

Our Guest Editor

Talks about creating aging-friendly communities

'Physical spaces and technical devices are not enough.'

ANDREW E. SCHARLACH



What makes a good place to grow old? This question, not a focus as young towns, cities, and communities evolved, is now compelling as population aging is increasingly recognized as a true demographic revolution. Here, *Generations* takes a look at the current state of efforts within the field of aging and beyond to address this concern. What must be done to make such a place a reality for everyone in a

complex and diverse society? These questions are at the heart of work to improve the lives of older people and have important implications for the welfare of all generations.

Our guest editor is Andrew Scharlach, associate dean and professor of social welfare at the University of California, Berkeley, where he holds the Kleiner Chair in Aging and directs the School of Social Welfare's gerontology specialization and the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services. His distinguished teaching and research, characterized by attention to the physical and social context of older people's lives, the complexity and challenges as they affect well-being, make him a natural leader in the search for aging-friendly communities.

Scharlach's analysis of current and future needs of California's older population served as the basis for the California Statewide Strategic Plan on Aging. "The mandate was to look broadly, not just at services, and consider how the state and its local communities should prepare for the aging of their

populations," he says. Under his leadership, the Center for the Advanced Study of Aging Services recently produced a Web-based international conference on creating aging-friendly communities. Some 750 people from all over the world attended, with another 2,000 accessing the website in the ensuing months.

"What I see is individuals and communities worldwide waking up to the reality of demographic aging and not quite knowing what to do," Scharlach says. "There definitely are more physical changes like curb cuts and ramps, and technological innovations like smart autos, that have significant advantages for older adults. But creating physical spaces and devices to meet needs is not enough.

"A high quality of life for older adults also requires the support of the entire community—and a different view of aging. If people thought more about the entirety of their lives, rather than fearing and denying the aging process, individuals and communities would make different choices. For example, if people chose housing thinking about their long-term well-being, 'walkability' would be just as valuable as good local schools.

"In a real way, efforts for aging-friendly communities are in their infancy. The idea that we can have age-related disabilities and still live a good life is relatively new. Can we grow into that image of ourselves? The task now is to create venues to bring together experts and promising practices that help shape people's view of the possibilities."

—MARY JOHNSON