

Engagement work

group finalizes statement



As part of a visioning process focused on preparing the active-aging industry for the future, an International Council on Active Aging work group has crafted a case statement that applies engagement to active living environments

In 2008, the International Council on Active Aging® launched ICAA 2020, an initiative dedicated to identifying and defining elements needed to prepare the active-aging industry for the future. The goals of ICAA 2020, which is supported by Morrison Senior Living, are to raise the value of the active-aging industry, expand our audience of believers, shift thinking to the new paradigm of a wellness model, and create opportunities for older adults and professionals. One of the strategies coming out of this visioning process is to promote engagement as a core principle when developing programs and preparing professionals to work with the aging population.

Over the last year, an Engagement Work Group—composed of ICAA Advisory Board and Visioning Board members—has delved into this strategic area. The group has now crafted a case statement

that applies engagement to active living environments (see pages 62–63). ICAA’s appreciation goes to the work group members for developing a statement that structures the discussion on how the active-aging industry can move forward on engaging older adults. This is a complex concept with multiple nuances, and the statement artfully identifies core issues.

The work group members have advised ICAA that a next step for the industry is to identify or develop an engagement assessment tool that can serve as an industry best practice. ICAA staff members are currently exploring the most effective approach to identifying and developing such an assessment.

Engagement Work Group: Khristine Rogers, Atria Senior Living Group (chair); Terry Fay, Senior Lifestyle Corporation; Janice Fowler, 3 Jans; Jana Headrick, Inverness Village; Jill Lund, The Garlands of Barrington; Martha Schram, Aegis Therapies; Denton Smith, SCIFIT; Barbara Trimble, Extended Family, LLC; Kay Van Norman, Brilliant Aging

Continued on page 62 with the Engagement Work Group’s case statement



The Case for Engagement: A Metric with Meaning for the Active-Aging Industry

ICAA Work Group Discussion Summary

For more than a decade, engagement in life has been a defining factor in successful aging. There is a growing body of research confirming that engagement can play a significant role in health and subjective well-being in later life. Activity theory has historically posited that doing something is better than inactivity, and most people experience basic wellness benefits from participating in some form of activity. However, the stereotype that simply keeping older people busy is a good indicator of well-being can be a barrier to optimizing active aging.

Multiple whole-person wellness benefits can be experienced through engagement in life, including life satisfaction, positive quality of life, and physical and psychological health.

Engagement must be uniquely defined for each individual and understood in the context of each person's needs, interests and sources of meaning. People who are privately and independently engaged can experience as many benefits as the person who participates in every activity offered by a senior living community or day program. Therefore, it is important not to assume that there is one universal and correct definition of engagement that applies to all older people. It is equally important that we do not define people or their level of wellness by what and how much they do.

The cost of disengagement can be high. People who are disengaged from their lives can experience so-

cial isolation, physical and cognitive decline, depressive symptoms, and spiritual discomfort.

Participation versus engagement

Participation in activities is the first step to sustained engagement in life, which is critical to successful and optimal aging. Participating in activities offers basic wellness benefits to many.

An older person's participation in activities can provide great comfort to family members and professionals who see keeping busy as a sign of late-life well-being. Participation can easily become prescribed by well-intentioned family members and professionals who often look to activity as a stand-alone indicator that an older person is thriving.

However, older people desire and expect to experience meaning and well-being in their lives and many do not view simply keeping busy as an acceptable option for late-life fulfillment. The widely held belief that an older person doing something—regardless of whether the activity holds interest and meaning for that person—is sufficient highlights how ageism can influence our societal beliefs about later life. People of all ages seek meaning and purpose in their lives, and this desire for fulfillment does not stop when one turns 65, 85 or 105.

The role of resilience

The paradox of aging is that while people do experience age-related losses, older people as a group have higher levels of subjective well-being than younger age cohorts. Resilience plays a key role in one's ability to overcome barriers to engagement at any age. Older people have overcome multiple adversities, which has reinforced their resilience.

Barriers to engagement emerge for many people throughout the life cycle. To maintain their engagement and sense of self, people must find ways to work through or around these barriers in order to continue to be themselves. Older people often experience additional barriers resulting from age-related losses that can include physical disease or disability, cognitive decline, relocation losses, and the death of family and friends. At face value, such losses can be incapacitating and lead to the belief that accompanying feelings of sadness or depression are a normal part of the aging experience.

Whole-person balance can be experienced in later life when decline in one dimension, such as a physical disability, can be offset by increased engagement in another dimension of wellness, such as social or spiritual connectedness. Creating this balance is an individual process.


Call for a paradigm shift

Engagement in life is emerging as a critical indicator of healthy aging. Providing a menu of diverse activities for older adults is an appropriate first step in encouraging an active lifestyle. Engaging older adults requires knowing each person as an individual. Engagement requires an exploratory process to uncover hopes, past successes and personal goals.

Engagement represents a dramatic business shift from traditional programming that is typically rooted in activity theory. Getting to know an individual's life story, desires and dreams requires more time and an additional skill set for staff. For example, an engagement approach positions program and activity directors as personal life coaches. Staff roles would shift from designing and delivering large group programs to the role of "engagement coach" with the purpose of

helping each client to live the life that they chose to live. Providing programs and professionals who facilitate engagement is a more complex business model than simply offering older clients things to do.

Current trends indicate that the return on an investment in building a business culture of engagement could result in increased longevity, quality of life, and subjective well-being for older people. Industry observers have noted indications that the ability to engage in life, versus simply participating in high-quality programs, will very soon become a customer requirement.

An industry shift from a culture of participation in activities to engagement in life will require an investment in a new approach to the business of serving older people. Professionals have much to gain by shifting towards cultures and practices of engagement that celebrate the aging experience and help individual older people engage in the lives that they want to live. 

Authors: Kristine Rogers, Atria Senior Living; Kay Van Norman, Brilliant Aging

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