

# BLUEPRINT UPDATE REPORT: INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

This report was compiled to inform the community work session on the Aging Well Blueprint focus area of Intergenerational Community, one of the six focus areas of the Aging Well Whatcom Blueprint. The purpose of the work session, held March 29, 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.

## Intergenerational Community and Older Adults in Whatcom County

### What has changed?

#### 1) Social isolation among older adults has deepened.

- COVID has played a large part in increasing older adults' social isolation. The Whatcom County [COVID Impact Assessment](#) (2021) states that "the isolation of older adults to protect them from COVID-19 has caused significant losses of social support and declines in mental health."
- That said, social isolation for older adults is not a new issue. It existed as a widespread and well-documented problem well before the pandemic.

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) The Whatcom Intergenerational High School was launched.

- The [Whatcom Intergenerational Highschool](#) (WIHS), a public charter high school, opened its doors in 2021.
- The Intergenerational Learning Alliance (ILA) is a program within WIHS that connects students with the elders of the broader community for learning and support across generations. Community Allies (mentors) are multigenerational community members who volunteer to interact with high school students and fellow volunteers.

#### 3) Opportunities for intergenerational interaction were diminished by the pandemic.

- The desire to reduce COVID risk for older adult has caused some families to limit in-person visits between older and younger generations.

- With reduced in-person contact, even older adults’ “incidental” interactions, such as mixing with other younger generations at a library or park, have been more limited.
- Intergenerational programs such as those at the [Generations Early Learning Center](#) and [Mobile Animals As Natural Therapy](#) have dramatically altered how they bring young and old together. For example, “window visits” with children and elders have replaced the usual in-person interactions.
- Faith communities, an important source of intergenerational interaction for many, have been limited by COVID closures and restrictions.

#### 4) Older adults’ use of technology has increased.

- COVID prompted many activities to become virtual, from family visits to medical appointments to book group meetings. While this reliance on technology presented barriers for some older adults, many adapted and expanded their use of technology significantly.
- Older adults’ increased comfort and skill with using digital technology narrows what can sometimes be experienced as a gap between elders and youngers, and broadens the opportunities for connections across generations and miles.

#### 5) More people are living in multigenerational households.

- Nationally, the number of people in the US living in a multigenerational household has nearly quadrupled in the past decade, with a 271% increase from 2011 to 2021 (7% vs. 26%). Economic reasons are the biggest driver of this trend; 66% say the current economic climate was a factor in their family becoming a multigenerational household, and 16% say it was the only factor.
- Not surprisingly, the pandemic has also contributed to the increase in multigenerational households. Among those living in a multigenerational household, nearly 6 in 10 (57%) say they started or are continuing to live with multiple generations because of the pandemic (Generations United report [Family Matters: Multigenerational Living Is on the Rise and Here to Stay](#), 2021).
- While data on multigenerational households in Whatcom County are not readily available, it is reasonable to assume that Whatcom County is part of this national trend, especially given the high cost of living in this area.

#### 6) Attention to intergenerational shared sites has grown.

- Over the last several years, the national organization Generations United released several critical publications on developing [Intergenerational Shared Sites](#), including navigating regulatory and funding challenges of creating spaces that serve young and old together.
- Generations United has also launched a [Shared Site Learning Network](#) that brings people together to “share the latest information and resources from the field, facilitate peer learning, and grow the global community of shared site practitioners.”

# Challenges

## CHALLENGE 1: REBUILDING INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTIONS

- Emerging from what appears to be the worst of the COVID pandemic, our communities will need to rebuild both the programs and informal interactions that connect people of all ages.
- Members of the [Elder Service Providers](#) group in Whatcom County observed that the “social isolation mindset” for older adults and broader community has continued even COVID restrictions have eased.
  - “People still fear interacting with others and have anxiety around potential exposure [to COVID].”
  - “Older adults are getting used to isolation – [they are] less likely to reach out for help.”
  - “Some are resisting contact, even seeing pushing people away.”
- Though COVID has diminished intergenerational opportunities, there are broader challenges to bringing generations together that existed long before the pandemic.

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

- **Social “comfort zone”**
  - “Groups may self-segregate based on age.”
  - “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.”
- **Regulations and funding**
  - Our society has extensive regulations intended to protect both children and older adults, but they are often not aligned.
  - Funding streams are sometimes designated for programs or services for specific age groups, which constrains how it can be used and contributes to age-segregated programming and facilities.
  - Programs that try to expand services to both young and old often must navigate and/or reconcile a range of rules and regulations necessary to access funding streams.

## CHALLENGE 3: AGE-ISM

- Nationally, there is growing momentum around the issues of ageism. Intergenerational interaction is widely regarded as one of the key ways to address ageism.
- “Ageism goes both ways—we need to acknowledge our own prejudices.”
- “We [older adults] sometimes stereotype millennials.”

- “[We need] intentional language, like the way kids are now talking about LGBTQ+, gender identity etc. There is a movement around language.”

## Opportunities

We often think of “intergenerational” in terms of older adults and children. However, interactions and relationships among adults of various ages – young adults, middle-aged people, and elders – are also intergenerational and can be promoted and encouraged.

### Many older adults say intergenerational experiences are importance to their quality of life.

- “I believe it is unhealthy, certainly for me, to age in an age vacuum where all my interactions are with people my own age. I seek interactions with all age groups. It's invigorating and helps me know how many of different ages live and feel.”
- “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.”
- “More opportunities to be with kids. It’s hard to know what interests youth – more intergenerational contact would help with this.”
- “I wish our society learned to honor the wisdom and experiences of our aging parents as a whole, and found ways to help seniors remain active physically and emotionally. We should not be tucked away somewhere out of the way until we die. Seniors can offer insights and common sense.”

### OPPORTUNITY 1: CREATE EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES THAT INTENTIONALLY INCLUDE ALL AGES

- “Almost anything can be made more intergenerational.”
- “Make a concerted effort and be intentional about making activities more intergenerational.”
- “Be intentional about encouraging interaction in places where older adults and younger people go.”
- “Consider whether activities are open to all ages and are accessible and welcoming (e.g. “run, walk, **and roll!**”)
- “Create and support inter-generational neighborhood activities.”
- “Some type of interaction with young children without being in charge of caring for them.”

### OPPORTUNITY 2: CONTINUE TO EXPAND “FORMAL” INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS

- [Generations Early Learning Center](#) is a childcare center located within Summit Place Assisted Living and Mt Baker Care Center with a well-established intergenerational program.
- [Mobile Animals As Natural Therapy](#) has an intergenerational project that connects youth with older adults in assisted care facilities throughout Whatcom County.
- Whatcom Intergenerational High School’s [Intergenerational Learning Alliance \(ILA\)](#) connects students with the elders in the broader Whatcom community, who may have distinct insights, skills, and knowledge to share. “By connecting generations, we strive to broaden our

community's perspectives and experiences, and thus contribute to growth in compassion, generosity, critical consciousness, and deepened inquiry skills for us all."

### **OPPORTUNITY 3: FOSTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMAL INTERGENERATIONAL INTERACTION**

- "Some things can be organically intergenerational because both older and younger enjoy the activity, like sailing, paddling groups, or knitting."
- "In my perfect world, restaurants would provide tables for singles willing to share a meal with strangers. I had that experience at the Old Town Café one morning, and it was enjoyable."
- "Volunteering and community service often bring young and old together."
- "Make public places like restaurants and coffee shops better for older adults, addressing things like menu readability/font size, music and background noise. Making places better for seniors is in a business' best interest."
- "Faith communities are places where older adults can be mentors to youth/younger groups."
- "[We can] learn from other cultures and traditions that have stronger intergenerational connections – recognize, honor, and learn from them."

### **OPPORTUNITY 4: CREATE HOUSING THAT PROVIDES INTERGENERATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES**

Housing that facilitates intergenerational interaction can range from co-located childcare to older adults living in separate but nearby spaces such as accessory dwelling units. Also, "intergenerational" doesn't necessarily mean children and elders. College students, people in mid-life, younger seniors, and people in their eighties or nineties are generally all of different generations.

- "Create more housing that provides natural opportunities for older and younger generations to interact."
- "Multi-generational housing, and cooperative housing."
- "Communal living for families and their elders. Eldercare facilities are isolated from other generations and diminishes an elder person's abilities and contributions."
- "Affordable housing that is not limited to a 55+ or 65+ community."
- "Spaces for childcare or afterschool programs located in older adult housing."

### **OPPORTUNITY 5: DEVELOP MORE INTERGENERATIONAL SPACES**

- "Community gathering space that is not a Senior Center."
- "A community center that is inclusive and open to all ages instead of a seniors-only center. I think the Senior Center does great stuff, but I do not like the fact that it is age segregated by definition."
- "Not having separate 'senior' activities and services."
- "[Makeshift Art Space](#) has all-ages concerts."
- Generations United is a national leader in advancing the development of [Intergenerational Shared Sites](#) and has numerous resources on the subject.

**Of the community assessments or organizational strategic plans reviewed for the Blueprint update process, only one was found to include intergenerational opportunities.**

The Bellingham Public Library's [2020-2024 Strategic Plan](#) includes the goal to “Establish the library as the best place in Bellingham for people of **all generations to learn together.**” [*emphasis added*]. Other parts of the plan mention age diversity and serving people of all ages (e.g., “support readers of all ages” and “hands-on learning experiences for all ages”) but does not explicitly express intent to bring them together in intergenerational programs or activities.

***Are there local strategic plans that include intergenerational goals that we missed?***