



Research Snapshot: Intergenerational Programming in Senior Housing

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During 2017, LeadingAge and Generations United conducted a year-long study focused on exploring the characteristics, benefits, implementation challenges, and promising practices associated with intergenerational programming in senior housing communities. This snapshot provides a brief overview of that research, which was supported by the Retirement Research Foundation. For more details, read the full research report: [Intergenerational Programming in Senior Housing: From Promise to Practice](#).

Why Provide Intergenerational Programming in Senior Housing?

When older adults transition from home to affordable senior housing, they often have difficulty establishing new social connections, both within their new housing and in the broader community (Mitchell and Kemp, 2000; Carroll and Qualls, 2014). These older adults run the risk of experiencing:

- Emotional distress that affects their mental and physical health (Ball et al., 2000);
- Feelings of isolation due to distance from, or lack of transportation to, community or group activities in which they previously participated;
- Decreases in life satisfaction and mastery, and increases in loneliness (Ball et al., 2000; Hawes and Phillips, 2000); and
- Lower quality and quantity of social interactions (Cannuscio et al., 2003).

Cognizant of these risks, a growing number of senior housing communities are offering residents meaningful opportunities to engage with and contribute to their communities through intergenerational programming and cross-age relationships. Research suggests that these interventions may decrease social isolation among older adults; increase their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and well-being (Barnes et al., 2004; Seeman et al., 2001); and help address the ageism that is pervasive in our society (Pastor and Carter, 2012; Robbins, 2015).

Senior housing can offer an ideal platform for high-quality intergenerational work. However, little is known about the characteristics of successful intergenerational programs or the implementation challenges they face.

This study was designed to help increase our understanding of the benefits, challenges, and promising practices associated with intergenerational programs. Researchers collected valuable information about these programs through web-based surveys completed by 190 respondents; follow-up surveys of 109 housing providers that are implementing intergenerational programs; and interviews with 20 market-rate and affordable housing communities that have intergenerational programs, and with 10 communities that do not.

Overview of Intergenerational Programs

Many senior housing providers are engaged in intergenerational programming, and some of the long-standing programs are exemplary. Most of the programs participating in this study have been operating for 10 or more years. The youngest program has existed for less than a year; the oldest programs were established 20 or more years ago.

Intergenerational programs in senior housing serve a range of age groups, including older adults of varying ages, and young people in pre-school through college. Programs that have established strong partnerships with local school systems are more likely to serve youth representing multiple age groups.

The top-5 reported activities sponsored by intergenerational programs include:

1. Friendly visiting,
2. Arts programming,
3. Health and wellness activities,
4. Oral history/reminiscence interviewing, and
5. Language/literacy programs.

Benefits of Intergenerational Programming

Study participants identified myriad benefits that both young people and older adults have enjoyed because of their participation in intergenerational programs.

A greater understanding of issues faced by older adults was the most frequently reported benefit of intergenerational programming for youth. This benefit was cited by 36% of respondents.

Decreased isolation and/or increased connectedness was the most frequently reported benefit of intergenerational programming for older adults. This benefit was cited by 44% of respondents.

Interestingly, respondents reported that older adults and youth shared several perceived benefits:

- Increased self-esteem and/or feelings of worth: 33% of respondents reported this benefit for older adults, compared to 29% who reported this benefit for youth.
- Increased trust across ages: 31% of respondents reported this benefit for both groups.
- Increased sense of community: 45% of respondents reported this benefit for older adults, compared to 38% who reported this benefit for youth.

Themes that Emerged from the Research

Several themes emerged when researchers interviewed housing providers that are currently implementing intergenerational programming.

Motivations/Goals: A desire to improve understanding across ages topped the list of reasons many senior housing communities initially implemented intergenerational programs. Providers wanted to dispel fears of aging and older adults among young people. They also wanted to help older adults gain a greater understanding of children and young adults in their communities. Other motivations for establishing intergenerational programming included the desire to use those programs to:

- Instill a spirit of volunteerism and social justice among residents;
- Expose young people to careers in aging;
- Reduce residents' isolation;

- Increase residents' connection with meaningful activities; and
- Collaborate with youth-serving organizations located on the same campus as the housing community.

Partners: Housing communities implement intergenerational programs in collaboration with a wide range of partners. Partnerships range from informal collaborations to long-term relationships featuring joint planning and implementation. Partners include:

- Elementary, middle, and high schools;
- Colleges and universities; and
- Community organizations like the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brother Big Sister programs, faith-based institutions, 4-H, Goodwill, or International Cultural Centers.

Staffing: Only a few housing communities reported having a staff person dedicated exclusively to long-standing intergenerational programs. This staff position tended to exist in market-rate housing settings, rather than in affordable housing settings. Housing communities that share a campus with a school or child care center often leverage staff from both organizations to assist with intergenerational programming. In addition, providers use student volunteers, including local college students majoring in allied health and social services, to assist in intergenerational activities.

Participation of Older Adults: A relatively small percentage of residents participate in intergenerational programs on a regular basis. Usually, a core group of residents attends most intergenerational events. Other residents attend events when they are interested in a specific activity or topic. Residents at housing communities with a long-standing, mission-based intergenerational focus are active in planning and participating with intergenerational programming. But, generally, residents have a limited role in program planning at most housing communities.

Engagement of Young People: Young people in some intergenerational programs provide a specific service to older adults, such as friendly visiting or health education and screenings. In other cases, young people are the recipients of a service, such as mentoring or tutoring. The most interesting approaches to programming provide opportunities for young people and older adults to engage in joint learning experiences or community service projects.

Nature of Programming: Most intergenerational activities occur monthly or revolve around holidays, and require a limited time commitment. Housing communities generally recruit residents to participate in specific, short-term activities, rather than asking residents to share their skills and talents with youth on a long-term basis. Some older adults actively interact with young people, while others prefer attending entertainment activities like concerts and plays.

Training/Orientation: Very few survey respondents or interviewees reported conducting formal training for either youth or older adult volunteers in intergenerational programs. However, all interviewees indicated that they would find it very useful to adopt training in the future. Several providers conduct sensitivity training about aging and memory for local school children, while others train service-learning students at local colleges and universities on appropriate ways to interact with older adults.

Program Evaluation: Few housing providers reported conducting any formal or informal evaluations of their intergenerational programs. However, most providers do collect information about overall resident satisfaction with on-site programming during their annual resident assessment.

Funding/Sustainability: Most intergenerational programs are supported through the housing community's general operating budget. However, intergenerational programs may also receive financial support from memorial funds, resident-initiated fundraisers, and grants from local organizations. Some programs obtain small amounts of money from school-based funds that support social service activities. This funding typically pays for transportation for youth, snacks, and program supplies.

Providers Not Currently Implementing Intergenerational Programs: Perceived challenges appear to discourage housing providers without intergenerational programs from implementing these programs, even though they are interested in doing so. These challenges are related to logistics, space availability, staffing, training, regulation, and buy-in from leaders and participants.

Implementation Challenges

Housing providers reported a variety of challenges associated with planning and implementing intergenerational programming. These included:

- Lack of investment by all partners, and a lack of joint long-term planning;
- Logistical issues, including difficulties with transportation, program scheduling, and the costly background checks that are required for regular visitors to certain housing communities;
- Limited understanding about the needs and interests of different generations;
- Lack of knowledge about planning high-quality intergenerational activities that appeal to both adults and children;
- The absence in most housing communities of a designated staff person who is responsible for intergenerational programming;
- Competing demands on staff members who carry out intergenerational work in addition to other assignments;
- Inconsistent participation by residents who may:
 - Be reluctant to embrace new experiences or make a long-term commitment;
 - Have negative views of children and youth;
 - Prefer “being served” to serving as volunteers;
 - Have frailties or disabilities that make it hard to participate; or
 - Have outside commitments that leave little time for intergenerational activities;
- Limited resident engagement in the development and management of cross-age programs;
- Minimal participant training;
- Lack of focus on cross-age relationship building;
- Insufficient tools for assessing program impact; and
- The need for more effective fundraising.

Strategies for Success

Study participants identified a plethora of effective strategies to make intergenerational programs more effective. These strategies fall into six categories:

Establishing Partnerships

- Designate a person or team of people who can be responsible for reaching out to, and maintaining partnerships with, youth organizations and educational institutions.
- Find partners with shared interests and values, or a common need that can be met through collaboration.
- Garner support from top administrators to foster buy-in at the organizational level.
- Identify how intergenerational programming can help partners meet their missions and positively impact the people they serve.
- Conduct partner orientation and training to raise awareness about the needs of each population, identify the benefits of intergenerational interactions, and explore effective strategies/activities for fostering meaningful cross-age interaction.

Planning Programs and Activities

- Engage all partners in short- and long-term planning to enhance the quality of programs and activities that address the needs, interests, and knowledge/skills of participants in all age groups.
- Create an intergenerational advisory group to help plan and implement programs.
- Include the marketing department in planning so it can advertise the program as a community asset.

Working with Educators

- Develop strong relationships with teachers, counselors, and principals who can facilitate the engagement of elementary, middle school, high school, and college students.
- Align intergenerational activities with curricular goals.
- Create a range of incentives to spur college students to volunteer, including the ability to use intergenerational experiences to fulfill school-based community service requirements, earn scholarships, or gain employment.

Recruiting Volunteers

- Identify and harness volunteers' talents and skills, including technology expertise and language proficiency, to help with new programs or fill unmet needs.
- Engage young people and current volunteers as "participant recruiters."
- Customize the volunteer experience by creating opportunities that address student and resident interests, and build on their strengths.

Recruiting Residents

- Ask housing staff to personally invite residents to become involved in intergenerational programs.
- Emphasize how residents can benefit from and contribute to programs.
- Work with resident councils to develop and advertise meaningful intergenerational opportunities.
- Identify residents who can act as champions for cross-age interaction and resident interests.
- Convene a "pilot group" of residents who agree to participate, provide feedback, and engage additional residents in new programming.

Promoting Cross-Age Interaction

- Be intentional about designing activities that foster cross-age understanding and empathy.
- Offer a continuum of intergenerational opportunities so residents can engage with different age groups, in different ways, and for varying lengths of time, independent of changes in their functional status.
- Create a mix of opportunities, ranging from one-time events to ongoing programming, which build on the interests, knowledge, and skills of all participants.
- Utilize housing community vans, if possible, to transport children or older adults to activities.

Conclusion

There is a growing interest among housing providers in using intergenerational programming as a vehicle for dispelling negative stereotypes about aging, preparing a future workforce for the aging field, and improving the well-being of both youth and older adults. Despite the existence of several long-standing and exemplary programs, a gap exists between the promise of intergenerational programming and the level of intergenerational practice in most senior housing communities.

More effort is needed to build the capacity of providers so the quantity and quality of intergenerational work in senior housing can be enhanced and sustained over time. Hopefully, the insights and learnings gained through this exploratory study will be a valuable resource in this regard.

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