While multiple sectors—cities and communities, education, employment, health, and public health—have identified and implemented strategies to promote age-friendly systems, their efforts have mainly advanced in silos. Each sector has met goals specific to its constituents, however, the major transformations required to realize systemic inclusivity and well-being among diverse groups of older adults remains indefinable. To begin to address this gap, we have engaged age-friendly sectors in a process of coordinated planning to define and operationalize an age-friendly ecosystem (AFE) that advances cross-sector and age-friendly solutions to meet the needs of all older adults. Our process borrows from Kania and Kramer (2011) who describe conditions to achieve substantial collective impact when coordinating efforts across sectors: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, and continuous communication. In this presentation, we describe our stepwise process to set a common agenda, by engaging older adults and working with experts across sectors, to agree on a series of characteristics that define an AFE. Specifically, we surveyed older adults about their perceptions of an age-friendly ecosystem as well as conducted a review and analysis of relevant activities (i.e., policies, programs, and practices) associated with five age-friendly sectors. Next, activities were organized by common and defining characteristics. We then convened more than 40 international experts representing diverse age-friendly sectors to review and revise the AFE characteristics. Through structured and facilitated group processes, we worked with experts to identify and define six critical AFE characteristics as well as examples of corresponding activities.

DEVELOPING A SHARED LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE THE AGE-FRIENDLY ECOSYSTEM

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As the age-friendly movement grows in its second decade, urgent questions of initiative sustainability have taken hold in the academic literature and among advocates implementing age-friendly changes. The creation of authentically age-inclusive environments requires not just the continuation of the initiative itself, but that its principles become embedded in formal and informal organizational processes, across sectors and beyond familiar networks focused on older populations. This paper argues that sustainability of age-friendly initiatives is enhanced by “spillover” effects, in which a behavioral or policy change in one environment spurs change in another environment. Evidence for such spillover and an understanding of how and when it occurs is currently limited in the context of age-friendly environments. This paper draws on the experiences of Age-Friendly Boston, which has been working towards age-friendly goals for more than five years. Based on Boston’s experience, we identify, describe, and exemplify three pathways to positive spillover across environments: 1) branding positively; 2) publicizing successes; and 3) embarking on new relationships, while strengthening existing ones, in pursuit of shared goals. We also draw conclusions about what positive spillover means for the sustainability of age-friendly environments.

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