Changing the Narrative on Careers in the Field of Aging

Among the many harmful stereotypes about aging, perhaps one of the most injurious is the notion that a career spent working with older adults is less fulfilling than one spent working with younger people.

Leaders of the Age-Friendly Teaneck community initiative are trying to change that narrative through a summer internship program that exposes high school students to the diverse and enriching career pathways in the field of aging.

In October, leaders of the initiative published a guide to its "Exploring Careers in Aging" internship in the hope of persuading others to replicate the program.

Age-Friendly Teaneck will present its internship toolkit guide at InnovAGING NJ Summit 2024 on March 22, 2024, a virtual event organized by the Rutgers School of Social Work, Hub for Aging Collaboration.



This toolkit and Age-Friendly Teaneck's efforts to promote the concept of exposing young people to careers in aging comes at a time when advocates are trying to foster solutions to the shortages of elder-care workers in New Jersey.

In 2022, New Jersey Advocates for Aging Well (NJAAW) joined with Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI), a national organization focused on developing the direct-care workforce, to create the Essential Jobs, Essential Care NJ coalition.

That initiative has engaged many stakeholders in New Jersey in the goal of developing strategies to recruit, train and retain direct-care workers, a long underpaid and poorly supported segment of the healthcare workforce.

Rooted in these efforts is the awareness that jobs in the field of aging are under-valued in our society, leading to lower compensation, fewer pathways to advancement and less promotion of these career roles to young people.



The four-week-long Age-Friendly Teaneck internship program has sought to broaden the high school students' awareness of elder-connected careers.

"The interns in our program have arrived thinking that aging careers consisted solely of jobs as nurses, doctors, or something in the medical realm," said Age-Friendly Teaneck Project Director EJ Vizzi. "We arrange for them to meet with social workers, recreation directors, elder law attorneys, aging-in-place tech entrepreneurs, senior living administrators, and a host of other professional roles unfamiliar to them."



The first internships were held in the summers of 2018 and 2019, before a 2-year pandemic hiatus, resuming in 2022 and 2023. The internship curriculum has expanded each year as Age-Friendly Teaneck worked to increase its community and provider partnerships.

The toolkit includes a curriculum development guide, strategies for securing internship partnerships and tips on finding funding to pay for staff costs and stipends for the student interns.

"As we've built this program out, we decided to share what we've created so that others might duplicate it," Vizzi said. "We are also exploring ways to expand our own program, such as by offering more education on aging careers during the academic year or developing a parallel program for college-age students."

In addition to being exposed to different career opportunities, Age-Friendly Teaneck interns learn about how governmental policies, ageism and societal inequities can affect people's ability to age in comfort and dignity, and about the growing movement to make our communities and systems more age-friendly.

"The interns leave our program with a broader understanding of the societal challenges and opportunities that are emerging as the population ages," said Elizabeth Davis, executive director of The Bright Side Family, the

nonprofit that leads the Age-Friendly Teaneck initiative. “They also tell us that the experience helps them to better connect with their own grandparents and other elders in their families.”

Davis was motivated to launch the internship program by the often-negative reactions she has received when telling people of her long career as a geriatric social worker and elder-care programs administrator.

“People always ask if my work is depressing and then are surprised when I tell them how rewarding and uplifting it is to work with older adults,” Davis said. “Sadly, there are a lot of negative stereotypes, and we really hope that our program is helping to dispel some of those unfair and off-base notions.”

Click here for the *Age-Friendly Teaneck Internship Toolkit*

Click here to register for *InnovAGING NJ Summit 2024*

Click here to learn about *Essential Jobs, Essential Care NJ*