

The Power of Stories

In mobilizing seniors to promote a better state system for aging in the community, one of our primary tools is a group meeting where we begin by asking participants to share brief stories about the challenges of aging — stories about themselves or people they know. We do this because we have found that nearly everyone has an “aging story.”

We use story-sharing as

On the Senior Agenda



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a starting point for several reasons. First, it builds relationships among the group’s members. Some group members may share similar stories about aging, while others may learn about an aspect of aging they had never thought about. Either way, they learn more about each other’s experiences and concerns.

Secondly, stories reinforce issues already on our agenda and also inform us about new ones. For example we have heard countless stories from people who had great difficulty in finding reliable information about senior services. When we closely examined the state’s senior hotline, The Point, we found it had major shortcomings. It lacked a Website, provided outdated information, and was underfunded compared to other states’ systems. Many people with stories of unsuccessful information searches for information had never even heard of The Point. Some who used The Point found it wasn’t helpful. As a result we have been working for legislation making major investments in improving The Point.

Many older seniors’ stories told of their isolation and depression following the death of a spouse or other long-term compan-

estimated cost of a program and data on the number of people it would help are important to any discussion about increasing funding

effects of school breakfast and data that it would reach thousands of children who weren’t eating breakfast. But what finally won the day was when three working mothers of school children from his district met with the Chair of the House Finance Committee. They told him their stories, in great detail, about how expensive it was to feed school children breakfast and how much free breakfast would help them make ends meet. He changed his position, included a school breakfast mandate in the budget, and over thirteen thousand children and their families benefited and still benefit today.

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ion. Their stories’ happy endings told how senior centers got them reconnected to other people and into healthy and educational activities. As a result, for years we have been working to pass a state budget restoring the \$800,000 in funding cuts to senior centers made in 2008.

Stories have a power that facts and data alone lack. Research shows that people remember good stories long after they have forgotten statistics. Certainly the

for that program. But potent and relevant stories about the human need for the program appeal directly to legislators’ emotions, and can help move them to take action.

I saw this play out while working at another agency. We had worked for years without success to get the General Assembly to mandate the federally-funded school breakfast program in all schools. We had presented copious amounts of research on the beneficial

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