Findings from the Urban Upbound Healthy Aging Initiative

Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway
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Introduction

Urban Upbound’s “Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway” report was developed under the New York Women’s Foundation Healthy Aging Initiative, a push for evidence-based program planning for aging women in New York City. Following the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, Urban Upbound (UU) immediately sent Critical Response Teams (CRTs) on the ground to provide emergency assistance to 196 residents – many of them aging seniors – living in public housing in the Far Rockaways, focusing on issues such as critical repair and access to food, clothing, emergency funds, employment services, emergency transportation, child care, income supports, additional government benefits, medical treatment, and prescription medication. Through the support of the New York Women’s Foundation (NYWF), UU and its research team conducted an in-depth study of seniors living in Far Rockaway Public Housing – research findings indicated that seniors faced a myriad of challenges and housing and health related issues. The “Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway” report highlights some of these issues and aims to raise awareness of the challenges facing aging women in public housing neighborhoods. The overall objective of this report is to: (1) deepen the understanding of senior issues and challenges in Far Rockaway public housing developments and (2) increase collaboration between key stakeholders and community members in an effort to mobilize existing resources and strategically improve service delivery for the aging population.
About Urban Upbound

Tackling Poverty, Changing Lives

The mission of Urban Upbound is to provide residents of public housing neighborhoods the tools and resources needed to achieve economic mobility and self-sufficiency, and to break cycles of poverty. Urban Upbound advances its mission through four integrated programs: employment services, financial counseling, youth development/college access, and community revitalization anchored by the Urban Upbound Federal Credit Union (UUFCU).

Workforce Development:
We provide job readiness and placement assistance for the unemployed and underemployed. We provide job seekers with hard-skills training involving resume development and soft-skills training in mock interviewing that result in jobs with career advancement opportunities in high growth sectors.

Financial Counseling:
We provide one-on-one financial counseling, long-term asset building, community-based financial education workshops, free tax preparation, and public-housing-specific tenant advocacy, so low-income individuals can improve their credit, increase their savings, reduce their debt, and get on a path to financial stability.

College Access & Youth Development: We provide in-depth SAT tutoring, college preparation, career exploration and readiness services, and one-on-one financial aid counseling for high school students and their families.

Community Revitalization:
Our internship program connects students to life-changing Science, Technology & Engineering, Art, and Math internships (STEAM) with community partners, including top NYC cultural institutions such as the Museum of the Moving Image.

We strive to create sustainable economic development in public housing neighborhoods by organizing critical community assets, such as mainstream financial services, fresh food, and robust retail services for residents, as highlighted by opening the UUFCU and establishing the Long Island City Merchants Association. The UU Hallets Point Cooperative is the first business association in our community. The UUFCU offers federally insured savings accounts, money orders, personal loans, and other safe and secure financial products geared toward improving the financial well-being of low-income residents. The UUFCU is also the first minority-owned credit Union in Queens.
Acknowledgements

Urban Upbound graciously thanks the New York Women’s Foundation for its support on the Healthy Aging Initiative.

To all of Urban Upbound’s supporters, including community partners: Thank you! Your support and commitment to breaking cycles of poverty makes Urban Upbound’s work possible. Thank you for your generosity and commitment to the Urban Upbound mission.

Researchers

Fausto Lopez
Data & Evaluation Manager

As the former Monitoring & Evaluation Assistant and current Data & Evaluation Manager, Fausto spearheaded the design, implementation and analysis of multiple studies at Urban Upbound including the “Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway” study. He is currently collaborating with Veronica Momjian to publish a study on economic security and health. Fausto holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and a Masters of Science degree in Applied Social Research from CUNY Hunter College.

Paula Bonfatti
Research Assistant

As a research assistant, Paula joined the team in April 2015 to support the “Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway” study. Paula holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism from Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora and is currently on track to receive her Masters in Urban Studies school with an emphasis on public policy.

Veronica Momjian
Director of Data Management & Evaluation

During her tenure as Director of Data Management & Evaluation, Veronica assisted in the implementation of the “Healthy Aging in Far Rockaway” study. Veronica Momjian has been working in the non-profit field as a researcher and evaluator for over eight years. Currently Ms. Momjian is a Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation Consultant specializing in the design, creation, and implementation of impact monitoring and evaluation strategies and protocols, while also finishing her doctoral degree at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Her dissertation, The Impact of Psychosocial Well-Being and Mental Health on the Relationship Between Economic Circumstance and Religiosity, focuses on quantitative methods, public health, and the sociology of religion.
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Project Overview

Purpose

The objective of this research project was to learn about the issues and challenges facing senior women throughout New York City; UU narrowed the objective to focus on seniors living in public housing developments in Far Rockaway. Our primary findings and recommendations are listed below:

Findings and Recommendations

Finding #1: There is a lack of (or limited) access to basic resources for seniors, including public transportation, food, recreational activities, and information on housing policies for the aging.

Recommendation #1: Create and coordinate partnerships with local stakeholders to address these issues, and mobilize existing resources in the community to leverage opportunities for seniors.

Finding #2: There is an untapped opportunity for local organizations and stakeholders to work collaboratively to streamline service delivery for the senior population.

Recommendation #2: Develop a resource management tool (RMT) that improves both community collaboration and service referral processes for seniors; the RMT would serve as the foundation of a larger community-wide effort to leverage the network of organizations (with different areas of expertise) that serve the aging population.

The Landscape

The current demographics of the elderly population in the United States suggest that the aging population, as a percentage of the population as a whole, will continue to increase for decades to come. By 2030, the population is projected to double, reaching an exorbitant 70 million (1). In New York City, the demographics for the elderly population are even more disconcerting; over the next 20 years, the number of residents 65 and over is expected to increase by 35 percent – from 998,000 to 1.3 million by 2030 (2). Although several initiatives and programs have been proposed to address present and future challenges for the aging population in New York, there has been limited attention and resources dedicated to low-income seniors and residents of public housing in distressed neighborhoods – a group that currently stands at the margins of society.

Following the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in 2012, thousands of Far Rockaway residents, many of them seniors, were isolated without energy in unheated apartments without running water, medical assistance, or sufficient food (3). Residents living in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments were especially hit hard – 26 NYCHA developments were labeled within the Hurricane Evacuation Zone (4). The effects of the storm linger in the community and have exacerbated the challenges facing seniors living in the area, among them financial instability, limited access to transportation, and, until recently, a food desert absent of supermarkets (5). Around 30 percent of NYC’s seniors live at or below the Federal Poverty Line, and older women are more likely to be included in that
group: 23 percent of women, against 19.6 percent of men (6). Challenges for this population include access to health care, economic security, social connectedness, and care giving. Given that a large part of the aging population resides in disadvantaged neighborhoods and public housing developments, the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA) and NYCHA are actively trying to provide services that address the issue mentioned above, for the low-income senior population.

NYCHA developments are home to over 60,000 older residents (ages 65+), of which 70 percent are women (about 42,000). By 2030, it is estimated that one in five NYCHA residents will be age 65 or older (7). Moreover, this senior population is comprised of traditionally underserved populations. In the five NYCHA communities in Far Rockaway nearly 10 percent of residents are aged 62 and older, 63 percent of which are African American and/or Hispanic women. As of 2009, a senior was head of one in ten families in the referenced NYCHA communities. Given NYCHA’s low turnover – 3 percent in 2014 (8) – we can expect the senior population to increase, shifting the demographics and needs of public housing residents; this presents both challenges and opportunities for policy-makers in New York City (9).

Leading Initiatives Serving the Elderly

Given the increasing aging population throughout the United States, organizations that primarily serve aging individuals have identified natural settlements where the elderly populations comprise a large portion of the area, areas designated as Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs). Organizations working in NORCs focus on improving senior communities; when a community is designated a NORC, service providers in the region mobilize new and existing resources to help meet the needs of seniors in the community. Ultimately the goal is to create sustainable aging communities. The NORCs initiative recognizes the importance of aging-in-place and, through a multifaceted approach, promotes healthy aging, independence, and community building.

The key elements to the NORCs program are case management and social work services; health care management and prevention programs; education, socialization, and recreational activities; and volunteer opportunities for program participants and the community. The NORCs program utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to service delivery for the elderly – creating a collaborative network of community-based agencies on aging, home health agencies, home repair/adaptation partners, local businesses, and hospitals. New York City is currently home to 27 NORCs (12 of which are NYCHA developments) located in four boroughs, and there is ongoing work to designate new regions predominantly occupied by seniors as NORCs.

One in every ten NYC seniors is food insecure. (New York City Coalition Against Hunger, 2015)
Methods

Sample

UU’s Healthy Aging Initiative conducted a 6 month learning phase between the months of September 2014 and February 2015, utilizing a mixed method design to collect data on older adults living in Far Rockaway. The design involved snowball sampling, including site observations and Rapid Ethnographic Assessments (REAs) conducted in-and-around three of the five public housing developments on the peninsula; interviews with key stakeholders and older-adults; and a focus group at Redfern Houses. Below is a breakdown of the data collection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REA Sample</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Interviews</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Focus Group</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Stakeholder Focus Group</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Considerations

Seniors are difficult to access for a host of reasons. Low-income seniors with disabilities have limited resources, making it harder for service providers and researchers to gain access to them. Through our relationship with the Resident Association (RA) presidents, we were able to compile a list of contacts and aging seniors to engage. Moreover, we gained access to additional individuals by contacting the RA presidents to set up interviews at their monthly resident meetings.

Even though people were eager to connect us with seniors, snowball sampling presented some issues. We were unable to access as many seniors as we wanted, resulting in a relatively small sample size; however because of the depth of information collected through qualitative methods, the sample size can be overlooked as a consequence of limited time and capacity.

Six out of ten seniors - 59 percent - report using the internet.

Methodology

The study was primarily qualitative. We conducted a series of rapid ethnographic assessments (REAs) as well as phone and in-person interviews, ultimately culminating in a focus group. We started with site visits to three different public housing developments in Far Rockaway, where we conducted observations of the grounds and conducted several REAs on senior citizens in the areas. REAs were conducted using a paper guide with a series of questions; we walked around the community and asked people walking through if they lived in the developments or worked in the neighborhood. If so, we requested to interview them. In addition, we took photographs of the developments and neighborhoods throughout the community.

After transcribing and reviewing the information provided by community members, we proceeded with stakeholder
phone interviews, primarily targeting Resident Association (RA) presidents and other partner organizations in the area. This contact information was given to us by one of our own program officers stationed in Far Rockaway; our program staff is constantly building and maintaining relationships with partner organizations and community leaders. After developing a comprehensive resource map of the network of service providers in Far Rockaway, and learning about other resources from RA presidents, we decided to focus on getting additional feedback from seniors.

We conducted a series of interviews with several senior citizens at two different public housing developments during their Christmas celebrations. These senior citizens were not as forthcoming with information as we had hoped, and we were only able to interview a handful, limiting the implications of their feedback. Subsequently, we conducted a focus group at Redfern houses where we received significantly more personal information from seniors. Using all this information, we crafted this report. In an effort to mobilize resources we held a focus group forum made up of service providers in Far Rockaway. The primary goal was to get input and share good practices among the present organizations. We noted that institutions can deliver better service for the elderly by working together.

Findings

Transportation

One of our primary findings was the limited public transportation options for seniors in Far Rockaway.

Part of the issue is a lack of available services and provisions in local areas, which means seniors in the area need to travel farther to buy food or access basic needs. The primary public transportation option for seniors is the bus; with the rising cost of metro cards and logistical challenges due to fragility in old age, buses do not meet the needs of all seniors, particularly those who suffer from moderate to severe health issues that compromise their mobility. One senior mentioned, “... Waiting in the cold because the bus took too long and there isn’t a barrier to keep us warm at our bus stop.”

One option provided by the state is Access-A-Ride (AAR) – a paratransit system that “provides transportation for people with disabilities who are unable to use public bus or subway service for some or all of their trips.” Passengers still pay their drivers as they would for a bus, but they get door-to-door service. While this service seems highly useful, many of the seniors we interviewed mentioned that they could not use AAR because they either did not have enough information or ability to sign up for the program or did not have any disabilities, which is one of the eligibility requirements.

There is one regional service provider, Ocean Bay Development Corporation, that offers personalized transport to all seniors regardless of disabilities. A local non-profit organization in Far Rockaway, Ocean Bay
provides its senior clients with transportation on a “first come first serve” basis. Seniors were aware of this service, but mentioned that it was insufficient – the service was constantly overbooked, and required seniors to plan ahead. Ocean Bay Development Corporation continues to serve Far Rockaway residents.

**Recommendations: Transportation**

Access to transportation is arguably the most critical issue to address for aging seniors, because its impact and effect on senior quality of life is directly or indirectly connected to most of the other issues facing seniors in the community.

Making matters worse is a limited number of businesses in the area providing basic needs and services for senior populations (e.g. groceries, laundromats, financial institutions). Currently, seniors cannot easily access transportation inhibiting them from mobilizing and going out for professional or personal purposes. With fewer barriers to transportation, seniors can more easily travel.

Access to transportation is paramount for routine needs and other important responsibilities like visiting financial institutions, picking up groceries, and running other errands. The use of dollar vans in the area is an interesting grey-market system that seniors do seem to be using - according to information from some stakeholders. These dollar vans provide short, cheap rides (as the name implies), however there are concerns about their safety and legality. At the same time this micro-economy in the Rockaways highlights that some informal market approaches can be effective in solving issues. Aside from the need to increase information and access to AAR, there are other complementary alternatives. These include the use of school buses in late morning hours, early afternoon, and weekends and in summer months when school is off.

According to N.Y.S. Education Law §1501-b, “school boards are allowed to rent or lease their motor vehicles, when they are not needed to transport children, to senior citizen centers, any nonprofit organization that serves senior citizens and a nonprofit that serves the physically or mentally handicapped . . . ” (10). This has been implemented in Far Rockaway before, through a partnership between the Department of Education (DOE), DFTA, and the Department of Transportation and could be further explored for the future.

**Food**

Food insecurity is directly related to limited access to transportation; RA presidents discussed how the lack of low-cost transportation accessible to seniors made food very difficult to access, and deterred food services vendors from establishing their businesses in the area. Focus group participants and interviewees mentioned the limited food options and high cost of food shopping in the area. Furthermore, many seniors shop for multiple people in their household, requiring that they carry large amounts of groceries back and forth – a cumbersome process.
Recommendations: Food

One of the biggest issues with food in Far Rockaway is the lack of supermarkets and grocery stores that are accessible to public housing and community residents. Ultimately, spurring economic growth in the area and emphasizing the success of small food businesses would be a great undertaking. However, this is impractical at the moment. Solutions need to be simple and efficient, quick to set up, and easy to use. One idealistic, yet practical recommendation is to increase methods of and access to transportation, so that seniors can travel back and forth from food providers.

Alternatively, another recommendation is to increase the presence of food pantries and/or to attract food providers to local areas. There are also potential opportunities for private/public partnerships between supermarkets and non-profits to transport seniors to their closest supermarkets.

The current partnerships between service providers and bigger chain stores such as Key Foods and Stop & Shop which offer vouchers for some of the local organizations’ clients could also be complemented by partnerships with local food banks, such as The Campaign Against Hunger. The Brooklyn based organization has two organic farms in Far Rockaway and runs a program providing culturally relevant food to Far Rockaway residents.

We found that Far Rockaway has the potential to become a strong and reliable community for seniors; however information is fragmented and neighborhoods are territorial. Also, seniors do not use technology in the same capacity that younger people do, meaning their access to quick, readily available information is limited. Recognizing need is as important as providing it; as service providers we can specifically identify seniors who need our help and provide them with the one stop shop for information about what is available in the area until more infrastructure is built.

A 65 year-old man can expect to live another 17 years and a 65 year-old woman another 20 years.

Social Isolation

“I can’t work full-time because I’m taking care of my grandchildren, but I could use all the help I can get!” – Hammel Houses II Participant

Seniors also reported feeling that there was little to do in Far Rockaway; the peninsula lacks even a basic movie theater. Senior women in Far Rockaway do not have access to a lot of recreational activities nearby. There are very few recreation options near public housing developments and those that are nearby
might be too expensive or don’t target seniors. Unfortunately there are a lot of nuances to this particular issue; there are personality characteristics, racial biases from existing businesses, age barriers, and physical mobility issues. Essentially we cannot make the claim that seniors are necessarily alienated from existing activities, because it is quite possible that they simply do not want to use existing services. However, we can say that there are not many nearby options for seniors and so those who would access activity services are unable to do so.

**Recommendation: Social Inclusion/Community Support**

Seniors need accessible recreational activities nearby. Solutions include bringing the activities to them, or organizing movie nights at NYCHA or in nearby community centers like churches. The Young Women’s Christian Association in Flushing, NY hosts movie nights, recommended in part by their senior advisory board. This event serves two purposes: (1) provides a recreational activity chosen by a group of community members and (2) becomes an outreach event where seniors can become informed on services. The recently opened YMCA in Far Rockaway also offers a program for older adults, including “Health Well-Being and Fitness,” “Sports and Recreation,” and “Group Interests and Health Screenings.”

Often, it is difficult to reach seniors because of their limited use of technology. Educating seniors from low-income backgrounds in technology can help increase access to information.

The Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) is a non-profit that builds sustainable new systems to change the way we age, by making technology accessible to older adults. The organization partners with the Jewish Association for Serving the Aging (JASA) in Far Rockaway and currently holds computer classes to the elderly in JASA computer labs. By having a robust referral system and a collaborative network of service providers, these different programs become more accessible to the local senior community.

**Other Findings**

Unemployment and fixed income have become issues among low-income seniors. Interviewees mentioned that social security does not sufficiently provide senior residents with the income needed to survive, and many are in need of part-time jobs to both supplement income and engage in an extracurricular activity. Health care is another recurrent issue addressed by our interviewees. RA presidents and service providers mentioned that enrolling seniors in health insurance was crucial and others were trying to get attendant assistance. As an example of how simple community based actions can create impact, one RA president started a “hospitality committee” tasked with going around the developments and knocking on doors to make sure seniors were feeling well. Although these issues were not directly addressed in this
research project, further data is of great importance for future studies and must be taken into consideration by policy-makers and other entities and institutions serving the senior population in Far Rockaway.

**RMT (Resource Management Tool)**

Following research, UU was faced with a dilemma: how best to serve seniors within the scope of the services we offered. What we realized is that we did not have to reinvent the wheel.

Researchers at Urban Upbound worked to put together a targeted survey that would refer seniors to the service they needed. Putting together a handful of services that addressed the findings in this report, we created a resource management tool that would allow a counselor to interview seniors, walk them through their issue, and refer them to a service. While still in its pilot stages, this tool looks promising and its potential is vast. By tweaking it, a service provider could incentivize collaboration, offer services currently unavailable, and capture referral data.

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**Conclusion**

Seniors living in Far Rockaway public housing are a group of strong, but vulnerable individuals.

They are able to take care of themselves and seek little aid from the outside world, but they do require supportive services. Far Rockaway and the surrounding regions offer a lot of beneficial services that if leveraged properly could help fill a gap of senior services that was widened by Hurricane Sandy. With a growing senior population, Far Rockaway NYCHA developments are very well on their way to becoming NORCs. Organizations need to recognize this fact and work to get the region designated as such in order to allocate resources appropriately.

Whether it is one individual hustling to wrangle up activities for seniors, or one organization transporting seniors around in an over-booked van, these innovators need support and a network to draw upon for resources. By working together to create a web of resources, service providers along with funders and individuals within the community can help tackle the issues seniors face in Far Rockaway.

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42 NYCHA developments are for seniors only.
Collaborative Models for Sustainable Aging: The NORC Supportive Services Program

The NORC Supportive Services Program (NORC SSP) is a community-based intervention designed to reduce the fragmentation of services provided to the elderly and create healthy, integrated, and empowered communities which are resided predominantly by seniors. The core program components include social work services, health care management, education, socialization, and recreational activities.

The program is part of the Aging in Place Initiative, which means seniors are able to continue living in the home of their choice safely. The NORC has a multifaceted approach and unites housing entities, health and social service providers, government agencies, non-profits, community activists and organizers, older adults, local businesses, and family caregivers. The success of the program in providing the essential services required by the senior population is an example of how different stakeholders can cooperatively work together to successfully deliver services to a constituency.
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