Communication & Coalition-Building Help Keep Age-Friendly Englewood Thriving and Striving

A good community cause needs a good community ambassador, and Age-Friendly Englewood has one in its coordinator Janet Sharma.

From filling an information vacuum with a community newsletter that reaches thousands to building a community network with nearly 70 participating organizations to teaching new and diverse audiences across the state about this global movement, Sharma's stewardship of Age-Friendly Englewood is a model of age-friendly leadership.



"Communication and collaboration," Sharma says when asked to explain the formula that has helped sustain the Age-Friendly Englewood initiative eight years after its founding. "Englewood has always been a city with many strong nonprofits, city agencies and faith-based organizations. What was needed was a vehicle for them to communicate and collaborate with one another."

Age-Friendly Englewood is that vehicle. Its newsletter reaches more than 3,000 people, and it was published on a nearly daily basis during the pandemic and in greater frequency in the days and weeks after Hurricane Ida devastated the city in 2021.

"One of the first needs we identified in Englewood was the need for reliable and up-to-date information about the resources and services that many city residents need, and that became even more crucial when the city was dealing with those twin crises," Sharma said. "In addition to our newsletter. Age-Friendly Englewood has produced resource guides and co-sponsored informational events on important subjects that older residents need more education about, such as housing and transportation."

That's the communication piece; Age-Friendly Englewood also is a driver of many significant collaborations, including its instrumental role in the city's coordinating committee, which is comprised of municipal, civic, nonprofit and faith leaders.

The coordinating committee was created at the start of the pandemic as a way for service providers and others to share information and coordinate with one another. After Tropical Storm Ida unleashed unprecedented flooding in the city of Englewood in September 2021, the coordinating committee proved to be an invaluable tool for harnessing donations, food deliveries and other myriad resources for evacuated residents.

The city's coordinating committee continues to meet periodically, and Age-Friendly Englewood continues to be a respected community partner and catalyst for change.

In May 2024, Englewood's participation in the AARP Network of Age-Friendly Communities was renewed upon approval of its five-year progress report.

The collaborative approach fostered by Age-Friendly Englewood is a topic that Sharma regularly speaks about, and in recent years, she has focused on spreading the age-friendly message outside the city's borders.





Sharma has delivered numerous presentations on the benefits of the age-friendly approach to making communities more livable, including a recent presentation titled "Disaster Resilience through an Age-Friendly Lens" that she delivered to the AARP Livable Communities Workshop on Oct. 8, 2024.

In March 2022, Sharma was appointed to the Age-Friendly State Advisory Council, the only community leader to server on that panel, whose task was to advise the state on its creation and adoption of the New Jersey Age-Friendly Blueprint.

Sharma's age-friendly ambassador role continues to expand. With the help of an age-friendly capacity-building grant from The Henry & Marilyn Taub Foundation, Sharma is leading a Bergen County-focused effort to persuade more communities and provider organizations in the region to adopt age-friendly approaches.

Sharma took the lead in organizing a "Discover Your Town's Age-Friendly Future Conference on Sept. 22, 2023, which was attended by more 150 county, municipal, community, health

care and non-profit leaders. She also helped revive regular gatherings of regional service providers and community leaders in a movement-expanding effort now known as the Age-Friendly Bergen Roundtable.

The bimonthly meetings, which typically attract about 40 to 50 attendees, are an opportunity for leaders in the region to hear informational presentations about aging-related topics and to network with one another

“Education and information-sharing is such a crucial part of age-friendly work because it helps breed new community strategies and new collaborations,” Sharma said.

“Our alliance’s goal is to have more communities in North Jersey embrace age-friendly principles,” she added. “For that to happen, we must reach new audiences. We need to engage the stakeholder organizations and community leaders who can bring about the kind of changes we need at the community, county and state level to truly make New Jersey a more livable state for people of all ages.”

A good community cause may need a good community ambassador, but as Sharma knows, a successful statewide movement needs many, many others.