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RESEARCH REPORT

Age-Friendly Community Initiatives in Their Maturity:

Insights on Accomplishments and Sustainability

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Table of Contents

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Age-friendly community (AFC) initiatives are deliberate, cross-sectoral efforts that aim to make localities more supportive of residents' health, well-being, and engagement as they age. As part of a multi-year developmental evaluation project, this report presents findings from qualitative interviews with 26 key informants conducted in spring of 2023. The participants represent eight age-friendly community initiatives in New Jersey that received private philanthropic grants for their operations starting in 2016. This report addresses two aspects of these AFC initiatives as they mature beyond the initial grant-making program, including their focal accomplishments as well as differences across their operational statuses.

Regarding the accomplishments of the initiatives seven years following their start-up, findings describe the breadth of ways in which they benefited their communities. Themes include: (1) enhanced programs and services (e.g., the creation of new positions on aging, the procurement of resources from outside of the community to benefit older residents locally), (2) improvements to the built environment (e.g., age-inclusive additions to public parks and outdoor spaces, land-use ordinances to enhance housing options for residents as they age), (3) changing the social fabric on aging within the community (e.g., stronger local champions and norms of collaboration for aging), and (4) expanding age-friendly influence across neighboring communities, at higher systems levels, and through a community of practice among regional AFC leaders.

The report then describes the ways in which the AFC initiatives were maintaining and planning for their continued operations beyond the original grantmaking programs that spurred them. Although the eight initiatives launched at roughly the same time and received comparable philanthropic support over the years, findings indicate the wide variability in the initiatives' operational statuses at the time of the interviews. We describe this variability according to three categories: stable, evolving, and discontinued.

The report concludes with insights for the continued development of AFC initiatives in New Jersey and beyond. This knowledge development is of increasing importance in the context of a growing number of grantmaking programs to support AFC development and impact.

SECTION 1
Introduction

The age-friendly communities movement continues to grow as a 21st century development in the field of aging. As part of this movement, age-friendly community (AFC) initiatives have emerged as deliberate, cross-sectoral efforts that focus on a targeted geographic area such as a municipality, county, or region to improve built, social, and service environments for aging. In the United States alone, about 800 communities have enrolled in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities since 2012,[1] and many others are operating outside of organized networks.

Parallel to growth in AFC initiatives, research on AFC development and implementation also has accelerated. Much of this work aims to understand the organizational and community contexts that allow for AFC initiatives to result in meaningful and long-lasting community changes.[2]

This report contributes to a growing knowledge base on AFC efforts by presenting findings on the long-term outcomes and sustainability of eight grant-funded AFC initiatives in New Jersey that began in 2016. In addition to its immediate relevance for the age-friendly communities movement in New Jersey, this report is also of interest to AFC leaders, champions, and partners across the United States, especially in the context of an increasing number of statewide and regional grantmaking programs.[3]

Specifically, the report addresses two questions:

- **What accomplishments resulted from the AFC initiatives in the seven years following their start-up?**

- **In what ways are the AFC initiatives maintaining and planning for continued operations beyond the original grantmaking programs that spurred them?**

We first provide background on the research project, including its emergence as part of a regional grantmaking program as well as the study design. We then present findings that address the two research questions, as stated above. We conclude with key insights and implications for further supporting AFC initiatives across diverse communities in New Jersey and beyond.

PROJECT SETTING AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This report focuses on eight AFC initiatives that received funding from a pioneering grantmaking program of two philanthropies—The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation (HMTF)[4] and the Grotta Fund for Older Adults at the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest New Jersey (Grotta Fund).[5] At the beginning of 2016, the grantmakers selected an initial cohort of communities in their respective geographic

catchment areas to receive AFC planning grants. Over subsequent years, the grantmakers provided additional support for eight of these communities to further develop their initiatives and implement age-friendly actions.[6]

Also as part of the grantmaking program, the Age-Friendly Research Team at the Rutgers University School of Social Work Hub for Aging Collaboration has followed the AFC initiatives as they have emerged, developed, and matured since 2016. Specifically, the Rutgers team has conducted a longitudinal developmental evaluation of the eight initiatives that have been ongoing with operational support of the grantmaking program. This research has generated insights on how AFC initiatives form, act, and evolve over time.[7]

This current report draws on the seventh and most recent wave of interviews conducted in the spring of 2023, seven years after the start of the grantmaking program. Funding under the original grantmaking program, at this point, had been exhausted or near-exhausted. This timing provides a unique opportunity to examine the initiatives' accomplishments and status after years of change-making efforts, providing insights into the longer-term sustainability of their operations and impact.

We conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in duration with 26 individuals considered key stakeholders of the eight AFC initiatives.[8] Questions largely addressed the status of their initiatives, programmatic efforts, and plans for the future. We also explored considerations of racial and aging equity in their work and perceptions of the value and continued participation in Age-Friendly North Jersey, a network of AFC initiatives that emerged from

the grantmaking program.[9] All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Members of the research team used qualitative research methods–including coding, memo writing, and peer debriefing–to thematically analyze the data and develop the findings as reported below.[10]

This current report draws on the seventh and most recent wave of interviews conducted in the spring of 2023, seven years after the start of the grantmaking program.

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic background of the participants. Of the 26 individuals, most identified as female (N=22), reported White in terms of their racialized identity (N=21), were over 55 years old (N=19), had a bachelor's degree or higher (N=22), and were employed (N=22). Also, most participants were current or former members of their initiative's core team (N=21), and others were partners through the initiative's auspice organization or another organization (N=5).

Table 2 displays information about the communities represented by the eight initiatives, which varied in size and sociodemographic composition. The communities had a median population size of 27,601 residents, mean 15% of residents aged 65 and over, mean 51% racialized as non-Hispanic White, mean 52% with a bachelor's degree or higher, and a median household income (in 2021 dollars) of $130,985.50.

TABLE 1. Participant Demographics (N=26)

	N	%		N	%
Avg. Number of Participants/Initiative	3.25		Type of AFC Leader		
Sex			Current Leader	16	62%
Female	22	85%	Prior Leader*	5	19%
Male	4	15%	Partner	5	19%
Racial and Ethnic Identity			Education Level		
Asian	1	4%	Associates Degree or Trade School	3	12%
Black or African American	3	12%	Bachelor's Degree	9	9%
Hispanic or Latinx	1	4%	Graduate Degree	13	50%
White	21	81%	Currently Employed	22	85%
Age					
25-54	7	27%			
55-64	11	42%			
65-84	8	31%			

*One prior leader was also a partner

TABLE 2. Community Demographics (N=8)

	MEAN	MEDIAN	MIN	MAX
Total Population	38,578	27,601	11,186	134,283
% Persons Age 65 and Over	15%	14%	11%	22%
% white alone, not Hispanic or Latinx	51%	54%	14%	77%
% Persons Age 25+ with Bachelor's Degree	52%	55%	15%	78%
Median Income (Dollars)	$126,122	$130,986	$54,415	$194,256

Community information presented from US Census "Quick Facts" Report: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219

Accomplishments of the AFC Initiatives

What does age-friendly progress look like seven years into a community's AFC journey? AFC leaders described the variety of ways in which their initiatives enhanced local environments for aging: programmatically, physically, and socially.

We identified four overarching themes of AFC accomplishments: (1) enhanced programs and services, (2) initiating improvements to their communities' built environments, and (3) changing the social fabric on aging within the community. The final theme (4) addressed how the initiatives' impact extended beyond their own localities into other communities, as well as across systems levels and as part of statewide advocacy. Below, we present the four themes each addressing a category of accomplishments (also displayed in Table 3). While we recognize that a single output from an AFC initiative might have components that cut across categories (e.g., a new community program includes enhanced services, as well as improved facility space), we discuss each category separately to distill related-yet-distinct dimensions of progress resulting from the grant-funded initiatives.

Creation and Enhancement of Programs and Services

The most prevalent theme addressed ways in which the development and implementation of AFC initiatives resulted in new and enhanced programs and services. Below, we describe this theme in two parts—first, with respect to community programs, and second, one-on-one services.

A. COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

A common theme from the interviews was how the AFC initiatives led to enhanced community programs for older adults, such as events and workshops. Collectively, the participants described **a great variety of programs introduced to their communities.**[11] Examples included community fairs, healthy cooking classes, health promotion programs, and benefits workshops. These

TABLE 3. Summary of Themes Regarding the AFC Initiatives' Accomplishments

THEME	SUBTHEME

1. **Creation and Enhancement of Programs and Services**
 	
(see p. 4)
	• Community programs
	   • Introduction of new programs
	   • Increased quality and reach of existing programs
	• One-on-one services
	   • Creating new services and service sites
	   • Creation of new positions on aging
	• Other programs and services
	   • Communications platforms
	   • Workforce training programs

2. **Changes to the Built Environment** *(see p. 8)*	• Influencing municipal leaders to enact improvements to the built environment • Empowering older residents to advocate on the built environment
3. **Changing the Social Fabric on Aging within the Community** *(see p. 9)*	• More intentional partnerships • Elevated consciousness about aging in community • Stronger champions for aging • Enhanced community pride

4. **Expanding Influence Beyond the Local**
 	
(see p. 12)
	• Participant-initiated advocacy and outreach at higher-systems levels
	   • AFC leaders work directly at higher systems levels
	   • AFC leaders serve as a "check" on age-friendly progress at higher systems level
	• Expanding age-friendly capacity in neighboring municipalities
	• Relationships with other AFC initiatives through Age-Friendly North Jersey as a community of practice
	   • Sharing amongst peers
	   • Curated information
	   • Structure and legitimacy to their community work
	   • Advocacy power

gatherings took place across a wide range of community settings, spanning the facilities of senior centers, community centers, civic groups, libraries, social service organizations, municipal buildings, faith-based organizations, parks, and more. In some cases, the AFC initiative leaders themselves directly developed and offered this programming. More often, however, participants described their efforts to influence the program offerings of other community groups and organizations.

In addition to inspiring or generating new programs, participants also described ways in which they **improved the quality and reach of their partners' existing programs.** Again, the participants described a variety of program partners, such as libraries, civic groups, social service organizations, health departments, housing providers, and recreation departments, whose ongoing programs were enhanced because of the AFC initiatives.[12] Participants reflected on making community programs more intentionally inclusive of older participants, as well as engaging a greater diversity and number of residents attending other organizations' programs for older adults. For example, a participant, working from a community-based social service organization, described how branding their older adult programs as part of the AFC initiative inspired more residents to engage: "When people hear 'age-friendly,' it means something to a lot of people."

B. ONE-ON-ONE SERVICES

Participants also reflected on how their AFC initiatives led to improved one-on-one services for

aging. Across the interviews, enhanced one-on-one services were framed as community-based aging services, such as supportive counseling, information and referral, transportation assistance, nutritional support, and financial services.[13]

Participants recounted multiple ways in which the AFC initiatives helped to connect larger numbers of older residents to community-based services. One way was through AFC core team members' direct referrals. AFC leaders commonly found themselves in the position of receiving inquiries from older residents and family members seeking information about aging resources, whom they would direct to organizations such as senior centers, Area Agencies on Aging, and other social service organizations.

In addition to these ad hoc connections, participants described **launching new service programs**, two of which we spotlight below.

- One initiative helped to establish a local presence of a national on-demand ride service designed for older adults. The initiative increased access to this service through various activities, including promoting information about it through their AFC communications platforms and at community events, conducting targeted outreach about the program to different organizations and community groups, writing press releases about the service, and fundraising to offer a subsidy to incentivize older adults to use the service. These efforts resulted in over 100 residents regularly using the service during the five years that the initiative was active.

Participants reflected on making community programs more intentionally inclusive of older participants, as well as engaging a greater diversity and number of residents attending other organizations' programs for older adults.

- Another initiative obtained a grant from the county government to implement a financial management program for older adults in need. This new program was positioned as a component of their AFC initiative. The program involved recruiting and managing volunteers to assist older residents with money management both through community workshops and one-on-one consultations. They reflected on the ways in which this program was helping them to identify economically vulnerable residents who would benefit from additional County-based resources.

AFC initiatives also helped to **cultivate additional sites for service delivery**. For example, through years of work in developing pilot programs and relationship-building, one initiative helped to cultivate a partnership among nonprofit organizations to establish a food bank within their community. Another community worked closely with a municipality to create a community center that would provide one-on-one services as part of a new senior housing project located in a historically underserved and racially minoritized neighborhood.

Another way in which the initiatives enhanced one-on-one services was through **advocacy for additional professional staff positions explicitly focused on aging.** Five of the eight initiatives described the creation of a new position on aging in their community as stemming from their AFC efforts, with one additional initiative stating that plans were in progress. In most cases, these positions were embedded within municipal departments, such as health departments or central administration. In other cases, they were housed within private organizations, such as senior centers or nonprofit organizations. These new positions focused largely on the provision of direct services, especially for residents aging in place with precarity (e.g., because of social isolation, poor health, limited financial means) and offered services such

as information and referral, case assistance, friendly visiting, financial management, and home safety accommodations. In a few cases, the positions were more oriented to offering community events and programs. There were a variety funding sources for the new positions, with most supported through municipal funds, but others through grants from regional authorities and private philanthropy.

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C. OTHER PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Participants described two other categories of programs and services resulting from their initiatives. First, participants described numerous **communications platforms** stemming from their work, such as newsletters, websites, social media accounts, and resource guides. These communications platforms were expressly designed with older residents as the focal audience. One participant, for example, had recently conducted a survey of e-newsletter subscribers on the value of the initiative continuing its long-time newsletter, with 92% of respondents indicating that they would like to continue receiving the information.

Second, several participants reported that their initiatives led to **workforce training programs in aging**. In one case, the AFC initiative directly

organized a high school internship program to introduce participants to a variety of careers in aging and "the joy of working with older adults." Also focused on youth, another initiative developed a coffee shop program in a community center co-located with low-income senior housing, which promoted workforce training and intergenerational connections for high school students with disabilities. Finally, another initiative reported that their work inspired a local philanthropy to begin a tuition assistance program for residents pursuing direct care workforce training through the local community college.

Changes to the Built Environment

The AFC Movement has long focused on the built environment, encompassing public buildings, outdoor spaces, housing stock, road design, and more. Nearly all eight initiatives described their influence on some aspect of their community's built environment.

Collectively, they described how their work led to:

- **Repaired sidewalks**
- **Improved pedestrian crossings and signage**
- **Installation of benches along walking routes**
- **Plans for the construction or re-design of public buildings (e.g., community centers, senior housing buildings, municipal offices)**
- **Redesign of public parks with age-friendly amenities (e.g., pickleball courts, seating)**
- **Integration of age-friendly considerations in municipal master plans**
- **Passage of ordinances to ease construction of accessory dwelling units**

Of note, the AFC leaders described their personal

role toward these outcomes in terms of advocating to municipal decision makers.[14] In other words, it was not within the direct control or purview of the AFC leaders themselves to implement these changes, but instead, to **influence municipal officials** with the jurisdictional power and resources to make these improvements. Examples of key community leaders included municipal departments of engineering, parks and recreation, planners, as well as central administration. The interviews further conveyed that this influence was cultivated over years.

For example, one participant described "beating the drum" on plans for the age-friendly redesign of municipal parks. They recalled having developed a report on age-friendly parks that they were invited to present at a public meeting of the local council, reflecting on the experience: "We presented it. Now what? Nothing had happened or nothing had come from it." Several years later, however, the municipal manager asked the initiative to partner on a grant application to implement some of the report's recommendations. The leader reflected, "They're still very interested in it. It means that we're building this pathway for helping at least the concept of age-friendliness, not just be a buzzword, that it's actually something that's sticking in their minds a little bit."

It was not within the direct control or purview of the AFC leaders themselves to implement these changes, but instead, to influence municipal officials with the jurisdictional power and resources to make these improvements.

The AFC leaders also described **older residents as a resource for advocacy** on the built environment, such that the leaders shared that they worked deliberately with older residents to amplify their voices directly to municipal authorities.[15] Examples included working with older adult members of municipal committees on aging regarding built environment concerns, sharing information on AFC mailing lists about public meetings of importance, and forming allyships with long-time residents with established relationships with municipal leadership.

One participant, for example, described working with a resident, who was a former councilmember, to advocate for the installation of a bench in a key location of their community. Initially, the municipal administration had not taken action on its installation. Reflecting on her work with the resident, the participant stated:

> ❝We both have this shared alignment of wanting to have benches for seniors. I pleaded with (the resident) like, 'What do I have to do to put a bench…on a street where a lot of people walk, and there's no place to stop and sit if you're walking into downtown?' He said, 'I'll take care of it. I'll talk to the borough administrator, and we'll get you all sorted out.' He did, and now we're getting it all sorted out.❞

Changing the Social Fabric on Aging Within the Community

Participants further reflected on how the AFC initiative changed the way community leaders conceptualized connections between their work and issues of aging in community.

As one participant reflected, the initiative served to change people's views on aging from "little one-off" events and programs to considerations of aging becoming "just part of the thread of society." The themes presented below describe ways in which participants narrated their initiatives' impact on changing the social fabric of their communities.

As one participant reflected, the initiative served to change people's views on aging from "little one-off" events and programs to considerations of aging becoming "just part of the thread of society."

A. MORE INTENTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Participants stated how the AFC initiatives led community organizations to be more intentional in collaborating with others in their work on aging. In some cases, this involved the coordination and co-production of programs and services. For example, one participant described how the AFC initiative resulted in greater communication across municipal departments in their interactions with older residents in need of support. Other participants described establishing long-term partnerships across community organizations, including with AFC core team members, to create regular programming for older adults.

Participants further described how the AFC initiatives facilitated opportunities for community organizations to more intentionally position their work relative to others. Such positioning took place

through short-term platforms sponsored by the AFC initiatives, such as co-tabling at community fairs. Other examples referred to longer-term partnership structures. For example, one community described how their municipality, inspired by the AFC initiative, was in the process of developing a networking group for local social service providers. They stated: "(It is) a committee that's going to meet very regularly to talk about social service needs in the community and how we can…work together to address them…(with) older adults being a large group of people in need."

Participants further described how their AFC initiative led to an overall mindset of working in partnership on considerations of aging. As one participant reflected: "Whether it's bringing counseling services, on-call doctors, university students, getting grants…wherever I can access funding, grants, or programming, I'm pulling in those resources directly to the agency. That's what I took away from (name of AFC initiative)." Another participant shared that, because of their community's AFC initiative, they were more mindful of how the work of their own organization could address gaps in community resources and to not duplicate services. The participant also discussed how the AFC initiative resulted in their more intentionally collecting information from other communities doing work on aging to improve their own organization's efforts.

B. ELEVATED CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT AGING IN COMMUNITY

Another common theme was how the AFC initiatives raised the visibility of older adults to key community organizations and leaders. Analysis of the interview data yielded three main ways in which they promoted such awareness:

General community outreach. Many participants reflected on ways in which activities such as age-

friendly informational campaigns, one-on-one meetings, sector-specific trainings, and serving as the age-friendly voice on municipal committees raised attention to considerations of aging in community. Community partners also gained heightened awareness on aging through their participation in age-friendly partners groups, such as coalitions and advisory committees. As one participant reflected, "When I started working with [name of other AFC leader] years ago, I wasn't aware of any of these things that our older adults go through."

Implementing community events and programs. Participants also reflected on their and others' growing awareness on aging in their community through implementing events and programs.[16] For example, participants from two different communities reflected on how the experience of organizing a food distribution site helped them to realize the pervasive issue of food insecurity among people of all ages in their communities, including older adults. Other participants described how running successful community events demonstrated the need for greater attention to older adults, which inspired other community leaders to think more broadly, deeply, and intentionally about their work with older adults.

Participants described how successful community events and programs demonstrated the need for greater attention to older adults, which inspired other community leaders to think more about their work with older adults.

Strategically sharing information and data.
Participants described their strategic use of
information and data to raise awareness of aging-
related issues among community leaders. The
collecting and sharing of this information was
sometimes done formally, such as presenting
findings from surveys with older adults to public
bodies. Participants also described informally
developing and sharing insights on aging issues in
the local community. For example, one leader of
a nonprofit service organization reflected on how
their community-based service provision helps to
elevate knowledge and considerations of aging to
local authorities: "We're in (the community and
people's homes) providing services, we're collecting
important information and building relationships
and bringing these, our concerns and observations
and ideas and suggestions back to the powers to be.
I think that's really important."

C. STRONGER CHAMPIONS FOR AGING

Another theme was ways in which the AFC initiatives
cultivated local champions for aging. Of note,
these individuals were not just the people directly
involved in administering the initiatives, but
other people within the community. For example,
three of the initiatives described their influence
on establishing or revitalizing their community's
municipal committees on aging. They described
how older residents, through this structure, served
to advocate for their needs. One participant stated:
"I think seniors have more say in town through
the (municipal committee on aging), and they do
let their feelings [be] known. That's going to go on
forever…(Committee members) all want to know
what's going on, and they all have their views, and
any issues that they see, they bring it up and it gets
worked on."

Other participants described ways in which their
initiative cultivated age-friendly champions
among influencers in their communities more
generally, such as elected officials, municipal
managers, municipal committee members, and
leaders of municipal departments and community
organizations (e.g., library directors). For example,
one participant described how, at the start of their
initiative, they repeatedly sought to get a meeting
with their municipal manager. Now, the municipal
manager regularly turns to them with ideas for age-
friendly improvements, such as grant applications
and new housing-related initiatives.

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*Three of the initiatives described
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municipal committees on aging.*

D. ENHANCED COMMUNITY PRIDE

Finally, a few participants described how the AFC
initiative was a source of overall pride for their
communities. One participant reflected:

> **So when you see these positive
> initiatives…that are actually doing
> things, I think that's very important…not
> only…to the mayor and the politicians of
> the world. It's just important to the people
> that they can say they're part of that town
> that does that good thing."**

Expanding Influence Beyond the Local

While participants' narratives largely focused on ways in which their AFC initiatives influenced the focal community, some participants described how their local work related to affecting change outside of their communities.

This "outside" influence manifested in three ways: participant-initiated advocacy and outreach at county and state levels, developing AFC capacity in neighboring municipalities, and amplifying AFC progress with the emergence of Age-Friendly North Jersey as a community of practice.

A. PARTICIPANT-INITIATED ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH AT HIGHER-SYSTEMS LEVELS

Several participants described how their experiences in leading AFC efforts at the community level spurred their age-friendly involvement at higher systems levels, namely county and state. This advocacy was oftentimes directed to government administrations, but also included regional or statewide nonprofit organizations and government instrumentalities (i.e., an entity that performs a public service of the state but operates independently). In most cases, participants described positioning themselves as a resource to improve decision-making, service, provision, and resource allocation at higher-systems levels. They described sharing information and insights from

their community-level work on aging. They also described benefits from learning about and sharing information about work on aging from higher-systems levels with their own communities.

In other cases, participants described this role more in terms of serving as a watchdog or "check" on the accountability of higher-level systems leaders' age-friendly commitments. For example, one participant reflected on a recent networking meeting with a regional organization in service to the County: "We [i.e., the local AFC leaders] can be a resource, we could be collaborators, but we're also going to be keeping an eye on them and wanting to ensure that they're doing what they should do…and that they're responding to the community needs as priorities."

B. EXPANDING AGE-FRIENDLY CAPACITY IN NEIGHBORING MUNICIPALITIES

Some participants reflected on ways in which they aimed to spread age-friendly successes from their own community to neighboring municipalities. They described ways in which they provided, or were planning to provide, mentorship and technical assistance on age-friendly community-building to colleagues in neighboring towns. In some cases, this was done informally, such as an AFC leader in one community reporting how they provided ad hoc assistance to age-friendly leaders in several adjacent communities. In other cases, this cross-pollination was being developed more intentionally, with participants stating their plans to design

Participants described their positioning themselves as a resource to improve decision-making, service, provision, and resource allocation at higher systems levels.

toolkits, trainings, and one-on-one consultations to help colleagues in other communities advance AFC efforts. Other participants described their plans to replicate successful community events on aging in their own community through directly collaborating with colleagues in nearby communities. This capacity to work with other communities was cultivated, in many cases, through an emerging grant program of one of the original grantmakers (HMTF), encouraging long-time age-friendly core team members to develop plans for building on the capacity that they themselves had developed over the years of the initial grantmaking program.

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER AFC INITIATIVES: THE EMERGENCE OF AGE-FRIENDLY NORTH JERSEY AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Age-Friendly North Jersey (referred to as "AFNJ" and the "alliance") is another accomplishment that emerged from the grantmaking program. AFNJ operates as an intentional and formal network among leaders of AFC initiatives across the grantmakers' geographic catchment areas. The foundations for the development of the alliance began at the outset of the grantmaking program in 2016, at which time the grantmakers convened the leaders of the AFC initiatives approximately once per month to share with each other and learn from outside speakers. This group continued to grow, with new communities joining with or without grant funding. Also over the years, the Age-Friendly Research Team at the Rutgers University School of Social Work assumed greater responsibility for co-coordinating and administering the alliance, including taking on greater leadership in planning and implementing AFNJ learning-and-action meetings, further developing the AFNJ website,

moderating an active email listserv, and producing a monthly AFNJ newsletter.[17]

When asked in the interviews how the alliance can continue to support their work, participants used language consistent with a "community of practice."[18] A community of practice is a group of people with shared concern and passion for something they do, and who learn together on how to improve their practice through regularly interacting with each other. Participants described how their work at the local level and beyond benefited from participating in the alliance in four primary ways.

Age-Friendly North Jersey (AFNJ) is [an] accomplishment that emerged from the grantmaking program, [and] operates as an intentional and formal network among leaders of AFC initiatives across the grantmakers' geographic catchment areas.

Sharing Amongst Peers. Participants described how AFNJ provided space in which they could share their successes with each other, learn from others' experiences of doing similar work, and get ideas for programming. AFNJ meetings were particularly helpful in providing spaces for these purposes. According to one participant:

> **I think that I've been very successful in my work here because of ideas from the alliance, because of work through the alliance. I've been able to tap into not only the resources and not only the**

networking and people who work in other agencies that are in the alliance, but just hearing what they're doing. I've been able to incorporate that in my space here. It's really made programming successful."

Curated Information. This theme is different from "peer sharing" because it pertains to information coming from outside of AFNJ and disseminated to AFNJ members specifically, such as through curated content through AFNJ newsletters and strategically selecting outside experts for timely programming. While some participants found the information and technologies used to convey this information overwhelming, most participants found that the information curated by AFNJ organizers made it easier to keep up-to-date on resources related to age-friendly communities and available funding. As one participant stated:

> " I'm just a super fan of all the technical advancements… Before there were like a million different email groups flying around. And the Padlet and the newsletters; all of that is super helpful. Notices about grant funding. I just think it really helps to streamline the process of keeping up to date on everything. The meetings, I'm still finding very helpful, the group meetings. It all is valuable."

Structure and Legitimacy to Their Community Work. Examples include providing a formal structure for their efforts during times when the work felt less organized at the local level (e.g., because of staffing transitions), security in knowing that AFNJ would be available to support

new endeavors and risk taking, helping to stay connected to other communities while the original grantmaking program was concluding, and serving as an on-ramp for new communities. For example, one participant commented on how being part of AFNJ gave them more legitimacy in their town: "I think it also makes us stronger in [name of town] too, to see that we're part of this other alliance. Reporting back to [name of town] any progress on the county level or on the state level, I think makes [name of town] residents think, 'Okay, yes, Age-Friendly is a good thing we need to keep in our town.'"

Participants discussed how AFNJ provided them with a sense of structure and legitimacy to their community work.

Advocacy Power. Participants described a stronger capacity to influence age-friendly change at the county and state levels through AFNJ. They commented on the positioning of AFNJ as important for driving advocacy messages to higher-systems level leaders, appreciation for the AFNJ's recent advocacy activities (i.e., organizing testimony around relevant state legislation), and the importance of being committed to this work through advocacy for the long-haul, recognizing that cultural and infrastructural change towards age-friendliness takes time. As one participant commented: "You have better political influence from a large entity like that than you would from an individual basis."

AFC Initiative Operational Statuses

The sustainability of AFC initiatives addresses the long-term trajectory of AFC progress and impact. The eight initiatives began their planning process at roughly the same time in 2016. By early 2017, all initiatives had progressed past the planning phase by completing their initial action plans and transitioning toward implementation. At the time of the interviews, only one of the initiatives was still receiving funds from the original grantmaking program. Despite these similarities, we found considerable variation in their operational statuses by the spring of 2023. As displayed in Table 4, we describe this diversity in terms of three overarching categories: Stable, Evolving, Discontinued.

We present these categories below as a snapshot of the initiatives' current operational statuses, as well as planned trajectories for initiatives that had yet to secure their next phase.[19] Below, we provide case illustrations of initiatives under each category. These case illustrations serve to demonstrate the shared characteristics of the initiatives under each category, while also highlighting important differences within the categories, as relevant. Collectively, these cases advance knowledge on how to characterize communities' age-friendly journeys as dynamic trajectories in the context of their organizational and community settings.

Stable

The "Stable" category indicates the ongoing operations of an initiative with a continued focus on the local community, as well as clear plans for maintaining the initiative's core leadership into the foreseeable future.

Three of the eight initiatives fit this category. Notably, all three initiatives had been embedded within a committed and longer-standing auspice organization from the start of their AFC journeys. Despite these similarities, the three initiatives in this category differed from each other in terms of the trajectory of the scope and scale of their AFC work heading into the future. These differences are highlighted in the case illustrations below.

CASE #1 "EXPANDING"

This initiative was still receiving its final year of seed funding from the original grantmaking initiative at the time of the interviews. Participants from this initiative described concrete plans to maintain their initiative as a branded entity within a social service auspice organization. While there was some concern expressed about the long-term capacity of this organization to support the initiative, there were

several ways this initiative was continuing to grow in scope and scale.

All three initiatives characterized as "stable" had been embedded within a committed and longer-standing auspice organization from the start of their AFC journeys.

First, one core team leader had recently received a promotion within the auspice organization, whose new job description included age-friendly responsibilities. Additionally, the leaders of this initiative had obtained and were exploring multiple new funding sources to offset the sunsetting of the original grantmaking program, including state, county, and private foundation grants and donations. State and county grants were especially important for the initiatives' capacity to expand programmatically.

Furthermore, the initiative leaders expressed a sense of momentum in their relationship with their municipal administration. Examples included a recent memorandum of understanding with the municipality in support of a new program of the initiative and in the administration offering physical office space to the AFC initiative in a new municipal resource center. Finally, while higher-systems work was not as prominent as with other initiatives (see cases #4, #5, and #6 below), the leaders were developing ways to disseminate their flagship AFC programs to facilitate replication by other municipalities.

CASE #2 "MAINTAINING"

Operating from within the public sector, this initiative had secured municipal budget lines for both AFC initiative staffing and operational expenses. In this sense, this initiative represented a structurally secure administrative status - one that many initiatives described as being a possible long-term goal for AFC work (i.e., being a budget-line or funded program within the municipality).

Despite this structural stability, this initiative had experienced some reductions in programmatic scope in the past few years, in large part because of staffing transitions. Leaders of this initiative were new to their positions at the time of the interviews and described, on the whole, a process of rediscovering what AFC work entails in their organizational context.

TABLE 4. SUMMARY OF AFC INITIATIVE OPERATIONAL STATUSES

	N
Category 1: Stable	3
Case #1 "Expanding"	
Case #2 "Maintaining"	
Case #3 "Consolidating"	
Category 2: Evolving	4
Case #4 "Bifurcating"	
Case #5 "Ramping Up Regionally, To Be Determined Locally"	
Case #6 "Sustaining through a Regional Structure"	
Case #7 "In Flux"	
Category 3: Discontinued	1
Case #8 "Disbanded"	

Nevertheless, the leaders were continuing to host key events that the AFC initiative had hosted in past years, as well as some new offerings. They also described growing their social media presence and continuing to disseminate a regular newsletter. In terms of long-term impacts, leaders of this initiative shared that the AFC initiative (both as an organization and as a framework for community decision-making) was embedded into municipal master plans on aging and that other municipal departments were now more active in generating aging-focused programs and services.

CASE #3 "CONSOLIDATING"

This initiative was securely embedded in a social service auspice organization, yet had experienced some reductions in dedicated staffing for the AFC initiative specifically. The focus of this initiative also had changed in recent years, going from an effort working with multiple organizations (via a coalition) to an organizing vehicle for advancing the age-friendly efforts within the auspice organization into other community-based organizations, both at the local municipal and county levels.

The initiative leaders were mostly focusing on facilitating flagship events that they had developed and implemented in past years, most notably community wellness events and safety resource programs. They also were advancing outreach into the new segments of the community through related aging-relevant projects of the auspice organization. As the initiative was no longer receiving funding from the grantmaking program, the efforts of the staff members were being supported through the auspice organization, such as by sharing expenses among departments (e.g., Public Relations incurring expenses for promoting AFC events) and drawing on grant-funded project budgets to cover expenses of relevance to AFC activities.

Evolving

In contrast to the "Stable" category, the "Evolving" category conveys initiatives that are in an active transition point, including an uncertainty or shift in the exact shape and form of their next phase, but continued activity and hope for the work to carry forward. The operational statuses described by leaders of initiatives in this category represent more planned states (e.g., pending grant funding, contingent on additional conversations among other decision makers).

Four initiatives fit under this category. Of note, all four initiatives were eligible to apply for a new grantmaking program of one of the funders (HMTF) designed to build from the grantees' accomplishments at the local level to support AFC influence in other communities and beyond.

All four "Evolving" initiatives were eligible to apply for a new grantmaking program of one of the funders designed to build from the grantees' accomplishments at the local level to support AFC influence in other communities and beyond.

This new grant opportunity in mind, cases #4, #5, and #6 are similar in that their leaders shared plans to transition from a prior locally-focused phase to a new phase on multi-community (horizontal systems expansion) and/or higher-systems level work (vertical systems expansion) – and, in some cases, intentionally layering this expanded scale on top of consolidated local efforts. Case #7 provides an example of an initiative without formalized plans

for their future organizational structure—locally or regionally—but with continued striving to sustain the initiative at the local level.

CASE #4 "BIFURCATING"

Participants in this initiative described their efforts to continue local AFC work coupled with a new branch of more regionally focused work. They described the latter in terms of plans to offer age-friendly trainings to groups of public sector leaders across municipalities, with the goal of embedding an age-friendly perspective into municipal administrations, and developing a mentorship program for AFC initiative leaders within nearby communities.

In-kind arrangements would allow for one core team leader to continue their AFC work at the local level, and the other core team members largely would shift to multi-geography work supported through the new leadership grant to which they were applying. The funds for their regional work would be conducted through the branded AFC initiative at the local level, such that the local AFC initiative would be the organizing program for geographic expansion as well as a continuing local programmatic presence. The local level work, including the initiative's coordinating committee, focused on continuing to offer the core functions of the AFC initiative developed during the initial grantmaking period.

CASE #5 "RAMPING UP REGIONALLY, TO BE DETERMINED LOCALLY"

This initiative had already received funding from the new leadership grantmaking program at the time of the interviews. One of the participants described the new grant funding as enabling them to continue in their role of leading and championing age-friendly work in new ways. The leader was "winding

down" some of their local programming efforts as they transitioned toward engaging in higher systems-level AFC work at the county level.

These new efforts were still being conducted through the branded entity of the initiative at the local level, and the initiative continued to develop and disseminate the AFC initiative's newsletter, maintain the initiative's partnership coalition, and advocate to municipal leaders. At the same time, participants expressed some uncertainty around plans for the initiative's long-term organizational structure and operations, particularly at the local level.

Collectively, they referred to a range of possible arrangements, including placing the initiative within the public sector, having its programs administered by a local nonprofit organization, or sunsetting the program. This sunsetting would not reflect a desired outcome among the initiative leaders, with participants sharing that they individually, as well as their key partners, did not want to see the initiative and its programs fade away.

CASE #6 "SUSTAINING THROUGH A REGIONAL STRUCTURE"

Similar to case #5, this initiative was scaling down their locally focused efforts. In contrast, however, the leaders of this initiative were intentionally considering sunsetting the AFC initiative as their age-friendly work moved into its next iteration. The leaders shared that they planned to use the potential funding from the new higher-systems grant to continue their age-friendly champion role and repurpose their skills and expertise by serving as consultants to other communities interested in launching their own AFC initiatives, a horizontal systems expansion.

Illustratively, at the time of the interviews, most of the initiative's programming had been spun off

or handed over to key partners, except for their newsletter, which they were considering turning into a regional age-friendly communication platform. The potential sunsetting of the local branded initiative coupled with the embedding of key program components to partners highlights that, even as the initiative's own operational activities could be sunsetting, indicated ways in which the local-level age-friendly work would continue on across community organizations. At the time of the interviews, the leaders were not yet being supported via a new leadership grant, though they projected this would be the financial mechanism for sustaining their formal AFC efforts.

CASE #7 "IN FLUX"

The initiative's core team—somewhat reduced in size—was operating on a volunteer basis at the time of the interviews. The leaders were maintaining key operations, such as updating the initiative's communication platforms, participating in a municipal advisory board, meeting regularly with local municipal leaders, and collaborating with partners on events.

However, the leaders acknowledged that their voluntary status could jeopardize their capacity and the overall continuation of the initiative. The leaders expressed an interest in expanding their efforts—including formally mentoring other communities and training officials—though such plans had yet to fully form. This initiative also was exploring the possibility of transitioning responsibility for the local initiative to a municipal department; however, the leaders expressed reservations about the department's sufficient capacity given that key employees were supported temporarily through other time-limited grants.

Importantly, similar to other initiatives, there were several ways in which the impact and legacy of this effort were poised to continue. For example, similar to case #6, the leaders shared that many of their prior programs and events had been handed over to partners for future implementation and, further, similar to case #2, there was a long-lasting structural impact via the initiative's successful efforts to be embedded in the municipality's master plan.

Discontinued

The "Discontinued" category represents a complete cessation of AFC efforts at the overall program level. One of the eight initiatives fit into this category, as described below.

CASE #8 "DISBANDED"

This initiative demonstrated a formal and intentional disbanding of the AFC initiative as a programmatic entity, which occurred several years prior to the time of the interviews. The formality of this concluding process somewhat reflected the initiative's standalone non-profit structure, which required the initiative to be officially discontinued with the State of New Jersey.

Leaders shared that they had disbanded in 2021 after an attempt to transition the initiative into an auspice organization at the start of the fourth year of the grantmaking program. The participants reported that members of the leadership team had since taken on other community and employment positions and that multi-governmental jurisdictional barriers and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic were key circumstances resulting in the cessation of the initiative.

As with other initiatives in the cohort, leaders shared that the legacy of the initiative was carrying on through the work of longer-standing community organizations (e.g., regional nonprofit, local senior center) and senior advisory committees in local municipal governments that were started or revitalized as a result of the AFC initiative.

Conclusion

This report presents findings from interviews with leaders of eight AFC initiatives in northern New Jersey that were part of grantmaking programs that began in 2016. The report delineates the range of accomplishments achieved by the initiatives seven years into their AFC journeys, as well as diversity across the initiatives' operational statuses as of spring 2023. In this conclusion, we present three key insights for continued efforts to develop robust AFC initiatives across a diversity of communities in New Jersey and beyond.

PROGRESS IS POSSIBLE

This report provides insights into AFC progress for a cohort of established AFC initiatives, highlighting "big picture" ways in which they collectively benefited their communities.

These accomplishments encompass both documented and observable outputs (e.g., passage of ordinances) as well as more abstract community-wide outcomes (e.g., stronger norms of collaboration on aging-foccused programs, services, and events). We emphasize the value of our findings in characterizing the range of accomplishments that grant-funded initiatives are achieving, given their programmatic structure, access to resources, and positions within the broader age-friendly ecosystem. While our report draws upon interviews collected at one point in time, it is important to recognize that our findings on accomplishments reflect and are enriched by the historical perspectives of leaders, who reflected on both current and past achievements and, often, of the inter-relationship of cumulative achievements through their years of practice.

While our research design (i.e., reflexive thematic analysis of qualitative interviews) did not allow for the systematic assessment of causal outcomes and impact, the outputs and outcomes described in this report implicate promising signs of progress. Such findings can provide a useful framework for future evaluation and research studies that monitor initiative outputs, outcomes, and overall community impact over long periods of time in more prospective and systematic ways.

SUSTAINABILITY IS MORE THAN "YES OR NO"

Our findings reveal a diversity of ways to conceptualize the overall operational status of AFC initiatives. Implicating the importance of adopting a multi-dimensional approach, findings suggest that sustainability is more complex than an "on/off switch" between active and inactive. Illustrating this point, we found a variety of ways in which initiatives were actively continuing operations. Moreover, understanding what it means for an AFC initiative to continue beyond an initial grantmaking program

requires a holistic view of all the components of age-friendly work. For example, in addition to the operational status of the overall initiative, it is important to consider how different elements of AFC work are continuing, such as the leadership structures, funding, programs and events, leadership capacity, and changes in community organizations (e.g., new aging-oriented positions).

The outputs and outcomes described in this report implicate promising signs of progress.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND SUSTAINABILITY GO HAND-IN-HAND

Finally, the findings illustrate the overlap between AFC achievements and sustainability. In other words, achievements and sustainability are two sides of the "coin" of AFC long-term progress. We highlight this overlap in two key ways, as describe below.

First, AFC efforts often require some degree of longevity to achieve impact. This is especially true for some of the more recent achievements identified by core team leaders, such as new positions in municipal governments and changing norms for aging within a community. These achievements build on years of incremental work by the AFC initiatives, indicating the imperative of time for these initiatives to develop and operate.

Second, sustainability takes place across the achievements of AFC work. Whether the

accomplishment is a change in a public sector budget, new park benches, a partner taking on an AFC event, residents' enhanced access to aging resources, or new partnerships on aging, the achievements of AFC work are the conduits through which the enduring legacy of an initiative occurs across individuals, organizations, and the community at large.

SUMMARY

In summary, insights from this report can amplify the efforts of AFC champions across sectors and industries in garnering the financial, social, human, and tangible capital necessary to support AFC initiatives with optimal impact, especially in the long-term. Findings also can facilitate more robust evaluation and metric-tracking for future age-friendly funding programs and related community-based social innovations. As well, these findings provide a conceptual framework for practitioners and community members to guide their work in generating impacts and planning for sustainability.

Accordingly, these findings are applicable for initiatives that are just starting, serving as a guidepost for planning their future goals and trajectories. Results also offer insights for more established initiatives regarding how they can evaluate and present their accomplishments and journeys over time. In the context of a growing number of grantmaking programs for AFC initiatives, our findings can illuminate the multi-faceted dimensions for strengthening, monitoring, detecting, and celebrating meaningful AFC progress over time in ways that validate and encourage future investment of financial, human, and political capital in these aspirational efforts for a better aging future.

Notes

1. AARP. (2023). AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities: The member list. https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/member-list.html [Retrieved September 27, 2023].

2. For more information on the status of the growing literature exploring the organizational and community contexts of AFC initiative implementation, including progress toward short, medium, and long-term outcomes, refer to: Forsyth, A., & Lyu, Y. (2023). Making communities age-friendly: Lessons from implemented programs. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 088541222311607. https://doi.org/10.1177/08854122231160796.

3. For examples of public and private grantmaking programs for AFC efforts, see https://mn.gov/dhs/age-friendly-mn, https://mpa.aging.ca.gov/LocalMPAGrantProgram/Index, and https://hfwcny.org/program/age-friendly-go-local.

4. For more information about the The Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation (HMTF), visit: https://taubfoundation.org.

5. For more information about the Grotta Fund for Older Adults at the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater MetroWest New Jersey (Grotta Fund), visit: https://grottafund.org.

6. From January of 2016 through October of 2023, the funders have made grants for the operations of 12 initiatives spanning 15 municipalities in Essex, Union, Morris, and Bergen Counties, New Jersey. They also have supported nonprofits and consultants to provide technical assistance to the communities.

7. For a list of prior publications and timeline of prior waves of data collection, see https://socialwork.rutgers.edu/centers/hub-aging-collaboration/projects/age-friendly.

8. We invited twenty-eight individuals to participate in an interview, and two individuals from one of the communities declined.

9. For more information about Age-Friendly North Jersey, refer to agefriendlynj.org.

10. More information about the research design, data collection, and analytic process is available upon request and forthcoming in subsequent publications.

11. For more on the importance of community programs to propel AFC work, see: Pope, N. E., & Greenfield, E. (2022). Community events as part of age-friendly community practice. *Journal of Community Practice, 30*(3), 299-318.

12. For more on how AFC core teams work with their partners, see: Pestine-Stevens, A., & Greenfield, E. A. (2022). Giving, receiving, and doing together: Interorganizational interactions in age-friendly community initiatives. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 34*(2), 218-236.

13. For more on ways that AFCs function within communities to improve programs and services, see: Greenfield, E. A., Pestine-Stevens, A., & Scher, C. (2022). Responding to local needs by mobilizing community assets: Age-friendly community initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Gerontologist, 62*(10), 1431-1442.

14. For more on how AFC leaders are advocates in their communities, see: Greenfield, E. A., Pestine-Stevens, A., & Scher, C. (2022). Responding to local needs by mobilizing community assets: Age-friendly community initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Gerontologist, 62*(10), 1431-1442.

15. For more on the roles that older adults take on in AFC initiatives, see: Greenfield, E. A., & Reyes, L. (2022). Characterising older adults' engagement in age-friendly community initiatives: Perspectives from core group leaders in the Northeast United States of America. *Ageing & Society, 42*(6), 1465-1484.

16. For more on how community events can increase community awareness on aging, see: Pope, N. E., & Greenfield, E. (2022). Community events as part of age-friendly community practice. *Journal of Community Practice, 30*(3), 299-318.

17. The coordinating team included the Rutgers team, program officers from the funding organizations, and a communications professional and also a leader of one of the AFC initiatives in the network.

18. Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) *An introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses.* Available from authors at https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice.

19. We emphasize that these statuses are dynamic, such that the initiatives have continued to evolve since the interviews were conducted prior to the publication of this report.

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Learn more about Age-Friendly North Jersey: www.agefriendlynj.org

For additional research findings and reports: https://go.rutgers.edu/agefriendly

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Age-Friendly Community Initiatives in Their Maturity:

Insights on Accomplishments and Sustainability

DECEMBER 2023

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