-sector learning engagement opportunities are the important components of LCA work moving forward.

Notes

1. Some but not all LCA efforts are part of formal programs such as the Global Network of Age-friendly Cities and Communities and the AARP Network of Age-friendly Communities.

2. Visitability is a design concept that accommodates guests with mobility limitations, including features such as: a zero-step entry into the home, interior doorways of 32” or greater width, and at least a half-bath on the main floor.

3. Complete Streets is a transportation policy and design approach that requires streets to be planned, designed, operated, and maintained to enable safe, convenient and comfortable travel and access for users of all ages and abilities regardless of their mode of transportation.

References


Further reading


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