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# The Role of Foundation Grantmakers in Responding to Community Aging: John T. Gorman Foundation

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# The Role of Foundation Grantmakers in Responding to Community Aging:

John T. Gorman Foundation

by Tony Cipollone

*Foundations respond to a variety of compelling needs. How do you reconcile the responsibility of addressing the needs of Maine's aging citizens in light of other competing issues?*

Using data as a decision-making tool is a core value of our foundation. A few years back as we were developing our current strategic plan, we used demographic information to help us to understand the challenges associated with particular populations in Maine. While we didn't anticipate making seniors one of our foundation's priority investment areas, it was hard to ignore the compelling picture painted by current and future demographic trends. By far, seniors represent the largest percentage of our state's population, and unfortunately many face some significant challenges. Almost one in ten are living at or below the federal poverty rate, and seniors 85 and older are about 50 percent more likely to be poor. About a third of seniors live only on Social Security. One in nine has been a victim of elder abuse, and 15 percent of these victims have suffered from financial exploitation (usually at the hand of a family member). Almost 40 percent live alone, and far too many experience significant isolation.

Given these statistics and our foundation's mission, we were hard pressed not to devote some of our resources annually to helping more seniors to age safely and comfortably in their homes and communities, which according to local and national surveys is the overwhelming desire of seniors in our state. However, seniors are also not the only population we focus on at the John T. Gorman Foundation. The challenge for us is to ensure that we make the strongest and most strategic investments we can to advance the supports and opportunities that seniors need and work to leverage more attention and resources to this issue from other philanthropies and public systems.

*Is there a special role that you see philanthropy playing in promoting the experience of positive aging in Maine communities? If yes, what is it? If no, why not?*

On the whole, foundations have greater flexibility in their ability to devote and deploy resources to promote positive aging in Maine communities. Given this, philanthropy can play a role on a number of fronts that involve varying degrees of risk. These include

- Raising awareness about the issues facing seniors in Maine by making investments in data and policy analysis that provide critical information about how well seniors in different parts of the state are faring, the particular contextual challenges they face, and what might be done—based on research and best practices about program and policy interventions statewide and nationally—to address such challenges successfully.
- Creating incentives and partnerships with state government and local municipalities to invest creatively in addressing the needs of seniors.
- Investing in efforts that help meet seniors' critical basic needs (food, home safety, heating assistance) that for this population serve as preventive supports that can keep seniors out of more expensive and sometimes unnecessary institutional care.
- Where appropriate, use their resources to become investors in critical infrastructure and redevelopment efforts (housing, transportation, new community centers) through vehicles such as low-interest/no-interest loans and loan guarantees.
- Participating in regional solutions that are more likely to influence policy and garner support at the federal level (a strategy that a number of

philanthropies from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont are already pursuing).

While these are but some of the things that philanthropy might consider doing, what is absolutely critical to keep in mind is what this sector cannot and should not do: act alone. The fact is philanthropic resources represent a small fraction of the investments that are actually needed to help our seniors to thrive. They can supplement, but absolutely cannot supplant, the investments that need to be made by government and the private sector if we are to get ahead of this critical challenge.

*What strategies, broadly speaking, do you think are likely to be most successful in promoting the well-being of older adults in Maine, the oldest and most rural state in the nation?*

As a rule, we believe that given the complexities of the challenges facing many of our seniors (as well as other disadvantaged Mainers), the smartest and potentially the most successful strategies will likely be those that are comprehensive in scope and grounded in both best practice and the particular realities of different geographic regions. The fact is that seniors are not homogeneous and may need different supports and opportunities at different times in their lives. The basic question should always be: what does this particular senior require to successfully age in the place of her choosing. For some, it may be as basic as having a trusted and compassionate neighbor they can call on in a pinch; for others, it may be a connection to needed basic resources such as food, heating assistance, or health care for a chronic, debilitating condition. Other seniors may face more challenging issues such as unsafe housing or the fear of losing precious financial resources to a predatory relative.

For us, this implies that the most effective strategies will likely be those that are rooted in communities; reflect the regional/local needs of senior residents; and knit together so that they can be delivered in an integrated way—i.e., they represent a system of supports that can be tapped into by seniors and caregivers over time, depending on need and desire. Finally, we believe that the most effective strategies will be those that attend to the reality that seniors (like everyone else) are likely to need a connection to someone they trust who can both assuage their apprehension about taking advantage of a

particular opportunity or support and help them to navigate whatever process is required to do so.

*Does philanthropy have the power to create age-friendly communities?*

First, the word “power” is an odd one to use in the context of philanthropy. Foundations really don’t have the power to change or create something. What we do have, however, is the ability and opportunity—if we choose to take advantage of it—to inform and influence how people and sectors think about issues and challenges and to support promising and proven solutions to address them. The power of a foundation lies in the capacity and willingness of the people, organizations, and communities it funds to make a measurable difference.

Second, as noted earlier, foundations do not—even when all philanthropic dollars are pooled—have the ability to support, let alone create, something like age-friendly communities at a scale that may be needed in Maine. Can philanthropy play a role? Absolutely, but it needs to be part of a broader effort that includes public and private participation and resources.

That said, foundations can and should do what they can to stimulate and create incentives for thinking and action that enable communities to help seniors maintain their safety, their dignity, and their independence. To paraphrase an African proverb, supportive communities are not only critical for raising healthy, successful children—they’re significant for seniors as well.

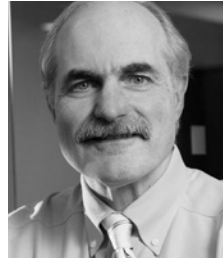
*If an anonymous benefactor wrote your foundation a blank check to address the challenges of aging in Maine, what would you consider doing?*

If money were no object, I think you’d have to consider the tough issues that make life particularly hard for many Maine seniors. They include the following:

- **Investing in transportation.** It’s virtually impossible to have a conversation about seniors in any community without the challenge of transportation quickly emerging. Given this, we’d suggest creating a fund that enables less populated communities to develop innovative approaches to the issue and helping more densely populated areas consider more options for public transportation.
- **Investing in technology.** Around the country (and here in Maine) there are new ideas for using

technology to better meet the needs of seniors. They range from using technology to monitor and meet senior needs in a nonintrusive way to driverless transportation. Capturing the power of technology for the benefit of seniors at a level that is commensurate with the scale of our population seems to be an area that is ripe for investments.

- **Investing in new housing and alternative housing models.** Even with the state's encouraging conversations about the need to expand senior housing, the fact remains that we are scratching the surface of existing need. There is a need for investments that can help seniors in older homes to make needed repairs and adjustments, as well as for new housing that can better meet their needs and ensure a connection to communities. 🐉



**Tony Cipollone** is president and CEO of the John T. Gorman Foundation, a Portland-based private foundation dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged people in Maine. Since joining the foundation in 2011, he has helped advance a range of new investment strategies

aimed at improving results for children, youth, and families. Formerly, he worked in senior leadership at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for over 20 years and helped develop and lead numerous initiatives related to education, community redevelopment, and policy advocacy, including Casey's national KIDS COUNT project.