

Northland Foundation's *Rural Aging Initiative*

Helping Older Adults Live Full, Meaningful Lives in Northeastern Minnesota Communities



**RURAL
AGING
INITIATIVE**
A Northland Foundation Program

A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO RURAL AGING-IN-PLACE

The later years of life should be as purpose-filled, vibrant, and comfortable as youth and middle age. Yet in rural communities, connecting older adults and caregivers with the services and supports for aging-in-place presents barriers. Northeastern Minnesota, with seven rural counties covering over 18,000 square miles and a population aging faster than national averages, is a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities.

Less robust community and nonprofit infrastructure, miles between residents and service providers, lack of public transportation, and waning public funding create obstacles to aging with independence in rural areas. In 2014, the Northland Foundation launched its Rural Aging Initiative as a three-year, \$2.5 million program to bolster efforts to help the region's older adults to live full, meaningful lives in their homes and communities.

One of the Initiative's three focus areas was strengthening the region's nonprofits and community partners serving older adults and caregivers. Two strategies were employed: capacity-building training and financial awards for 23 direct-service organizations; and community organizing and funding support in two sites to improve collaboration among formal and informal service providers.

Secondly, the Initiative sought to increase active engagement and social connectedness among older people, leveraging the Foundation's nationally recognized AGE to age program in 13 rural communities, including three Indian Reservations.

The third strategy honed the Foundation's model of residential assisted living for older adults in three rural sites. The Initiative supported efforts to improve residents' social

and emotional wellbeing; enhance technology; increase workforce retention; and explore long-term sustainability.

Generous resources implemented over a multi-year timeframe and tapping into community partnerships enabled the Northland Foundation to dig deeper into its longtime aging priority. The Rural Aging Initiative has affirmed long-held beliefs and highlighted new lessons to help guide future work.



The Rural Aging Initiative's Multi-faceted Design

Aging Services Capacity Building

Strengthening the regional aging services network through training, peer learning, and capacity-building.



Training, peer learning, and technical assistance, along with multi-year financial support.

Community Care Integration Pilot

Facilitating local planning processes in two underserved rural sites to strengthen informal and formal services to help older adults age in place.



Community Engagement and Social Connectedness

Creating opportunities for meaningful engagement of older adults through AGE to age, an intergenerational community-based initiative.



Assisted Living for Rural Older Adults

Enhancing operations, care, and sustainability of three rural assisted living facilities that serve a high percentage of low-income older adults.

CAPACITY BUILDING AND COMMUNITY CARE INTEGRATION

Two components – the Capacity Building Program and the Community Care Integration Pilot Program – comprised the Aging Intermediary Grant Program strategy, to:

- Strengthen fragile community-based organizations providing services and supports to older adults and caregivers.
- Facilitate partnerships to improve informal and formal service delivery.
- Create a regional network for ongoing peer learning and collaboration.

The Foundation worked closely with the Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging to carry out this strategy.

Aging Services Capacity Building Program:

Service providers tend to be lean, largely volunteer-based, and struggle with board recruitment, financial management, fund development, and IT infrastructure. Many rely heavily on funding sources such as the Older Americans Act, targeted for direct service, leaving them few funds for improving their organizational capacity.

The Initiative used a three-pronged approach of training, peer learning, and financial awards. Of the 23 participating organizations, most have operating budgets under \$250,000. Each took an initial assessment to identify organizational needs, received training and peer learning, and was awarded up to \$25,000 to implement a tailored plan.

In all, 92 staff and board members participated in 12 trainings totaling 50 hours, on topics like evaluation, governance, and adaptive leadership. \$462,500 in financial awards supported technology upgrades, strategic planning, and more. All participants met their capacity-building goals and reported increased knowledge of management strategies to improve services.

Community Care Integration Pilot:

The Foundation facilitated this pilot project in two underserved sites: Aitkin County (pop. 15,742) and Moose Lake (pop. 2,881). Each site received technical assistance to organize a cross-sector team, identify needs and opportunities, and design a two-year action plan. Both sites were awarded

funding to hire experienced local coordinators and implement their individual action plans.

Raising awareness among older adults and their family caregivers about the services already available was a priority for both sites. Teams developed service directories and conducted outreach. They also undertook unique projects such as senior technology and fraud prevention education, transportation, and chore services for older adults. A learning community has enabled valuable idea-sharing across the two sites as they strive to enhance services and supports for aging in place.



ASSISTED LIVING FOR RURAL OLDER ADULTS

In rural areas, there is high demand for locally accessible elder care and housing, yet these sites are less attractive to for-profit developers due to lack of infrastructure, sparser populations, lower income levels, and smaller pools of qualified workers. Between 2007 and 2011, the Foundation developed three cottage-style residential communities for older adults in underserved rural areas. The Foundation's guiding principle is to make assisted living accessible to both private pay and low-income residents receiving financial assistance. This approach differs from most providers, who limit low-income resident admissions for financial reasons, thus leaving many older adults unserved.

Through the Rural Aging Initiative, the Northland Foundation undertook organizational improvements to our rural assisted living, such as installing leading-edge technology to track staff care provision and resident safety. The Foundation also employed strategies to increase residents' social wellbeing, including hiring dedicated Health & Wellness Coordinators to provide person-centered activities and community engagement. Finally, ideas to make high-quality, rural housing-with-services sustainable for the long term were explored through hiring expert consultants and convening a Strategic Work Group – thought leaders in aging services, housing, and healthcare.

The Foundation's three facilities have benefitted greatly from updated technology, enhanced outreach and marketing, and improved staff training and retention. Indicators of social wellbeing measured by resident and family surveys show increased satisfaction. And, based on Strategic Work Group recommendations, the Northland Foundation's Board partnered with a mission-aligned senior housing provider to manage our rural facilities, a decision that shows promise as a model for high-quality, cost-efficient care.



LESSONS LEARNED

The Northland Foundation has learned and affirmed a number of lessons through the Rural Aging Initiative. Some of the key lessons learned are:

Partnerships bring valuable expertise. Engaging a broad array of partners brings new insights, expertise, and resources necessary to achieve intended goals efficiently and effectively.

Capacity-building is vital to help fragile aging services organizations. The Capacity Building Program provides critical resources to aging service organizations with limited flexible funding to address capacity-building needs such as strategic planning, technology upgrades, and program expansion. Training and peer learning opportunities are essential to strengthen individual organizations and the regional network as a whole.

Community organizing is an effective approach to strengthen aging services and supports in underserved areas. Bringing diverse sectors together to identify needs and opportunities, craft an action plan, and implement grassroots efforts helps strengthen informal and formal approaches that support aging in place. A commitment of three to five years is needed to begin embedding promising strategies into community infrastructure.

Meaningful engagement of older adults is beneficial to rural communities and Indian Reservations.

Intergenerational programming provides an intentional pathway for elders to share their experience and accrued knowledge and expertise. Community connections not only help them sustain their health and wellbeing, but also contribute to youth development and community vitality. Engagement transforms the human capital of older adults into the social capital of rural communities.

Training and Technical Support Foster Learning Communities. Formal training sessions provide staff and board members access to evidence-based programs and practices, create a wider learning community, facilitate peer-to-peer information sharing, and foster mutually beneficial relationships among participants.

Ongoing evaluation keeps programming on track.

Evaluation plays a vital role in monitoring progress, informing needed adjustments, and gathering evidence to assess the impact made upon the lives of older adults as well as rural communities and Indian Reservations.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Over one-third of northeastern Minnesota's population is age 55 and older. This growing wave of older adults, who report that they want to support youth and are concerned with the continuing vitality of their rural towns, has been a largely untapped resource in our rural region. In 2008, the Northland Foundation launched *AGE to age*: bringing generations together as a grassroots initiative that now is thriving in 13 northeastern Minnesota communities and Indian Reservations.

The *AGE to age* infrastructure already in place provided a ready framework to deepen ongoing efforts to meaningfully engage older adults in community life. This strategy was designed to improve community care integration through locally driven efforts that intentionally provide a pathway for older adults to remain active, connected with people across all age groups, and valued for their wisdom and life experiences.



"I will never stop doing what I am doing when I see the difference it has made for young people—and for me."

—Rita Baresh, Moose Lake older adult volunteer

During the past three years, the Northland Foundation has:

- Provided technical support and funding to the 13 rural *AGE to age* sites to foster older adult community engagement and address local needs.
- Engaged 6,700 people each year: 3,000 youth ages 5-18; 2,200 adults ages 19-54; and 1,500 adults 55+.

- Spurred 11,700 annual volunteer service hours among people of all ages working together on 600 community-driven activities and projects.
- Established summer internships for college students to engage in intergenerational projects and programs in their rural hometowns.
- Raised \$1.8 million from regional, state, and national partners to support local efforts.

This strategy has resulted in a majority of older adult participants reporting improved physical and social wellbeing, decreased isolation, and increased sense of connection. This strategy has also made a positive difference in the lives of children and youth while helping small towns and Indian Reservations create "communities of generations" that consider the needs and resources of all ages.

Impact Story: PAY IT FORWARD

Through its planning process, one of the two Community Care Integration Pilot sites, Aitkin County, discovered local older adults needed help with yard work, painting, light cleaning, etc., so their action team partnered with McGregor Area KIDS PLUS on *Pay It Forward*.

“Your help made it possible to stay in my home.”

Pay It Forward not only supports older adults to remain independent, but also helps area youth, ages 12 to 16, to develop job and life skills while strengthening community connections. Youth receive training, participate in scheduled services, and benefit from the caring guidance of the adult supervisors. Many older adults chose to reciprocate by donating to or volunteering with KIDS PLUS.



During the pilot phase, 66 seniors received over 1,700 hours of services from 40 young people. In return, older adults volunteered more than 83 hours and donated \$500.

Seeing this success, the nearby city of Aitkin is now connecting youth, adults, and older adults for community service days, too. *Pay It Forward* benefits all ages ... and community.

OUTCOMES ACHIEVED

Following are some of the outcomes accomplished through the Rural Aging Initiative.

Aging Services Capacity Building

- **Assisted an organization with obtaining its 501(c) (3) status** to provide and sustain services that help older adults remain in their homes and communities throughout the rural county it serves.
- **Launched an occupational therapy program** for older adults with vision loss, allowing the organization to bill medical insurance for services.
- **Expanded legal service programming** for older adults living in sparsely populated rural communities.
- **Improved recruiting and onboarding** (onsite paid training, mentorships) at a health care agency to reduce chronic staffing shortages that were limiting new admissions.

Community Care Integration Pilot Sites

- **Created and distributed brochures** and established other outreach efforts to inform rural older adults and their family caregivers on available local services.
- **Enhanced chore service support** to older adults living in a high-poverty rural community while helping local youth build job skills and earn stipends.
- **Addressed rural older adults' need for transportation** by resuming bus service through a partnership between the city and a transportation service.
- **Spurred engagement of older adults** in the planning and implementation processes, awareness and outreach efforts, and community-based activities such as technology learning.

Community Engagement and Social Connectedness

- **Encouraged multigenerational participation in culture and tradition activities** such as language camps, traditional speakers, Native crafts, and regalia making within three Indian Reservations.
- **Engaged 53 college interns** who spent nearly 11,000 service hours designing and implementing intergenerational programming in rural sites.
- **Bolstered children's social-emotional development and literacy** through older adult volunteers providing one-to-one reading help.
- **Inspired projects and activities that promote health** and increase social interaction, such as walking clubs, community gardens, and farmers' markets.

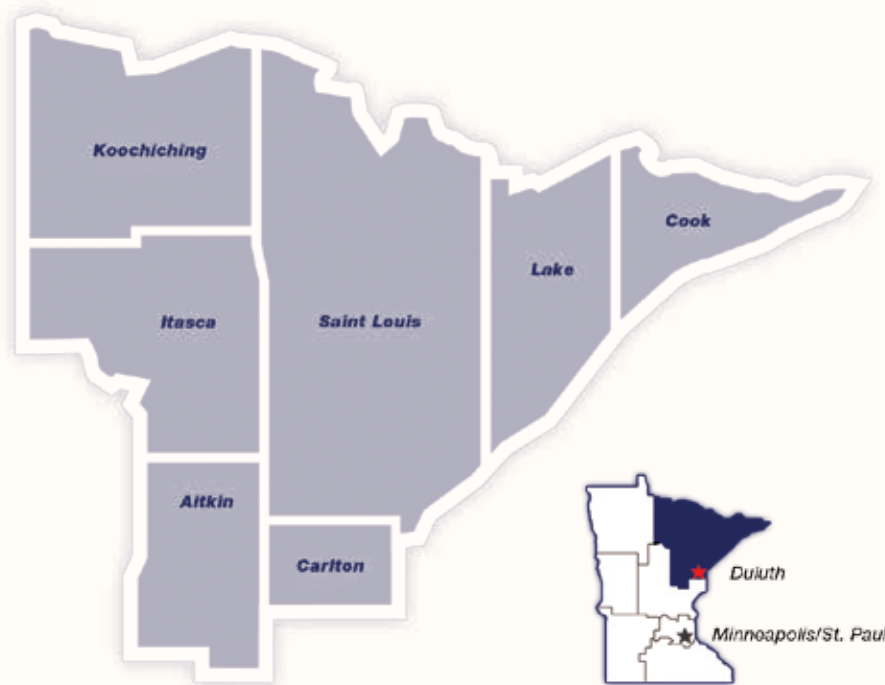
Assisted Living for Rural Older Adults

- **Improved operations to enhance efficiency** and the resident experience: upgraded technology, refreshed marketing strategies, and boosted staff retention and training.
- **Created Health & Wellness Coordinator positions** to support the psychosocial, physical, and spiritual wellbeing based on each resident's individual preferences.
- **Implemented new technology** to track staff productivity, improve resident-staff communication, and help ensure residents' safety.
- **Formed a strategic partnership** with a large, experienced senior housing provider, whose mission and values align with the Foundation's, to manage three rural assisted living facilities.

“Improved systems mean we are able to provide more efficient, effective care for older adults in our rural area.”

—Lisa Porthan, Northwoods Partners, Ely

ABOUT THE RURAL AGING INITIATIVE REGION



NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTA FAST FACTS

- 7 counties covering 18,185 square miles
- 1 urban hub of 86,238 people and 67 smaller towns with populations up to 16,000 and 3 Indian Reservations
- 325,803 residents, or just 18 people per square mile
- 16% of people live in poverty, with poverty rates in pockets of the region as high as 30%
- 20% are age 18 and under
- 31% are age 55 and older
- More than 25% of adults age 65+ across all 7 counties live alone

PARTNERS

The Northland Foundation's Rural Aging Initiative has been possible through strong partnerships, support, and participation from countless individuals and organizations.

Arrowhead Area Agency on Aging

AGE to age and Community Care Integration coordinators and team members

Consultants and Strategic Work Group members

Training and Technical Assistance providers

Aging Services Organizations

Community Leaders and Regional Residents of all ages

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