

In Search of Innovation

Two weeks ago, together with Bill Cooper, Deputy Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Aging and Independent Living, I had the pleasure of presenting an update report on KERI (available on this website) at the 33rd Annual Meeting of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (N4A) in Nashville. The audience was enthusiastic and, following our remarks, we received positive feedback from Area Agency on Aging (AAA) representatives from all over the country. Kentucky was praised for its efforts, through 30 focus groups and 15 community forums held in 2006 and a statewide survey conducted last year, *“To foster statewide awareness, dialogue and insight into the challenges and opportunities provided by the aging of the “Baby Boom” population...”* While it is always gratifying to receive kudos for accomplishment, KERI is far from complete. The second part of the KERI mandate reads *“...and stimulate local and statewide initiatives to appropriately address the pending changes that will result from this process.”* At this point, it is particularly important to focus on this aspect of KERI.

While change can and will certainly occur at the state level, many of the most exciting initiatives are likely to originate within individual AAAs and on a local level. One of the highlights of the N4A conference was presentation of the 2008 Aging Innovations and Achievement Awards. Sponsored by Critical Signal Technologies, this program, now in its fourth year, presented Aging Innovation Awards to 11 AAAs. Several of the awards were given to AAAs for their efforts in planning and community engagement. Generations, Area 13 Agency on Aging in Vincennes, Indiana, was recognized for its *“EngAGE Initiative”* that involved working with community leaders in identifying long- and short-term goals and developing action plans to make towns more livable. Westchester County Department of Senior Programs and Services in Mount Vernon, New York, was honored for its *“Livable Communities Project”* that included mapping information about services available to seniors in 15 categories and establishing “connection offices” in community-based organizations to improve service access. And Los Angeles AAA was recognized for a *“Seniors Count! Needs Assessment”* that used GPS technology in conducting what was cited as “the largest known survey of senior needs in the nation.” Other Aging Innovation awards were given to AAAs that focused on more specific themes. Triangle J AAA in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, was recognized for work on emergency preparedness that included a “Train the Trainer” curriculum and a video for community leaders concerned with promoting disaster preparedness among older and disabled adults. AAA Region 1 in Phoenix Arizona received two awards, one for its *“Mosaic Elder Refugee Program”* and another for its *“DOVES”* program that provides temporary housing for older adult victims of domestic violence.

Traveling around the state and visiting all of the Kentucky’s AAAs over the past two years it has become clear to me that there is tremendous potential for similar innovation within our Commonwealth; and in several regions such innovation is already underway. It is gratifying to know that, despite the tremendous work overload under which AAA personnel in Kentucky are operating; there is still openness to trying something new. In future KERI Columns, I plan to describe some of these innovations. As we move forward, it is important, not only to emulate the accomplishments of AAAs in other states but also to make sure that creativity and innovation in our own Commonwealth does not go unnoticed. But, beyond recognition, our culture of caring must actively nurture change. To this end, I hope that the KERI website will become a forum for sharing and celebrating innovation and promoting best practices. Our own AAAs need to be receiving awards at future N4A conventions.

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