

For the first time in our country's history, we are living in some of the most diverse communities. Our families span multiple generations and our cities, towns, and villages are catering to a variety of people's needs.

These generational needs invite an approach that values equity – an intentional process by leaders to create a playing field where all are welcomed. When cities, towns and villages think about generational needs, it's important to take into account the power dynamics that create systems, policies and practices that advantage one group of people over another.

Community leaders want thriving, vibrant communities; communities where all can reach their potential, from the very youngest to the most seasoned. An approach that values equity is one that will actively address the way that people are situated differently. This contrasts from equality, which is the assumption of "sameness" and the idea that everyone should be given the "same thing."

Age is one dimension on which inequities exist and intentionally centering communities with the most marginalized needs is necessary to create a more equitable playing field.

 Equity

Photo Credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

 Equity2

Photo credit: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Consider the two images above: the individuals could be the same age or different ages, but they definitely have different needs. It is the role of government to create systems and structures that meet people where they are, rather than implement a one size fits all approach.

In the example, the bicycles require important infrastructure like bicycle lanes and signal timing that would cater to the different needs of people who ride three-wheel bikes, recumbent bikes, small bicycles ridden by children and even bicycles with trailers attached. By developing roads and street infrastructure that work for all people, local elected officials can demonstrate a true commitment to equity and challenging Ageism and the many ways it reflects itself in policies.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Ageism as “the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age.” First used in 1969, it refers specifically to systemic discrimination against elderly people, but similar stereotypes also exist against young people and children, limiting their ability to live full lives.

Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities defines age-friendly environments as those that “recognize the wide range of capacities and resources among older people” and “respect older people’s decisions.” A similar set of criteria can be applied to support other age groups which are often excluded from public spaces including young children, teenagers, and young adults.

How To Make Your City Age-friendly

In order to make communities more equitable across all ages, municipalities can take concrete steps to adjust and expand programs using the WHO’s systemic and inclusive approach to becoming more age-friendly. The WHO age-friendly guide states, “Creating environments that are truly age-friendly requires action in many sectors – health, long-term care, transport, housing, labor, social protection, information and communication – by many actors – government, service providers, civil society, older people and their organizations, families and friends.”

And here in the U.S., the first city to join the international movement to become an age-friendly city was [Portland, Oregon](#). Since 2010, Portland has instituted citywide efforts to embed age-friendly policies and programs into the city’s governance. Their tagline: “Portland is a place for all generations,” promotes the city’s joint initiative, [Age-Friendly Portland](#), with Multnomah county.

The initiative began with an initial partnership with the Portland State University’s Institute on Aging (IOA). IOA helped the city apply and join the international network in 2010, galvanizing the [city’s action plan](#) “to move Portland toward future development and activities that foster not only physical environments but also social and service environments that meet these criteria, making Portland a community for all ages.”

Since 2016, the city has been putting resources into supporting the initiative. Portland has gone through a number of stages leading to the development of 10 age-friendly policies that were included in the city’s [2035 Comprehensive Plan](#), which took effect in May 2018. Earlier steps included conducting research and holding community listening sessions with people over the age of 50, which included 89 percent racial, ethnic or cultural minorities, and 68 percent of people with limited English proficiency.

Portland also established an advisory council that works to advance the age friendliness of Portland. The Advisory Council is made up of a cross-section of local stakeholders, including nonprofit partners like AARP, universities, businesses, and local elected officials. Additionally, the city has established five committees who oversee different elements of the age-friendly environment. The committees consider housing, transportation, civic participation, health services, and employment policies.

Building on the example of Portland and the other cities in the WHO Global Age-Friendly Network, cities can begin thinking holistically about how ageism shows up in their community. And cities can take action to combat ageism: set up open conversations with residents and develop plans to develop environments, services, systems and policies that seek to address the needs of all age groups.



About the Author: *Aliza R. Wasserman is the senior associate with NLC's*

Race, Equity, And Leadership (REAL) Initiative.