

BLUEPRINT UPDATE REPORT: CULTURAL SHIFT

This report was compiled to inform the community work session on the Aging Well Blueprint focus area of Cultural Shift, one of the six focus areas of the Aging Well Whatcom Blueprint. The purpose of the work session, held March 25, 2022, was to engage organizational partners and community members in reviewing and revising strategies for the 2022 edition of the Blueprint. Work session participants provided additional information, which was added to this report.

Cultural Shift and Older Adults in Whatcom County

What has changed?

Social and cultural change is generally slow and can be hard to measure.

1) Aging Well Grant Round.

As part of Aging Well Whatcom, the Chuckanut Health Foundation conducted Whatcom County's first ever grant round dedicated solely to funding projects related to aging and older adults. A total of \$94,509.00 was awarded in 2021 to [seven Whatcom County organizations](#) for projects aligned with the Aging Well Blueprint. This funding is an example of the one of the ways the Chuckanut Health Foundation engages and empowers community partners to build the culture, physical infrastructure, social supports, and services for all of us to age well.

Information sources for **What has Changed** section: Community partner survey and discussions regarding older adults and housing (Nov 2021); interviews and other communication with housing partners; website and report review; data review (specific sources noted).

2) Art of Aging.

The [Art of Aging](#) project explores some of the details of aging through series of painted portraits and recorded interviews reflecting diverse experiences of older adults in Whatcom County, as told through their own words. The project collaborators produced 20 visual and audio portraits throughout 2021. The collection has been displayed at the Bellingham Senior Activity Center and Blaine Senior Center, with plans to show at additional venues throughout 2022.

3) End-of-Life Initiatives.

The [Palliative Care Institute](#) at Western Washington University and [NW Life Passages Coalition](#) have continued to advance community awareness and systems change around aging, palliative care, end-of-life care, and death. This work is contributing to shifting perspectives on end of life and making talking about it more acceptable.

4) Ageism.

- Reports on age discrimination tend to focus on employment and legal and/or economic aspects of these biases. However, ageism diminishes our communities in many other ways beyond the workplace.
- A recent study shows that perceptions of age discrimination grew during the pandemic. In 2020, 78% of older workers reported having seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace—up markedly from 61% in 2018. Rates are similarly high across gender and race/ethnicity. ([As Economy Improves, Age Discrimination Continues to Hold Older Workers Back](#), AARP 2021).
- Nationally, there is growing momentum around the issues of ageism and broadening public awareness of the wide range of experiences of aging. Two particularly strong initiatives:
 - [Old School](#) is a clearinghouse of free and vetted resources to educate people about ageism and help dismantle it. “Our goal is to help catalyze a movement to make ageism (discrimination on the basis of age) as unacceptable as any other kind of prejudice.” Old School focuses on curating resources about ageism – “not positive aging or productive aging or healthy aging or conscious aging or creative aging, but...ageism.”
 - The [Reframing Aging Initiative](#) is a long-term social change endeavor striving to improve the public’s understanding of “what aging means and the many ways that older people contribute to our society. This greater understanding will counter ageism and guide our nation’s approach to ensuring supportive policies and programs for us all as we move through the life course.”

5) Changing desires and expectations.

- Local organizations serving older adults observe that people “coming of age” now tend to place a greater value on autonomy, and may be wanting or seeking more individualized services or experiences.
- They don’t want to be “othered” and may be more sensitive to being lumped into a category or labeled as “seniors,” “active agers,” etc. They may be less likely to want services dedicated to or branded for older adults, such as senior congregate meals, senior exercise classes, or senior shopping hours.

Challenges

The challenges outlined in the 2019 Blueprint remain relevant. The following comments reinforce these challenges.

CHALLENGE 1: ATTITUDES ON AGING AND OLDER ADULTS

- “I don't want to be seen/treated as 'old' which can be seen as less worthy than the young. I'm an individual continuing to work hard to have a healthy, vital life.”
- “How to not buy into the negative stereotypes within myself – the stereotypes are external and internal.”
- “[I would like] respect. Being seen as having value.”
- “People want to keep older adults safe, which can result in paternalistic and controlling instincts. Safety may not be the most important thing. How do we support autonomy and self-determination around safety decisions where we (vs. others) assess and choose risks?”
- Several survey respondents felt some people’s responses to COVID reflected a lack of value for older adults:
 - “Seems like people don't want to get vaccinated because COVID doesn't affect them – just old people, and who cares.”
 - “Because mask mandates are not enforced generally here, it feels dangerous... It's demoralizing to see how little many in the community care about people who are vulnerable, older and have disabilities.”
 - “Older people matter. Vaccinate people so older adults don't get sick.”
- Other survey respondents noted
 - “I have felt "dismissed" by a few doctors because of age...very few, but still....”
 - “I want a doctor who cares about keeping me as healthy as possible and who doesn’t chalk up every issue to my age.”
 - “I do not always feel listened to by medical personnel.”

Information sources for **Challenges** and **Opportunities** sections: Community partner survey and discussion regarding older adults and housing (Nov 2021); Aging Well Whatcom Older Adult Survey (Nov 2021), and listening session with Elder Service Providers (Dec 2021).

Items in quotes are survey responses as written by the respondents.

CHALLENGE 2: SEPARATION OF GENERATIONS

- “Age segregation. [I am] kind of conflicted by the comfort of being with group of people in same age group vs. seeing the value of intergenerational connections.”
- “Differences in cultural references between youth and older adults creates a gap.”
- “Agism goes both ways, e.g., we [older adults] sometimes stereotype millennials.”

OPPORTUNITY 1: OLDER ADULTS AS A RESOURCE FOR COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

- “Older people make a difference. Older people are showing up to help make change. Look around at the climate, Women's, and BLM marches.”
- Contributing to the community was mentioned by many in response to the question “*What things do you feel are the most important to your quality of life?*”
 - “Protecting the beauty and health of Bellingham's natural resources, infrastructure, and citizens.”
 - “Connect and contribute to the well-being of others and the community.”
 - “Opportunities to contribute to my community.”
 - “Being given a chance to help.”

OPPORTUNITY 2: EXPLORING THE WIDE RANGE OF AGING EXPERIENCES

- “We define seniors as 65+ but within this is a huge range. Need to recognize the variation in experiences within that range.”
- “[I] feel excited about getting old – there are many gifts and opportunities – AND also acknowledge the negative/hard aspects.”
- “Conceptualize life stages differently, e.g., youth, adulthood, older adulthood.”
- “Cultural differences in views on aging – e.g., elders are respected in some countries, less so in the US [dominant culture] – what causes these differences?”

OPPORTUNITY 3: STORIES AND STORYTELLING

- “[Use the] power of stories to normalize experiences of aging.”
- Share the Art of Aging portraits with youth – it could travel to schools, or classes could visit the show while it’s at senior centers, and encourage parents to accompany.
- Cascadia Weekly is switching to daily. Could have regular feature about the experiences of aging.
- [Connecting Community](#) is a local organization that engages community members in many kinds of storytelling, including digital stories.

OPPORTUNITY 4: AGE AS A DIMENSION OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

- “[We need] an anti-agism campaign, following in the steps of the racial justice work that is happening.”
- The vast majority of our country’s important focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) does not include the dimension of age. Recently this omission has been pointed out by a few national organizations, though mainly in the context of workplace DEI (see articles from [Wellness Council of America](#) and [AARP](#)).

OPPORTUNITY 5: INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCES

- “Multi-generational experiences help decrease feeling of invisibility [as an older adult].”
- “It’s great to have younger people participate with older adults. WWU had a program where students worked with senior center and seniors went to WWU to hear students’ presentations on their experiences.”
- “Use a ‘Get to know us’ strategy like was used in LGBTQ+ activism, especially during the AIDs crisis. Knowing people is an antidote to fear.”
- “More opportunities to be with kids. It’s hard to know what interests youth – more intergenerational contact would help with this.”
- The “What has Changed” section above includes perspectives on older adults’ changing desires and expectations. The same local organizations that note that senior-designated programs may be less desirable also observe that the corresponding **opportunity** is system redesign – not having separate “senior” activities and services.

Intergenerational Community is another one of the six focus areas of the Aging Well Blueprint.

Other Assessments and Strategic Plans

No community assessments or organizational strategic plans were found to include aspects of cultural shift.