

Overview of the Program

Chesterfield County Public Library (CCPL) created a series of programs designed to allow community members to address the issue of Chesterfield County's aging population. Programs were designed to promote open dialog between citizens and key figures in local government, and interdepartmental cooperation on issues important to senior citizens. CCPL received a grant from Building Common Ground, a joint project of the American Library Association and the Fetzger Institute, to carry out the project. CCPL worked closely with the Chesterfield County Senior Advocate's office and other county departments to provide a variety of avenues for engagement, allowing citizens to voice their concerns in a direct line to those who are in a position to effect change.

Over 100 participants attended the programs, in addition to individuals who participated in ongoing aspects of this project, such as interactive "thinkboards" in the library, book discussion groups, and a Video Memory Project.

The Problem/Need for the Program

Chesterfield County Public Library's (CCPL) nine branches serve a population of 316,000, spread across 446 square miles. Chesterfield County currently faces an "agewave," a rapidly-increasing aging population. Twenty-three percent of Chesterfield County's population is 55 years old or older – a large increase from 16.5 percent 10 years ago. The current infrastructure for seniors will be unable to support the growth unless changes are made. "Building Common Ground: Discussions of Community, Civility and Compassion" was created to allow citizens a voice in the issues facing aging residents and caregivers with civility and compassion. These issues include transportation problems, lack of consolidation of services, lack of gathering locations, and rising costs in senior living expenses. Our hope was to work with the aging community and county departments to improve communications about the current network and procedures, and to consider solutions moving forward.

The goals for the program series were:

Goal 1: Raise awareness of issues facing the senior population and caregivers within Chesterfield County and provide opportunities in which these issues can be addressed with civility and compassion.

Goal 2: Strengthen relationships between CCPL, county departments and local agencies serving the aging community, partnering together to offering a better quality of life for the aging community.

Project Implementation

To implement this project, CCPL received a grant from Building Common Ground, a joint project of the American Library Association and the Fetzger Institute. From the onset of the project we worked closely with Debbie Leidheiser from Chesterfield County's Senior Advocate Office who was our project partner. She helped CCPL identify key area agencies that would be interested in Building Common Ground. As we began to discuss the project with local organizations such as

Virginia Department for the Aging and The Capital Area Agency on Aging, they expressed their desire to be involved in the program series. The core project team consisted of 15 CCPL staff members that were responsible for implementing the project. At least ten different agencies and County departments were involved in promoting and participating in the program series.

Our program series consisted of four parts:

“Seeing the Invisible: The Aging Community of Chesterfield” was the first program offered on April 26th. Five expert panelists were asked to address questions presented by the moderator. Panelists were Katie Roeper, Assistant Commissioner for the Virginia Department for the Aging; Dr. Thelma Bland Watson, Executive Director for Senior Connections, The Capital Area Agency on Aging; E. Ayn Welleford, Department Chair of VCU Gerontology; Sara Link, Director of Older Adult Initiatives, United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg; and Sarah Snead, Deputy County Administrator for Human Services, Chesterfield County. Questions dealt with how residents, businesses and local agencies can gain awareness and respect for seniors and act compassionately on that awareness, in addition to fostering respect towards seniors among the younger generations. Time was allotted at the end for participants to ask questions and contribute their input. In order to encourage Chesterfield County departments to attend this discussion, key departments who work with the aging population were invited to attend a pre-program luncheon in honor of the panelists. The Friends of the Chesterfield County Public Library partnered with CCPL to provide the meal. This created an opportunity for County government to engage in conversation with local agencies, and in seeking ways to partner to address the issues facing the aging population of Chesterfield County.

“Understanding the Invisible: Reflecting on Aging with Civility” was the second program in the series. This community-wide book discussion focused on concepts of civility and conflict among the characters in “The Giver.” This book discussion was lead by two CCPL librarians. The staff

indicated that there were a variety of opinions and a lively discussion. A few of the attendees had not read the book but were able to contribute by discussing how the themes in the book can be found in our community today. Some of the topics discussed were: sacrificing freedom for safety; the idea of the “common good”; community; and our society’s focus on youth, healthcare and individuality. This program received such positive comments that CCPL decided to offer this same book discussion at two additional CCPL branches. Each book discussion participant was given a packet of additional resources to use during the discussion and following the program. These items included “The Giver” discussion questions, evaluation form, Building Common Ground information sheet and resource list. Many of the CCPL librarians know of book groups in the community in which library customers participate. These staff members gave copies of “The Giver” book discussion kit to those library customers to use in their community book groups.

“Invisible Voices: An Open Dialogue with Seniors, Caregivers and Community Leaders” was hosted on June 1st. This community discussion provided a forum for seniors and caregivers to voice their concerns. This program was focused on finding positive solutions to their concerns. County leaders were present from different departments. For many of the attendees, this was the first face to face interaction they have had with County department representatives. All ideas and thoughts were recorded by a scribe. County representatives have taken this information and suggestions back to their departments and are dedicated to incorporating the suggestions in order to improve county services. The information has been shared at the highest administrative levels and has spurred further research and discussion.

“Invisible No More: Stories of Community, Civility and Compassion” is an ongoing video memory project that focuses on seniors, caregivers and family members as they responded to questions relating to community, civility and compassion. A few videos have been recorded, and the project team is currently working on how best to increase interest in order to get a greater community

involvement. We continue to pursue the video memory project in hopes of expanding our collection of videos.

As part of the project, CCPL installed the “thinkboards” at three branch libraries. The whiteboards are placed in a highly visible area and a question is posted for library customers to comment on. Questions are changed on a weekly basis. All responses are retained for evaluation and information gathering purposes. Staff noticed that customers often gathered around these boards posting their comments and reading what others have to say. All of the questions deal with the issues facing seniors and how to address those with civility and compassion. Staff members have been approached by library customers who expressed that the whiteboards were a wonderful idea, and that CCPL needed to seek more of this type of community input. Thinkboards remain active in all the branches, and the questions are periodically updated to facilitate new conversation.

Results/Success

Over 100 participants attended the programs, in addition to individuals who provided feedback on the “thinkboards” and participated in the additional book groups.

For each of the programs, participants were asked to fill out a paper evaluation form consisting of nine questions. In the majority of the responses individuals indicated that their attitude and feelings towards the issues facing seniors changed significantly as a result of their participation. For the few participants that indicated there was little or no change in their attitude, the comments indicated that they were caregivers who understood the issues facing seniors or they were already “on board” with the need to address the issues facing seniors. The majority of the program participants were aged 50+ and mostly female. Seniors indicated in their feedback that they wanted to have greater inclusion into the community. Some examples they gave was the possibility of helping in the schools with reading programs, assisting teachers in grading papers and establishing a “Grand Partners” mentoring program with school age children. The suggestion was made that a

clearing house of senior volunteers be established so that agencies can call on pool of senior volunteers. In addressing the isolation issue, they indicated that these senior volunteers could be called upon to sit with elderly individuals so that their caregivers could have some time of respite.

The issue was raised of how the community can best build relationships with seniors by hosting community events bringing families together, not focusing on just seniors but rather focusing on community for all ages, and encouraging neighbors to take care of neighbors.

In the evaluation responses, participants requested that funding be increased to help address issues facing seniors, and that different approaches be used in reaching non-Caucasian groups of seniors. A request was made that a list of services for seniors be easily available to caregivers and seniors in the area. One participant said that elected officials would one day be part of the aging population, and thus should strive to better understand senior issues. Participants expressed concern for residents without natural support systems, and described a need for greater caregiver assistance in rural Chesterfield County. In general, participants were very pleased with the program series and indicated they would attend any future programs offered on this topic.

CCPL staff involved in the program series felt the community benefited from Building Common Ground and that it created an opportunity for civic engagement within the walls of the library. A CCPL staff member who helped lead a book discussion group on “The Giver” described the book discussion as a success, and in her opinion “it was a valuable discourse on the needs and concerns of seniors in Chesterfield County”. The participants involved in the book discussion had such a positive experience that CCPL staff decided to offer two additional book discussion groups of “The Giver” at two additional branches.

The “thinkboards” located in three of CCPL’s library branches offered helpful feedback from the community regarding attitudes and thoughts on the issues facing seniors and how to deal with them with civility and compassion. Some of the comments received included the following:

“Need more face to face interactions and less e-government.”

“Program for youth to provide transportation to seniors.”

“Work together.”

“Each member of the community can employ respect of self, others and for the authorities. Each member can contribute by modeling good and upright citizenship and being proactive and work together.”

“Invite the community to help solve community problems.”

These responses have inspired us to increase and revamp our senior programming.

Award Criteria

CCPL’s Building Common Ground program took the first steps in addressing some serious issues. The library became an avenue for community members to offer their opinions and experiences, and to have thoughtful dialogue with county leaders. Experts added their voice to the discussion. Through their interest and participation, attendees were more willing to become part of the solution, instead of focusing on problems. This program allowed CCPL and other county departments to work together closely, developing a better understanding of each other’s missions, and we are now able to advocate for each other and appreciate the roles each organization plays in contributing to the community.

However, the needs of our senior citizens extend beyond infrastructure and practicalities; our seniors need the support of an active, engaged, compassionate community. “Building Common Ground: Discussions of Community, Civility and Compassion” worked to address both sides of

this problem. The program opened a conversation on practical issues, and engaged individuals in a discussion of their intangible needs. We learned that both logistical and emotional considerations will need to be part of Chesterfield County’s plan, as we move forward in addressing the needs of our aging community.

Chesterfield County’s new strategic plan includes a proposed “age-wave team” – another step towards facing problems head-on. CCPL’s success with this venture into civic engagement programming has encouraged us to do more, and to further refine our role as a community center. We have proposed another civic engagement series for 2014, focused on civil rights and equality. These programs achieved their goals by applying some of the library’s most valued principles: all voices were heard, all perspectives considered, and all walks of life were represented.