



MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Honoring Lived Experience and Creating Community Authority

The Connecticut Age Well Collaborative is part of Connecticut Community Care, a nonprofit that helps people thrive at home, with connections to services and supports in their community. Delegated by the Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity & Opportunity, we're leading the state's livable communities initiative (Conn. Gen. Stat. Section 17b-420a).

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How can you authentically ask others to take a difficult but rewarding journey?

First, you take it yourself. Then you share what you learned along the way.

The Connecticut Age Well Collaborative builds bridges between governmental leaders and older people in the community, working together to foster inclusive, accessible communities where we can all age well. We do this work through various programs, but primarily through our Community Leaders Fellowship.

This fifth in our resource guide series for local governments shares the Collaborative's own experience piloting the Fellowship before bringing the program to Connecticut municipalities. By building relationships, trust, and momentum, we began a process of bringing lived experience and community authority to our own work.

CATALYZING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Ageism is entrenched in our culture, and we cannot simply legislate it away. But by building relationships and lifting up community voices, we can work to shift the public mindset at a deeper level.

In 2018, John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge released 'The Water of Systems Change,' an article exploring how to advance equity by shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place. They suggest that for successful systems change, we need to consider six conditions: Policies, Practices, and Resource Flows (structural change); Power Dynamics and Relationships & Connections (relational change); and Mental Models (transformative change).

As municipalities work to become more inclusive for all ages and abilities, local governments and stakeholders generally focus on structural change:

- What policies can we implement to target a community problem?
- How do we change practices to do things differently in our community?
- Where will we find the resources to pay for these changes?

The Connecticut Age Well Collaborative's work focuses on relational and transformative change, to make structural change ultimately more meaningful and impactful:

- How can we facilitate connections between municipal governments and residents with lived experience as older adults?
- How can we empower community members to make their voices heard?
- By starting these conversations and lifting up these voices, can we shift mindsets and dismantle ageism in our communities?

A Launchpad for Building Inclusivity

Our primary means of building relational and transformative change is the Community Leaders Fellowship — a program developed to bridge the gap between municipal leaders who envision age-inclusive communities and residents with the lived experience to guide them.

Over the course of a year, the Fellowship brings together older adults and municipal leaders to collaborate and make change. Fellows begin by exploring how ageism impacts their community and identifying the areas where change is needed most. Then, with guidance from the Collaborative, Fellows learn the skills and tools needed to build awareness, take action, and share power.

The Fellowship is designed to achieve both short-term and long-term outcomes. In the short term, the Fellows design and implement a project to build community awareness of ageism. In the longer term, a lasting relationship is built between municipal leaders and older residents, leading to further collaboration, more leadership opportunities for older adults, and ultimately, the ability to influence local decisions to further age inclusivity.

Proving the Concept

After we had designed the framework of the Community Leaders Fellowship, we reached a sticking point. A yearlong program is a big commitment for already-stretched town governments. How were we going to convince communities that the Fellowship was worth the effort?

The solution was obvious: we would pilot the program ourselves. Just like a municipal government, we knew our own work would be better-targeted when informed by the lived experience of Connecticut residents. We could demonstrate that the program worked and strengthen our impact at the same time.

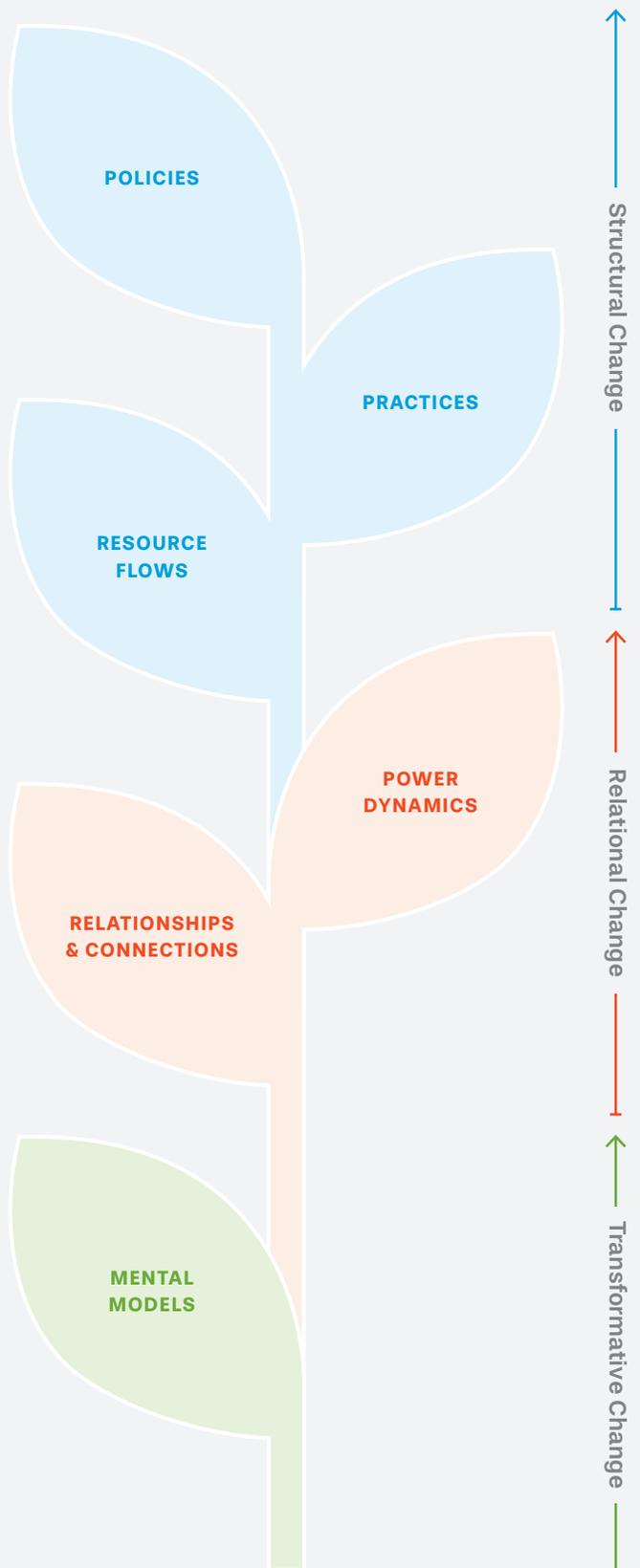
Setting the Parameters

For the initial learning phase of the Fellowship, we wanted input from a large, diverse group of Connecticut residents. We wanted to know how ageism was affecting their communities, what was working, and what needed improvement.

Next, we would identify a smaller group of Fellows to co-create a project with us. To achieve statewide reach for our project, we decided to collaborate on a webinar for our Age Well Academy education series. Geared toward municipal and nonprofit leaders, the webinar would tell the story of the Fellowship pilot, enriched by the voices and experiences of our Fellows, and it would make the case for bringing the Fellowship to Connecticut's cities and towns.

We also had a long-term goal for the Fellowship — diversifying our Steering Committee. Since our founding, the Committee had been dominated by professionals working in aging-related fields. Through the Fellowship, we hoped to find new members who could enrich the group with their lived experience.

SYSTEMS CHANGE CONDITIONS





**IN THEIR OWN WORDS:
WHY PARTICIPATE?**

“The Fellowship was an opportunity for me to learn, grow, and give back to others. Through participating, I saw how powerful input from community members can be.

Collaboration among different members of the community is important to obtain positive results. There is knowledge gain from these active conversations.”

Claudia Bouchard is a multilingual, multi-grade science teacher. She uses her native language of Spanish to communicate with students who are new arrivals to the U.S. — combining language learning with teaching science. She is also the caregiver and legal guardian for her adult sister, who has a developmental disability.

CREATING OUR COHORT

For Phase I of our Fellowship, we set out to recruit 20 Fellows. We had a few specific goals: we hoped to find as diverse a group as possible, and we hoped to lift up voices that are less-often heard.

To guide our recruitment efforts, we thought carefully about the qualities we would prioritize for selection.

Location

Fellows had to be Connecticut residents. Since the Collaborative works throughout the state, we hoped to find participants from all seven Connecticut counties. Ideally, we also wanted Fellows who represented our state's varied population — a combination of urban areas, surrounding suburbs, and rural regions.

Lived Experience

In keeping with our mission, we specifically wanted Fellows who could share lived experience with aging, dementia, and/or disability. This could have been their own experience, or experience gained by serving as a care partner to someone who is aging, living with dementia, or living with a disability.

New Voices

A key goal of our Fellowship was to gain insight from community members who often go unheard. Therefore, we gave preference to applicants from historically marginalized groups and with fewer financial resources.

As we started recruitment, we immediately faced a hurdle. Putting together a diverse group of Fellows was going to take hands-on work — we would need to recruit through a wide range of channels to reach the maximum number of candidates. But our team was small, without the internal capacity for a large outreach operation. Clearly, we were going to need some help.

In January 2023, we hired a consultant with expertise in community organizing to spearhead recruitment efforts and help coordinate our Fellowship. Since we wanted to find new voices, we cast the widest possible net.

Flyer Campaign

We posted flyers in public places throughout the state where we thought potential Fellows might be: libraries, post offices, laundromats, grocery stores, and municipal service offices.

Regional Networks

We also tapped into the power of existing networks in the state to help with recruitment, with electronic outreach to more than 50 organizations. These ranged from municipal and nonprofit service providers to professional associations, social justice organizations, academic researchers, and hospitals.

Personal Connections

Lastly, we reached out to our own networks. We shared information about the Fellowship through various list-serves and talked one-on-one with individuals who we thought might be interested in participating.

By the beginning of March 2023, we had received 40 applications and selected 20 Fellows. Our cohort came from three Connecticut counties — Hartford, Fairfield, and New Haven. They ranged in age from 25 to 85, with the largest number in the 65 to 74 age group. Seven had served as a care partner, and five identified as having a disability. Phase I could now begin!



LEARNING CURVE

Community engagement is hard work — it takes time and effort.

We solved a short-term staffing crunch during our Fellowship pilot by contracting with a consultant. But to grow the program and bring it to municipalities, we added a new staff position focusing on community partnerships.



LEARNING CURVE

Email list-serves are an easy way to send out information to a lot of people very quickly. But in debriefs, we learned that some people never saw those emails — they went to spam, or the recipient didn't recognize the sender and didn't open the message.

Although it takes more time, personal communication was more effective for recruitment.

PHASE I WORK

The initial phase of our Fellowship focused on three core questions about aging, dementia, and disability inclusivity in our Fellows' communities:

What works well?

What feels hard?

What can improve?



LEARNING CURVE

Our Fellows were spread throughout the state, making it challenging to meet in person. But to build trust, there's no substitute for face-to-face interaction.

We believe the community-building aspect of the Fellowship is even more effective at the municipal scale, when Fellows can gather in their town, or with close-by towns in a region.

In our first phase, 20 Fellows participated in three 90-minute sessions during the spring of 2023. Since our Fellows were spread out around the state and many were still uncomfortable gathering in groups after the Covid-19 pandemic, we decided that Phase I meetings would be virtual.

Our primary goal was to inform our work by learning broadly from the lived experience of our Fellows. What were their experiences with aging, living with dementia, or living with a disability in their community? Did they feel seen and heard by community leaders?

Our secondary goal was to identify Fellows interested in engaging more deeply with our work. A smaller group of participants would be selected to continue to our second phase of work and potentially be invited to join our Steering Committee.

Session Topics

Our March meeting focused on getting to know one another, with introductions and trust-building and visioning exercises. In April, we went deeper into recognizing the impact of ageism and ableism and creating systemic change. May's session summarized our learning and explored where we needed to go next — defining recommendations for aging, dementia, and disability inclusivity.

Honoring Diverse Communication Styles

Recognizing that we all communicate differently, we offered various ways for Fellows to share their experiences and ideas. These included:

- Full-group discussions over Zoom
- Virtual break-out rooms with smaller groups
- One-on-one conversations
- A digital whiteboard for real-time, collaborative brainstorming
- A 'homework assignment,' responding to a prompt in any format: essay, artwork, slide presentation, photography, poem, etc.

CREATING SAFE SPACE

The Community Leaders Fellowship aims to expand understanding by learning from the lived experience of participants. But for participants to feel comfortable sharing deeply personal reflections, we first had to create an environment where everyone could feel safe.



LEARNING CURVE

Honoring privacy is key to building trust, but it also places limits on maximally impactful storytelling about the Fellowship.

Small Group Sizes

While our full cohort consisted of 20 Fellows, we divided it into two groups, so that each session would have no more than ten participants. Groups remained the same for the duration of Phase I, allowing Fellows to build trust with each other.

No Recording

Our meetings were conducted virtually over Zoom. Although Zoom offers a recording option, we did not use it for our sessions to make it easier for people to be open and vulnerable about their experiences.

Options for Sharing Information

We gave our Fellows detailed choices for how we could use and reproduce the insights they shared. Options included:

- Permission to use their voice, quotes, image, and name
- Permission to use their voice and quotes, but not their image or name
- No sharing at all
- Custom options



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: TRANSFORMATIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Teresa Gregory Hines is a long-time community activist, advocating for people of color in the Greater New Haven area. After participating in our Fellowship, she joined our Steering Committee and a group of emeritus Fellows and Collaborative staff to co-author 'A Kids Book About Ageism.'

"To achieve transformative community engagement, I think it's so important to be intentional about going into the community, inviting people to the table, and asking them for their ideas. And asking with the intent to truly use the information that people give.

The only way we can transform anything is by having everyone's voice in the room."

ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

For maximum participation, we knew equal access would be crucial. From the application process to the work phases, we considered the accessibility of every aspect of our Community Leaders Fellowship — both by making it accessible for all abilities and by removing barriers to participation.



LEARNING CURVE

Our original intention was that audio visual equipment would be loaned out to Fellows, then given back to be reused in future programs. But in practice, it was challenging to manage the return process.

In the future, it might be simpler to consider AV equipment for Fellows as an overhead cost.

Accessible Communications

In our printed recruitment materials, we followed best practices for accessible communication, choosing clear typefaces, large text sizes, and strong color contrast between text and background colors. We also made sure that digital materials were compatible with assistive technologies — including our online application.

Options to Make Application Easier

Potential participants could apply online by scanning a QR code. For people who might be less inclined to scan a code, we also provided an easy-to-remember, shortened URL.

Recognizing that some people prefer to communicate directly with a person, we included a telephone number and email address on all communications. We also gave applicants the option to fill out a paper application, or to apply over the phone, if they needed assistance.

Considerations for Virtual Meetings

Laptops and tablets with built-in cameras are increasingly common, but we couldn't assume that all of our Fellows would have access to the technology needed for virtual meetings. We offered to supply a camera and/or microphone for any participant who did not have one, and we provided technical assistance as necessary to get participants online.

Considerations for In-Person Gatherings

Phase II of our Fellowship kicked off with an in-person meeting. Some of our Fellows were based in the Greater Hartford area, and the rest lived in Greater New Haven. We looked for a fully accessible location somewhere in the middle, and we ultimately selected the senior center in Middletown.

Although Middletown is roughly equidistant from Hartford and New Haven, the senior center is not so easy to reach by public transportation — a fairly common issue in Connecticut. Since some participants were not able to drive to the meeting, we organized a carpool to get everyone there safely.

Compensation

From the start, we were very aware of one particular barrier to participation: we were asking Fellows to share their time. Time contributing to our Fellowship was time not spent working, or with family, or just having a free hour. In an effort to literally value the expertise of lived experience, we made the Fellowship a paid opportunity. Our compensation wouldn't replace a job, but it would demonstrate our awareness that everyone's time has value.

We paid Fellows up to \$100 for 4.5 hours of their time in Phase I, prorated based on attendance. Phase II Fellows were paid at the same rate. For reference, Connecticut's minimum wage was \$15 per hour in 2023. Our compensation averaged out to about \$22.25 per hour. To make payment as convenient as possible, Fellows could choose to receive their compensation in the form of a check or a gift card.

Other Ways to Value Participants' Time

When we met in person at the start of Phase II, we provided food for participants, making sure to offer options to accommodate specific dietary requirements and food allergies.

Virtual meetings didn't allow us to offer food, so instead we gave Fellows Door Dash gift cards. The cards allowed Fellows to order a meal of their choice to eat during the meeting or at another time.

Finally, we were careful to respect the stated start and end times for each meeting, so that Fellows could get to other commitments on schedule.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: BEING SEEN

"Disability can be so invisible that I've gone all these years without seeing it. After participating in the Fellowship, I'm starting to notice so much.

I hope that the wonderful work that people do in their communities to make their towns more livable can really include all of us – not just the people that you see or that show up for meetings, but everyone who might be hidden to you."

Cynthia Hyland holds a master's degree in Social Ecology and has a longtime interest in livable communities. Inspired by her learning during the Fellowship, she is now studying Health and Wellness Coaching with a minor in Critical Disability Studies at Southern Connecticut State University. She is a member of the Collaborative's Steering Committee and lives in Hamden with her husband and son.

GOING DEEPER: PHASE II AND BEYOND

Bringing community authority to our organization was always a goal of our Community Leaders Fellowship — but the Fellowship has continued shape our work even more broadly and powerfully than we anticipated.

Phase II of our Fellowship was envisioned as a smaller group, working together to co-create a webinar for our Age Well Academy education series. Now that we had gotten to know our Phase I cohort, we invited a subset of participants to continue, focusing on Fellows who we thought could enrich the process most. Five Fellows accepted the invitation to join us for Phase II.

We kicked off with an in-person meeting to review our learning during Phase I and define goals for the webinar. We then held one-on-one conversations to gather and refine the stories and viewpoints that the Fellows would contribute to the presentation.

In October 2023, we presented 'Honoring Lived Experience and Building Community Authority' (inspiring the name of this Resource Guide). All five of our Fellows attended the webinar, and we heard each of their voices — either speaking live or through pre-recorded narratives, according to personal preference. A recording of the session is available on the Collaborative's YouTube channel.

Enriching Our Steering Committee

A goal of our Fellowship was to identify community members with lived experience of ageism to join the Collaborative's Steering Committee, which had been made up primarily of professionals working in aging and disability-related fields. As 2023 drew to a close, three of our Phase II Fellows were nominated to join our Steering Committee.

Going beyond our original goal, the Community Leaders Fellowship continues to help us expand and diversify our Steering Committee. As this

report is released in 2025, two of our original Fellows are still on the Committee, and we are poised to welcome two new members from the 2025 Community Leaders Fellowship, which was completed in partnership with the towns of Newtown and West Hartford.

Re-examining Our Assumptions

As our Steering Committee has evolved to include both working professionals and community members, we have had the opportunity to implement new practices to ensure that all voices are heard and meetings are accessible to everyone.

We established a mutual mentoring program, which brings together small groups of committee members to share knowledge and learn from one another. Groups change annually, based on each member's self-identified strengths and weaknesses. Making the program 'mutual' helps disrupt hierarchy — everyone has gifts to share and learning needs.

We also observed that Steering Committee meetings were organized around the assumption that members were working professionals who served as a part of their jobs. While we had previously met in the heart of the workday, we polled members to see what meeting time worked best, learning that professionals and community members alike appreciated moving meetings to the end of the day. Similarly, we established a compensation policy, allowing members who are not compensated to participate as salaried professionals to receive payment for time spent on Committee activities.

Contributing to 'A Kids Book About Ageism'

In early 2024, we had the unexpected opportunity to write a children's book about ageism for A Kids Co., an independent publisher of children's books about challenging, empowering, and important topics. We could have chosen to write the book internally, but we quickly realized that we could create a stronger narrative with a more authentic voice by turning to a talented pool of contributors — our Fellows.

Lisa Bress, Teresa Gregory Hines, and Cynthia Hyland joined our staff to co-author 'A Kids Book About Ageism.' Their input proved to be invaluable, bringing nuance and first-person experience that our book would not otherwise have.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: A MUNICIPAL PERSPECTIVE

"I joined the Fellowship because I hoped that having the opportunity to listen to others' experiences would help me be a better public servant. I was also eager for the opportunity to share the challenges that my family has faced with someone who would be able to influence public policy.

I believe that policy makers really want to help, but we are not always in tune with the aging, disability, or dementia populations' needs — unless we have experience with it ourselves."

Lisa Bress is a retired educator with an M.S. in Special Education and an M.S. in Educational Leadership. She is currently caregiver for a loved one with dementia and has advocated for worker/disability-rights for over 35 years. While she was a Fellow, she served as the Deputy Mayor of Windsor; she is now a member of the Collaborative's Steering Committee.



The authors of 'A Kids Book About Ageism'

MOVING TOWARDS COMMUNITY DRIVEN

All levels of community engagement can be valuable — where the Fellowship excels is in deepening it.

Engaging with the community at large has always been an important part of our work. We send e-newsletters with updates on our work. We post about our programs on social media. We conduct surveys and focus groups to solicit feedback on our plans and programs.

While these outputs and inputs are all useful, the Fellowship was our launchpad to go further. It provided a framework for bringing community members into our organizational governance, and it helped us build the relationships we needed to recruit co-creative partners for initiatives.

Looking forward, we're excited to see where the Fellowship can take us next. Our alumni are well-prepared to serve as ambassadors for the Collaborative — working with us to dismantle ageism in communities across Connecticut.



A group of our Phase II Fellows and Collaborative staff

What did we learn from piloting the Community Leaders Fellowship?

Creating community authority is difficult work — but it is infinitely rewarding.

The year-long experience of the Fellowship was tough at times. We didn't nail everything perfectly. And we learned a lot — like how much effort it takes to build authentic relationships and how challenging it can be to achieve truly diverse representation.

But the Fellowship was also transformative for our initiative. The work we do is richer for the involvement of our Fellows, and their input has led us to re-examine our own assumptions.

For municipalities curious about taking this journey, we urge you to make the leap. By embedding community input in municipal decisionmaking, we take a critical step toward fostering communities where everyone can age well.

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