

## REFOCUSING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY: TOWARD ELDER-FRIENDLY URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

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Our presentation will focus on a university wide collaboration at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The three presenters are among the primary facilitators and designers of this project. Other primary facilitators include a faculty member from the School of Design and Urban Studies, additional faculty from the School of Social Policy and Practice, and a senior administrator from the President's office.<sup>1</sup> Equally critical to the design and implementation of this project is our community partners, including several neighborhood based community organizations, and two city-wide advocacy organizations whose mission is to serve the City's elderly population. This collaboration is in its beginning stages. Our presentation will describe the origins of this project, its current status and future direction, with a focus on collaborative teaching, community based research and scholarship, and community education outreach and programming.

The focus of this collaboration is on the housing, health and what we call "quality of life" issues affecting the elderly population in the community adjoining the university, commonly referred to as West Philadelphia. Penn enjoys the distinct perspective of being a major academic and research based university located squarely within an urban environment. Historically not always viewed as a good neighbor to the West Philadelphia community, Penn has devoted the last several decades to being an engaged partner in the development and delivery of resources and services for the West Philadelphia community. To date, Penn's primary focus has been on children. Examples of Penn's partnership with the community to serve neighborhood youth, includes the development of a new public elementary school, staffed in part with students and faculty from Penn's Graduate School of Education, and a new federally qualified, community based health clinic, located in a neighborhood public high school.<sup>2</sup> While not as prominent, Penn does have an existing commitment to serving the elderly population in West Philadelphia. The best example of this focus is the Penn LIFE (Living Independently For Elders) program that provides nearly 300 West Philadelphia seniors with comprehensive nursing and medical care, rehabilitation, social services, and an

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<sup>1</sup> This collaboration is particularly exciting in that faculty from many other schools and disciplines have also expressed an interest in elder research, community service or teaching as part of this project. Faculty from dental medicine, medicine, architecture, urban studies and Wharton have participated in planning meetings for this project or expressed an interest in future participation.

<sup>2</sup> The Sayre Community Health Center is another example of a university wide collaboration that involves faculty and students from several schools and disciplines, including medicine, dental medicine, nursing, anthropology, social policy and practice, public health and law. Both Dina Schlossberg, who is counsel to the community based organization which operates the health clinic, and Eileen Sullivan Marx serve as faculty advisors to this project, and are actively involved in the design and operations of this health center. Eileen Sullivan Marx is also involved in research and scholarship related to this new health center.

array of recreational activities.<sup>3</sup> Those receiving these services at LIFE are eligible for nursing home care and are thus able to remain in their homes with family in West Philadelphia rather than move to a nursing home.

Penn's commitment to West Philadelphia has had a dramatic influence on the real estate market in West Philadelphia closest to the university. Due in part to university initiatives to encourage Penn faculty and staff to purchase homes in West Philadelphia, real estate in certain parts of West Philadelphia has skyrocketed in price and estimated value. A local civic organization, Friends of 40<sup>th</sup> Street, raised concerns about the impact these prices had on vulnerable residents.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing that increased property values could be problematic for low-income homeowners, particularly senior citizens,<sup>5</sup> a number of Penn faculty and senior administrators began to explore needs and concerns of the elderly population living in West Philadelphia, with a particular focus on elderly homeowners. The West Philadelphia elderly community is particularly vulnerable on a number of measures. Philadelphia has an unusually large senior population relative to the size of the overall population. Philadelphia is ranked second only to Miami among 23 U.S. cities studied by the Brookings Institute in the proportion of residents age 65 and older.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Philadelphia in general, is a large homeownership city, with over 60% of the city's households homeowners.<sup>7</sup> Seniors, however, make up one-third to one-half of all homeowners in many inner city communities, including parts of West Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> The majority of this housing stock is pre 1940, and is in need of repair or adaptation in order to allow seniors with declining health to age in place. A large percentage of seniors in West Philadelphia (homeowners and renters) are poor, with approximately 20% of seniors throughout the city (and a much larger percentage located in West Philadelphia), living in poverty.<sup>9</sup>

This collaboration, which we have titled, *Refocusing the Interdisciplinary: Toward an Elder-Friendly Urban Environment*, was borne out of these various and overlapping discussions. It is intended to address the myriad of housing, health, and quality of life issues facing the community's elderly. Although much of the focus of this collaboration is on a specific local community, our hope is that the findings of our research and the innovative collaborations that are being planned in teaching and community programming, can be transferable to other older urban communities with a large elderly population and similar housing, health and poverty concerns.

This collaboration has three principal research objectives:

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<sup>3</sup> The LIFE program is operated and staffed by the Penn School of Nursing and is overseen by the School of Nursing's Associate Dean, Eileen Sullivan-Marx.

<sup>4</sup> Friends of 40<sup>th</sup> Street is a civic organization that promotes a vibrant link between people and communities. It is the place where the University of Pennsylvania and the West Philadelphia community meet. Many faculty from the university participate in community meetings and programs, including Eileen Sullivan Marx, D.L. Wormley and another primary collaborator of this project, Harris Steinberg, of the Penn School of Design.

<sup>5</sup> These concerns include, increase property taxes and heightened pressure from predatory lenders to "take advantage" of the equity in these homes by taking out new loans, often with disastrous results.

<sup>6</sup> THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTE, *Philadelphia in Focus, A Profile from Census 2000* (2003). Included in this study were 8 of the 10 largest U.S. Cities.

<sup>7</sup> PHILADELPHIA CORPORATION FOR AGING, *Looking Ahead: Philadelphia's Aging Population in 2015* (2006).

<sup>8</sup> BROOKINGS INSTITUTE, *supra*.

<sup>9</sup> PHILADELPHIA CORPORATION FOR AGING, *supra*.

1. Development of new interdisciplinary research and teaching collaborations to examine and address challenges of older adults in urban environments<sup>10</sup>;
2. Exploration of rigorous community-based participatory research methodologies that can be used to address issues of older adults living in urban environments;
3. Develop and implement civic engagements in West Philadelphia that will foster community-based participatory action research to inform policy makers and sustain elder-friendly urban communities.

In addition, this collaboration has a community outreach and service component. This includes a series of community education programs on issues identified as important to the senior community. Based on interviews with community seniors, and focus groups, as well as discussions with representatives of Friends of 40<sup>th</sup> Street, these issues have been identified as financial and estate planning, home repair, predatory lending protection, health services, and access to support services.

The law school's involvement in this collaboration is currently limited to the clinical program. Our clinic's knowledge of community needs, especially in the area of affordable housing and community development, and our relationship to community based partners, including a legal services program devoted to legal needs of the elderly, has enhanced the learning and impacted the direction of this collaboration. We in turn, have been enriched by the multidisciplinary focus which enables us to see law as only a part of the strategy to address the needs of this vulnerable population. Going forward, we hope to have Penn law students, in conjunction with local attorneys, provide the community education workshops and when possible and appropriate, take on matters as clinical cases.

This project, which is gaining in recognition, fits well within Penn's strategic interest in interdisciplinary collaboration. It is also recognized by the Penn Institute for Urban Research (PIUR) an intra –university research center with the central mission of bringing together faculty with an interest in teaching and scholarship on issue of urban life, and with a forum for disseminating research learned and employed. The leadership of this collaboration has applied for a grant from the PIUR to assist in furthering our research and to provide an organized vehicle through which to engage in a series of interdisciplinary academic seminars, which will be open to faculty, students and where appropriate, community members. Should this grant proposal be successful, we will also host a conference to explore best practices of urban design, health care and housing to holistically address the needs of the elderly in an urban environment.

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<sup>10</sup> An example of this new interdisciplinary research and teaching collaboration is an undergraduate course that matches faculty research with undergraduate students who competitively apply for the course and a small stipend to conduct research over the semester in a particular area of urban research. Eileen Sullivan-Marx is currently working with an undergrad student who is assessing community health of older adults in West Philadelphia. A pre-law student is working with social policy faculty to assess collaboration between suburban churches with urban churches on issues of urban poverty and need.

