

Age-Friendly Public Health Systems: The Podcast

Episode 7

Host: Dr. J. Nadine Gracia, President and CEO, TFAH

Guest: Sara Lyons, Senior Program Analyst, National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO)

Interview Transcript

[00:00:01] **Sara Lyons:** Health departments can complement the work that they're already doing to meet the needs of older adults.

[00:00:11] **Dr. J. Nadine Gracia:** That's Sarah Lyons, Senior Program Analyst in the Division of Health and Disability at the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Hello, and welcome to Age-Friendly Public Health, the podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Nadine Gracia, President and CEO of Trust for America's Health, also known as TFAH. Welcome to Age-Friendly Public Health, the Podcast, a production of the Age-Friendly Public Health Systems Initiative.

[00:00:36] **Dr. Gracia:** Our guest today is Sarah Lyons, Senior Program Analyst in the Division of Health and Disability at the National Association of County and City Health Officials, also known as NACCHO.

In this role, Sarah provides technical assistance to local health departments by leading a community of practice and facilitating peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Prior to joining NACCHO, she worked at the Albany County Department of Health in New York, where she focused on public health education, chronic disease prevention, and emergency preparedness.

[00:01:06] **Dr. Gracia:** Sarah, welcome. To start, let's have you describe the many initiatives that NACCHO is a part of that support healthy aging.

[00:01:14] **Sara Lyons:** Sure. Well, thank you so much for having me today. For over 30 years, NACCHO has really been the trusted partner for our local health departments. We serve over 3,300 local health departments across the U.S., and we've been supporting education and training to local health departments on healthy aging and brain health initiatives, partnering with several organizations, Trust for America's Health being one of them, as well as the Alzheimer's Association.

[00:01:44] **Sara Lyons:** So to provide a little context on some of the exciting work we've been working on, NACCHO has been fortunate to work with the Alzheimer's Association on two separate initiatives, one being the Healthy Brain Initiative Roadmap Strategist Program, and this is increasing the capacity for local health departments to address brain health and dementia in their communities.

[00:02:08] **Sara Lyons:** Health departments are selected each year and receive direct funding, training, and technical assistance provided by Alzheimer's Association and NACCHO. They established a part-time roadmap strategist, which is really a person who serves as a systems change agent working to advance population health approaches related to dementia.

We're excited to start our fifth cohort of health departments at the beginning of January.

[00:02:38] **Sara Lyons:** We've also supported Alzheimer's Association's Public Health Center for Excellence on Dementia Risk Reduction through their Risk Reduction Learning Collaborative work.

And this was providing our regional convenings to support local health departments and equip them with knowledge and skills necessary to hold community action planning meetings focused on improving brain health.

The program included a two-day in-person training, financial support, and technical assistance. We're excited that there's going to be two additional convenings in 2026.

[00:03:13] **Sara Lyons:** NACCHO has also greatly appreciated its partnership with TFAH, specifically through supporting the development of the Age-Friendly Public Health Systems 6C's Training and Implementation Guide. The guide informs how to strengthen cross-sectoral partners, collect, as well as analyze and translate relevant data.

From NACCHO's perspective, staff, capacity, and time are really the main barriers to health departments' ability to engage in this work. So this guide really helps provide a framework of public health strategies.

[00:03:48] **Dr. Gracia:** Thanks for that overview, Sarah. The volume of work is so impressive, and Tifa very much values our partnership with NACCHO on the Six C's training and implementation guide that you mentioned.

Now, you also mentioned resource constraints. And of course, we all recognize that health departments are dealing with budget pressures. Can you talk about some of the strategies that local health departments are employing to advance healthy aging, even with budget constraints?

[00:04:17] **Sara Lyons:** There are a lot of constraints in public health right now, but I would really encourage health departments to consider that many of the initiatives that they're already involved in, like chronic disease prevention and community health improvement planning, can really incorporate a healthy aging lens to it.

From an analysis conducted by NACCHO, for example, community health improvement plans could be adapted for healthy aging programs.

For example, there's many health departments that have priorities such as chronic diseases, as well as substance use, depression, and other areas of mental health.

And we really consider that health departments can complement the work that they're already doing to meet the needs of older adults.

[00:05:07] **Sara Lyons:** So there may be coalitions that they're involved in that folks are already working on healthy aging materials and really having those conversations with partners to expand the resources and the tools for their healthy aging population.

[00:05:25] **Dr. Gracia:** Complement the work you are already doing. That's such good advice, Sarah. Can you say more about who are some unique or unexpected partners that could help make a community age-friendly?

[00:05:36] **Sara Lyons:** Sure.

So, in terms of partners, connecting and convening multi-sectoral partners to address healthy aging is really essential. So, there's many ways that health departments have been doing this, from building or modifying coalitions to advance healthy aging, educating partners about the value of age-friendly programs and services, and engaging with partners to advance a multi-sector plan for aging.

I would really encourage local health departments to consider organizations like Area Agencies on Aging, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, their local Alzheimer's Association chapter, Centers for Independent Living, public libraries, senior centers, and housing agencies to really engage a multi-sector initiative for addressing healthy aging.

[00:06:33] **Sara Lyons:** So some innovative approaches that I've seen include a train the trainer approach. So, for example, community health workers have been trained to educate clients about dementia risk reduction and supporting healthy habits for brain health to older adults in their community.

I've also enjoyed learning about health department's involvement in intergenerational approaches to healthy aging. So really just want to share that many health departments are, through some of these initiatives that I've mentioned, are leveraging their existing work to integrate healthy aging within public health.

[00:07:14] **Dr. Gracia:** So, your advice to health departments is to think of supporting healthy aging within your current portfolio of work and not as a separate area, nor to necessarily brand a new project? The goal is to integrate it into their ongoing work?

[00:07:27] **Sara Lyons:** Definitely, I would really also encourage health departments to think about healthy aging from the life course perspective, acknowledging that there's many factors for health that occur throughout one's lifetime.

So not just thinking about adults 65 and older when they're thinking about healthy aging, but thinking about across the life course and all of the residents that they serve to support us all as we age.

[00:07:57] **Dr. Gracia:** Say more about that, Sarah. That's an important point. How should health departments implement and prioritize this life course approach?

[00:08:05] **Sara Lyons:** Sure. So I think a lot of the work that health departments are doing, especially with chronic disease prevention, is they are working to support folks of any age to be healthier as they age.

So we've learned a lot of this work through our Alzheimer's Association partnership with the risk reduction collaborative that I mentioned. Many of them are thinking about how to reduce risk of dementia, not just from a older adult perspective, but what are we doing? What healthy habits do we have throughout our life that keep us healthy and prevent dementia as we age?

So there's many things that Alzheimer's Association and us at NACCHO have been working on. I would say an integrated part is how health departments are looking at their community health improvement plans to see how healthy aging could be embedded.

So, for example, if you are working on a Crohn's disease prevention or a diabetes prevention strategy or priority, how can you incorporate reaching all ages to meet the strategies and goals that you have set out? So it's really exciting to see that health departments are thinking innovatively.

[00:09:32] **Sara Lyons:** And year over year, as we've done this work, particularly around risk reduction, we've seen that health departments are really understanding that it's putting the lens on the work, not necessarily creating new projects and programs.

[00:09:50] **Dr. Gracia:** Thanks, Sarah. I appreciate the emphasis on laying the groundwork for older adult thriving across the lifespan, adultsicularly through chronic disease prevention. Could you also tell our listeners about the role of investment in addressing upstream drivers of health, which are also referred to as non-medical drivers of health?

[00:10:08] **Sara Lyons:** Yes, I believe, well, health departments are always thinking about the non-medical drivers of health, I would say, especially in rural areas.

Health departments are often involved in coalitions and partnerships on how to make sure everyone in their community can reach the programs and services that they need. And a lot of them, especially in rural areas, are thinking about transportation.

We do know that there are many older adults living in rural areas and how are we making sure that folks are able to get to the programs and services that we want to provide them in their communities and really thrive and have a sense of belonging where they live.

[00:10:53] **Sara Lyons:** Health departments are involved in a lot of coalitions that are thinking about things like transportation and housing and nutrition and food access. So, I always say, we always say at NACCHO that health departments are really connectors in the community. And I really think this lens of healthy aging is a great way to think about the work that they have been doing for a very long time.

[00:11:22] **Dr. Gracia:** Connectors in the community. You know, that's a great way to think about public health. Let's stay at that community level.

[00:11:29] **Dr. Gracia:** Can you say more about the tools and resources that local health departments need to support healthy aging in their communities?

[00:11:36] **Sara Lyons:** Sure, so I think one thing is making sure that they have access to the amazing trainings and guides that we have available from NACCHO and organizations like TFA. There's definitely some amazing initiatives, National Healthy Aging Movements, including TFA's Age-Friendly Public Health Systems and AARP's Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities.

I also think it's going to be helpful for health departments to understand what healthy aging and public health looks like depending on the type of health department or the type of region you're from. I think there's many different initiatives that would be happening rurally versus in an urban area. So, I think having lots of opportunities for peer sharing and communities of practice for health departments to engage with like-minded health departments and really share what's working and what's not.

[00:12:41] **Sara Lyons:** And I also think that there's many trainings out there, but we need to make sure that health departments know where they are, so I think our organizations can really help with that. I also think we could do a lot of work to explain more about the life course perspective of aging. And I keep learning more about this as I grow in this space and I think we do have some public health trainings in this area, but it would be great to see more, especially with the lens for local and state health departments.

[00:13:12] **Dr. Gracia:** Yes, absolutely, we agree. And that's the essence of TFA's age-friendly public health systems movement to elevate healthy aging as a core function of public health. And as part of that effort, we offer resources to states and communities to advance healthy aging and create opportunities for states and communities to learn from each other and share what's working in their communities.

Now, I also hear you saying one size does not fit all. That a community's approach will depend on its population, location, and resources. Can you say more about that?

[00:13:44] **Sara Lyons:** Yes, definitely. I think health departments are, we always say, you meet one health department and you meet one health department because a lot of them are doing many different things. And I would say, especially with how they could think about what's happening in their state and area, they're really, I would really encourage health departments to consider what

healthy aging initiatives may be happening in your state or region, because we know that sometimes, like we said, the states are guiding what's happening in their communities.

So, I just wanted to share that every state agency on aging is mandated by the Older Americans Act to create a state plan on aging. And there could be some great alignment for health department initiatives within those state plan goals and objectives.

So I really encourage health departments to look at their state plans and see where there may be alignment and what partners are working on things at the state level that they could collaborate with at the local level.

[00:14:58] **Dr. Gracia:** Thank you, Sarah. This has been a great conversation and one that I believe will help local health departments expand their healthy aging work and also see the relationship between their healthy aging work and their many other public health priorities.

Now, as we close, can I ask you to share any concluding thoughts with our listeners?

[00:15:15] **Sara Lyons:** Sure. I just really want health departments to think about, as I've said throughout this conversation, about how to think through healthy aging within the lens of the work that they're already doing.

And I know we have some great resources to share with health departments. I really want to uplift the C6 training and implementation guide that NACCHO has had the pleasure to work on with TFA.

[00:15:42] **Sara Lyons:** I had recently had the pleasure to speak on this guide at the APHA conference, and it was a wonderful opportunity to spread the word about this resource.

And I would really encourage health departments to connect with NACCHO and with TFA and partners like the Alzheimer's Association, so they can share with each other and with us the successes and ways to overcome barriers within the Healthy Aging Initiatives, we can always share and connect you to peers that are working in this space, as well as sharing great resources and best practices that we've learned together.

[00:16:19] **Dr. Gracia:** Thank you again, Sarah, for an engaging and informative conversation.

TFAH looks forward to continuing to collaborate with NACCHO and other partners to advance age-friendly public health systems.

For our listeners, please feel free to share this segment on your social media channels and look for an announcement of our next segment, which will be released in the next few months.

You can also learn more about the Age-Friendly Public Health Systems Movement on our website at AFPHS.org. That's A-F-P-H-S.org.