

This article relates the experiences of an APA member who recently attended a major national conference dedicated to serving non-profit senior housing and care providers. It turns out that there is much that planners' can learn and apply from allied professionals in the area of elder care.

Lessons from the Leading Age

By Elizabeth H. Tyler, FAICP

Just over a year ago, I was elected to sit on the Board of Trustees of Clark-Lindsey Village, a retirement center in Urbana, Illinois. Clark Lindsey is a beautiful 24-acre development in the heart of the prairie and is the choice living option for our older residents, providing a continuum from independent living to nursing care and rehabilitation. As a planner, I am keenly interested in the challenges of housing and providing services to our aging population. In addition to being a provider of services through the City of Urbana Grants Division, I have had first-hand experience as a consumer of services, during several years caring for my mother following a major stroke. I welcomed the board appointment as a great opportunity to provide service to this gem in our community, offering the organization the benefits of my own personal experience and my expertise in planning.

One of the perks of being a board member is the chance to participate in the annual meeting of **Leading Age**. Formerly known as the AAHSA, this organization is now in its 50th year and provides advocacy, leadership development, and applied research for 5,400 non-profit providers of home health, hospice, community services, senior housing, assisted living residences, continuing care communities, and nursing homes. (See http://www.leadingage.org/About_LeadingAge.aspx)

The 2011 meeting took place in mid-October in Washington, D.C. It was a beautiful fall week and the city had never looked better. In addition to dozens of educational sessions, Leading Age has a gigantic exposition, an Idea House exhibit, and inspirational general session speakers. We heard from the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, who is a member of the Elders, a group of prominent world leaders; celebrated poet Maya Angelou; and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel. What a thrilling lineup! The 50th Birthday bash featured the music of the Village People. Having gone through my own disco queen phase in high school, I was amazed to see the original motorcycle cop, cowboy, Indian chief, etc., still going strong. But, somehow the act seemed tame and innocent today, while it was the height of subversive camp back in the 70s!

Among the educational sessions I attended was one about therapeutic gardens at Veterans Administration facilities. These gardens are part of a national effort to offer the therapeutic benefits of healing gardens for senior veterans and those in rehabilitation. The gardens are the latest incarnation of a decades-long movement using gardening as an occupational therapy resource for veterans. The presentation reminded me of the powerful and empirically proven mental and physical benefits of green spaces to humans. To me, this is an endlessly fascinating field of research and something we should bear in mind for any plan or development. Add some nature! Read more about therapeutic gardens for

veterans at <http://www.va.gov/health/NewsFeatures/20100226a.asp> and <http://www.asla.org/ppn/Article.aspx?id=25302>

Another session was about the Village Model. Villages are self-governing, grassroots, community-based organizations developed with the purpose of enabling people to remain living in their own homes and communities as they age. Villages work as a sort of co-op, with members paying an annual fee in to the organization in order to tap into a volunteer base which can provide transportation, home maintenance, technical support, companionship, etc. Imagine a senior, living alone in his home of many years, who needs assistance with getting to doctor appointments, installing the latest software on his computer, shoveling the walk after the latest snowstorm, and just having somebody check in on him and offer companionship. What a wonderful alternative to prematurely moving to assisted living or a nursing home. Villages can also offer the benefit of helping to stabilize neighborhoods and keep them safe for all residents. As a planner, you might very well be instrumental in setting up a village in your own community. Villages are thriving and have a national network organization in the Village to Village Network at www.vtvNETWORK.org. Find more information in "Aging in Place: The Village to Village Model", by Candace Baldwin and Karen Kali, published in APA's Private Practice Perspectives, Spring 2011, available at <http://www.planning.org/leadership/divisions/initiatives/aging/>

My visit to Leading Age reminded me that planners have much we can learn from (and offer to) other fields and organizations. The best part is how we can apply these lessons to our everyday work in improving our communities.

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