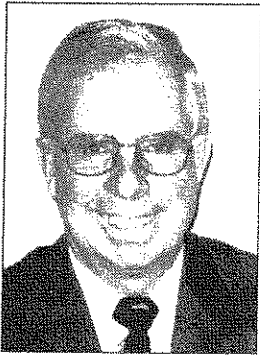


Listening to a Senior Center's Members

Recently a State Legislator invited me to join him at a meeting with members at a senior center in his district. I suggested that we use a "house meeting" format which we use in our organizing work. I explained it would begin by having everyone, including both of us, share a brief story about how aging in the community affected themselves or someone they knew. Following that he could make

On the Senior Agenda



By William F. Flynn Jr.

his presentation and answer questions. He agreed to give it a try.

The senior center was in a well-maintained though modest storefront. Inside it was a spotless and good-sized space. The center director welcomed us and immediately shared her story about its members' problems with transportation to the center (more about that later). We then met with a

group of about twenty senior members. I explained the ground rules (tell a story; it can be positive or negative; no interrupting). The legislator and I led with our stories, and then nearly everyone jumped right in and shared their heartfelt narratives.

We heard several common positive themes. The most common was from seniors who found themselves alone and isolated, often due to loss of a beloved spouse or absence of children who lived far away. Finding a safe, friendly place like the center helped them to overcome depression and stay engaged with other people. Also, immigrants from Puerto Rico, Liberia and elsewhere liked the center's diversity and felt welcome. Others said the center's exercise activities and nutritious lunches helped everyone remain healthier.

Some shared troubling stories about problems with transportation to the cen-

Social Security statement as proof of their income and requires some no-fare

regularly to senior centers. But we hear that many only show up during election

"This was a community of people who cared about and supported each other."

ter. People who arranged rides to and from the center through Logisticare, a state contractor, were frequently dropped off on the other side of very busy street from the center. There was no crosswalk and the center lacks a driveway. The center director identified two taxi services that always brought people to the front door, but Logisticare refuses to schedule only those services for her members. Some members with mobility challenges no longer attend. Another story involved renewing one's no-fare bus pass. RIPTA refuses to accept a

users to obtain a transcript from the IRS confirming their taxable income. This can sometimes become a bureaucratic nightmare.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming vibe in the room was extremely positive. This was a community of people who cared about and supported each other. The meeting concluded with members insisting on taking a group photo.

Total state funding for all senior centers was cut by \$800,000 in 2008, and despite our efforts the General Assembly has never restored it. We know that some legislators reach out

season to shake hands and maybe spring for a meal. If every legislator would meet at least once a year with senior center members and listen to their stories, they would understand why these centers and their services deserve increased funding.

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