Walking the Talk, Together

Cross-generational programs involve Asian elders in their community and build valuable relationships among seniors and youth.

Maggie Jones

On any Thursday evening in Seattle's International District (ID) during the summer months, you may see a group of 10 to 20 Asian elders walking together with a few young people walking alongside. This walking group is just one component of the International District Housing Alliance's Intergenerational Leadership Program, which focuses on engaging elders in their community.

The International District Housing Alliance (IDHA), created in the 1970s in Seattle to organize low-income residents of the ID, first focused on issues of housing and development. Today, IDHA houses many community organizing programs, one of which is an Intergenerational Leadership Program. The Program started in 2002 and grew out of the desire to strengthen community leadership for both youth and elders in the International District neighborhood.

The elderly are frequently left out of decision-making processes, although they comprise almost 30 percent of the neighborhood, according to the 2000 Census. As Hoa Tang, IDHA's intergenerational program coordinator, said, "The

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elders thought that they could not participate in decision making because they do not speak English. But they need to be heard because they have a lot of knowledge to share." At the same time, IDHA leaders realized that many of the 14- to 21-year-old youths who participated in their youth leadership program had bicultural and bilingual skills that could be an asset in engaging elders in the neighborhood.

The Intergenerational Leadership Program's philosophy is that you need to build knowledge and community relationships to build community leadership. The Program's philosophy is based on three models:

- Youth development, which focuses on empowering youth
- Community building, which recognizes that relationships on which to build already exist in the community
- Asset-based community development, which focuses on the strengths that people have and how those strengths can be used in community development

At the onset of the Program, IDHA's goal was to engage elders and youth in advocacy work around environmental issues. However, Program leaders quickly realized that they could not push only their own agenda if they were to be successful in community organizing. To engage and organize the youth and elders, IDHA first had to build trust, and second, it needed to let the participants have a say in the Program design and activities.

Program components

Starting with input from the elders, IDHA focused on four program components.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. The elders' first request was for English as a Second Language (ESL) and citizenship classes. Youth tutors facilitate the classes, which meet once a week. Classes often incorporate health and safety topics (for example, calling 911, talking to the doctor, and riding the bus) into the language lessons. The citizenship classes teach elders about civics, advocacy, and how to be involved in the political process. Although both classes are facilitated by youth tutors, the classes encourage an exchange of knowledge between youth and elders, encouraging both to be teachers. The ESL class has been well attended and has helped to build trust with the elders who attend. The trust established by these classes provided a platform for the relationship-building component of the program.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING. Important parts of the Intergenerational Leadership Program are social and community service activities that emphasize relationships, because, as Joyce Pisnanont, IDHA's director of Community Building Programs, said, "You have to have fun to be successful with community building." On Friday nights at a community center in the neighborhood, youth and elders get together to play games such as ping pong and Chinese chess. The Program also offers other activities such as neighborhood clean ups, holiday dinners, weekend camping trips, day hikes, and dance and tai chi classes. The emphasis on relationships is important to health because it promotes positive mental health and encourages the development of a social support system. For

example, elders have called youth to invite them out for an afternoon snack of dim sum or to ask for help in going to a doctor's appointment.

Leadership development. During the school year, IDHA holds weekly leadership development workshops in which bilingual, bicultural youth leaders help elders develop skills in public speaking, facilitating workshops, neighborhood organizing, and community education strategies. Resident elders also help youth develop multicultural skills and culturally appropriate outreach techniques as they work together on public awareness campaigns.

One year, for example, a group of about 15 elders and 4 youths focused on a recycling education campaign, which was prompted by Seattle's new recycling policies. The city had sent notices to homeowners that said they would be fined for noncompliance. This policy worried Seattle Public Utilities (a major program partner) and the staff at IDHA, since they knew that many ID residents spoke limited or no English. To inform their neighbors, the group worked with Seattle Public Utilities to develop and practice their education messages in the workshops. When they were ready, the youths and elders went door-to-door to tell residents about the city's new policies and what actions they needed to take.

Walking groups. The leadership development workshops meet only during the school year, so during summer months, IDHA sponsors a walking group. This group is very popular with elders in the neighborhood because it helps address their concerns about their physical health as well as public safety. During the walks, a youth coordinator tells the elders about the neighborhood—helping them learn street names and sharing with them the history of the area. Sometimes the elders invite their friends from other areas around Seattle to join the walking group. They also encourage other resident elders they encounter along the way to join their walk through the neighborhood.

In 2006, through its three components, the Intergenerational Leadership Program reached 101 youths and 110 elders. It was the first year in which the elders' participation was higher than the youths'. At any given time, 30 to 40 participants are participating in different components of the Program. Although IDHA has done no active recruiting for the Program since 2005, participation grows each year. Recruitment happens mostly through word of mouth and the visibility of the walking group in the neighborhood.

Successes and challenges

According to Pisnanont, the greatest success of the program is the level of engagement that youths and elders feel. The Program has also helped develop stronger leaders, and some elders have started to speak at city council meetings and conferences so that their stories can be heard. Pisnanont said that the willingness to participate in events, such as conferences, also reinforces their commitment to each other. One elder, for example, said, "This young girl asked me to do it, and I don't want to let her down."

Although the Intergenerational Leadership Program benefits more than 200 participants a year, one of the biggest challenges the Program faces is funding. Health-related funders tend to focus strictly on health rather than social determinants of health, a distinction that makes programs such as this one difficult to fund. As a result, the little funding the Program receives is through youth development funds that support intergenerational programming.

A number of administrative challenges also exist when providing services to elders. Such programs can be time consuming because of the time it takes to develop and maintain genuine relationships. In addition, program coordinators often must call participating elders before every activity so that they remember to come, which could be up to five times a week depending on how many activities they are involved in. Finally, logistics are a challenge—particularly with the field trips—to ensure that elders can participate safely in the activities.

Implications for public health

Although this Program was designed for a specific population with specific needs, it provides some lessons for the broader public health community.

Elders are so much more creative and capable than we assume or allow them to be. When designing programs to serve elders, remember that they know what they want and need. Be prepared to listen to them and be willing to take risks to meet their needs. If they have more involvement in the decision making, they will have more investment in the program.

Even if the program doesn't work out exactly as envisioned, it may be possible to incorporate the content in other ways that meet the needs of the target population.

Most importantly, to keep people of any age engaged in a program, everyone has to have fun. ■

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