

SENIOR AGENDA CONFERENCE PROMOTED “AGING IN COMMUNITY”

Janice Blanchard, a nationally-known leader of the “aging in community” movement, sparked excitement among 175 seniors and other interested citizens with her keynote address at the Senior Agenda Coalition’s Annual Action Conference held in Newport on October 16, 2008. Her presentation, “Aging in Community Takes a Village”, made a compelling case for developing a host of new arrangements that will allow seniors to not only avoid or postpone care in a nursing home, but to also enhance the quality of their lives and the vitality of their communities. Noting that “personal is political”, Janice explained that her interest in this area was sparked by her direct involvement in caring for her aging grandmother who was in a nursing and given 6 months to live.



Keynoter Janice Blanchard

By returning her to the community and connecting her to a network of friends, family and services, Janice helped her live for 10 more years.

Janice explained “aging in community” as a middle ground between living in a nursing home and “aging in place”, which often is a hollow victory because without engagement in the community, seniors aging at home are subject to the same conditions—loneliness, boredom, helplessness, depression, and care by strangers---that they fear about a nursing home. She defined “aging in community” as a range of living arrangements and support networks that have the following characteristics: interdependency, mutual support systems, intergenerational in scope, seniors are engaged and needed in the community, and are affordable and sustainable. It is a “proactive strategy that promotes intergenerational communities that are better for all members of the community, not just seniors.” She described two essential elements of “aging in community”: “physical containers” and “social software”.

Examples of “physical containers” included co-housing (combining private living spaces with common areas for meals and activities), retrofitting existing communities (common spaces, pathways between homes), and “golden girls homes” (senior women pool resources, sell existing homes and build a common home with separate private wings and shared public space).

“Social software” refers to arrangements whereby community is seen as an intervention that promotes senior well-being. Examples included services & goods offered via non-monetary exchanges, intergenerational arts and educational programs, retooling existing public spaces such as community centers, and “communities without walls.” Closing on an optimistic note, Janice noted that with the aging of the “baby-boomer” generation there will be a growing constituency for enacting these social changes among a group whose members have supported many campaigns for social change: the civil rights, peace, and environmental movements.

The balance of the Conference featured workshops on housing arrangements, the Independent Transportation Network, home modifications, and public-private senior services programs. These were followed by an afternoon panel presentation by three regional “social software” examples: Boston’s Beacon Hill Village, and Rhode Island-based Southern Rhode Island at Home and At Your Service. All were shining examples of what creative and motivated grass-roots senior groups can accomplish.