

*Age-Friendly Public Health Systems: The Podcast*

Episode 8

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

Guest: Alan Morgan, CEO, National Rural Health Association

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**Interview Transcript**

[00:00:05] **Dr. J. Nadine Gracia:** Hello, and welcome to Age-Friendly Public Health, the podcast.

Our guest today is Alan Morgan, CEO of the National Rural Health Association. Alan has more than 30 years of experience in health policy at the state and federal level, and is one of the nation's leading experts on rural health policy.

Alan has served as a contributing author about rural health from numerous books and articles, including about aging in rural communities. And he has been a wonderful partner to TFAH.

Alan, welcome.

[00:00:34] **Alan Morgan:** Doctor, thank you so much for having me on your program today. I'm looking forward to talking about my favorite topic, rural health.

[00:00:41] **Dr. Gracia:** All right, let's jump right in.

So the National Rural Health Association's Age-Friendly Initiative is an exciting project that TIFA has been following and has been privileged to support. Can you tell us how that project started and how it has supported older adults in rural settings?

[00:00:56] **Alan Morgan:** Oh, absolutely.

So, it's important to note that there are actually two different perspectives that really were the driving force behind the creation of this initiative. First, a recognition that rural's not a small version of urban. It's really a unique healthcare delivery environment. And what we're seeing in rural America is the population of older Americans are at a higher percentage in rural communities, number one.

[00:01:23] **Alan Morgan:** Those same older Americans have a higher percentage of those who have multiple comorbidities, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, heart disease. And among that same population, unfortunately, they are oftentimes in a lower income than other older Americans that we might see in urban areas.

So you've got this situation where rural older Americans are older, sick, or poor. That sets up the need, the necessity. But what makes this an exciting opportunity to focus in on age-friendly care is

that what we're seeing is across hundreds of small towns in the U.S., you actually see these innovation hubs.

[00:02:09] **Alan Morgan:** You see communities that are facing significant headwinds before we even get to workforce shortages and rural hospital closures, and they're forced to innovate.

So you're seeing some really creative approaches to delivering care and ensuring high-quality access to care. So with that, we approached the John A. Hartford Foundation back in January of 2023 to see if we couldn't take the best practices we're seeing in rural communities, apply the 4M framework, which is what matters, medication, meditation, and mobility, and see if we can't articulate the best practices for delivering this care and hope replication, not just among rural communities, but all of U.S. as a result of that. So that explains how we got to the point that we're at right now.

This first two years that we engaged in this process, it really was about identifying best practices. And now we're in the exciting point of, once we've identified those best practices, rolling out some of those interventions to actually see improvements among rural older adults across the United States.

[00:03:30] **Dr. Gracia:** Alan, it's really exciting to hear how you've taken this approach, especially when you talk about the challenges that rural communities can face. And you really leaned in on the point around innovation and innovation hubs. And I've noted in particular that NRHA has talked about rural America, of understanding it, not stereotyping it in a particular way, but really understanding that it is incredibly diverse, it's innovative, it's constantly evolving.

That's something that you focus on as an organization. How do you see that kind of innovation, just generally, that spirit of innovation spreading through the age-friendly initiative?

[00:04:09] **Alan Morgan:** Thank you so much for highlighting. You know, and you know this, you and I have talked about this before, we focus a lot on what we don't have or what we're lacking and what the challenges are, simply because that's how you make improvements.

But unfortunately, because of that, we don't highlight or stress the assets that we have in rural communities.

And let me just go through those very briefly. First and foremost, as we touched on, this spirit of innovation. And over the last 30 years, really honestly, most innovative approaches in our healthcare system have their roots in rural health and rural communities, number one.

[00:04:48] **Alan Morgan:** Number 2, there's this myth that people are either dying in rural America or dying to get out of rural America. And the data simply doesn't show that. Census Bureau data from the past decade show that rural America is growing in population. And most people don't realize that the fastest, fastest geographic area for population growth in the United States is rural adjacent to urban.

So you've got this population growth. You've had this innovation happening. But let's not lose sight of the real strength of rural America, and that is a sense of community. And anyone that's been in a rural town understands that.

[00:05:28] **Alan Morgan:** The data clearly shows that community connectedness has such a positive impact on not just health, but also the health of older adults as well, too. So you put all those things together, and you've got the recipe for, as we said, some really innovative approaches and some great outcomes as a result.

[00:05:50] **Dr. Gracia:** I appreciate you really lifting up the strength of community and actually dispelling some of the myths, right, that we have as it relates to rural communities. Because I think it's important, right, that we talk about what are the challenges that older adults face in rural communities.

You lifted some of those up, things like limited access to healthcare, to transportation, the workforce shortages, longer distances to be able to access services, as well as some of the financial and infrastructure barriers that hinder their ability to age in place. But as you just said, people actually are choosing to stay and live in rural areas.

So, if you were saying to our audience, what's the one positive aspect about aging in rural areas that you'd like everyone to know, what would you summarize that as?

[00:06:36] **Alan Morgan:** Oh, it has to be the connectedness. I mean, the data is shown again and again, this concern for social isolation. And social isolation, many refer to as the new smoking when it comes to public health, of course. And when you have that ability through the small towns and these social structures that you have in place there, you really have a great environment.

And let's not forget that prior to World War II, life expectancy in rural America was longer than in urban America. So it's got all the necessary aspects. We just need to highlight those and bring those to the forefront.

[00:07:16] **Dr. Gracia:** That's absolutely right. That's it. Those are the assets.

And as you pointed out, the social isolation, which we see truly as a growing issue, certainly one among older adults and the importance of connectedness, seeing that as a strength in rural communities is truly an asset.

And there's so much attention now really to improving and strengthening rural health in terms of the delivery system, in terms of public health, and so much so that we know, for example, that the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is now funding a rural health transformation program that's really to address some of these long-standing issues that we've seen in terms of the gaps in terms of health for rural communities.

[00:08:00] **Dr. Gracia:** This is funding all 50 states with the goal of strengthening and modernizing rural health systems. I'm sure that NRHA has an important role. Can you tell us what role the organization has played to advise states on this new and innovative program?

[00:08:16] **Alan Morgan:** Okay, now we're talking about the fun stuff. And this is the stuff that we all should get excited about.

[00:08:22] **Alan Morgan:** As a nation, so many times we're focused, and you mentioned this, on just maintaining access to care. What do we do to keep the hospital doors open and the clinic doors open?

We never have the opportunity as a nation to step back and really talk about how do we redesign this system appropriately so. Timing is everything, and I'm not going to ever be a critic of being at the right place at the right time. We could not have asked for this initiative to happen better than when it did, because we had in place a compendium of best practices for age-friendly care in rural communities, already developed when this \$50 billion rural transformation fund was released and the 50 states began to compete for this.

[00:09:15] **Alan Morgan:** So right off the bat, we were poised to provide each state, when they were doing their application, with ideas, references, and data points to be able to show how they can improve age-friendly care for older Americans. It was a perfect time, perfect place.

We convene multiple listening sessions and policy discussions across the country in prep for this. And as I said, we were perfectly aligned and ensure that some of these lessons learned are in fact included within these transformation fund applications and the grants going forward. So we're actually going to have \$50 billion of the federal government help us as we move forward to implement some of these best practices that we've identified in a partnership together.

[00:10:05] **Dr. Gracia:** Well, Alan, I can hear the excitement in your voice about this opportunity and such an important need for rural communities all across the country. But what we also know when we talk about health, when we talk about public health, it's local, right?

And so certainly there's going to be some diversity across what states are doing to really be able to address the needs of rural residents. In your view, and let's stay with this rural health transformation program. What are some of the highlights among the grants that will address the critical need for rural residents?

[00:10:39] **Alan Morgan:** Okay, so now we're getting into the specifics that I really want to talk about and the takeaways of where we're going to see these proposals translated into programs. And I'm just going to go through a few of these, because as you might imagine, 50 different state applications, multiple proposals within these 50 different applications, and they're going to have, below that, even multiple more funding opportunities.

But what we're seeing is some very key and specific aging initiatives that states have included and we're going to see as we move forward. Starting off with workforce training, development, and sustainability. Now, several states have activities that touch on expanding rural direct care workforce. Nurses, nurses aid training, community health workers, which we've done a lot of work on. These are laypeople, which have particular information and skills when it comes to age-friendly care.

And these grants are going to support providers who serve older adult populations, number one.

[00:11:48] **Alan Morgan:** We're going to see expansion of care models tailored towards older adults, states like Kansas, Michigan, Louisiana plan to expand the PACE program. And I know this very well, programs for all-inclusive care, the elderly. I love this concept. This is my 25th year of NRHA and the first year was on trying to develop policies to in fact expand PACE. It's such an amazing program and seems perfectly suited for rural communities.

It just, we've had regulatory and legislative barriers in the past to prevent that expansion. I want to talk a little bit about dementia and caregiver support. Georgia, Tennessee, Washington are building dementia care networks, telemonitoring and a hub and spoke system approach to this, which I think is worthy and it certainly works in certain communities. There's going to be support for long-term care and aging services.

Nebraska is modernizing its assisted living facilities and enhancing care for high-acute older adults. Let me just make sure that I talk about the issue of nutrition, mobility, and social integration.

[00:12:57] **Alan Morgan:** Connecticut's plan is one that includes digital access, fitness engagement, and technology training for older adults and people with disabilities.

As you might imagine, I could go on all day for this. I just want to give the listeners a sense that we're really finally putting these best practices in place. And what I hope is as a result of this, we're really going to have a playbook and be able to say, here are the specific takeaways from this \$50 billion, five-year process that we can implement nationwide to finally move the needle on improving care for older adults.

[00:13:34] **Dr. Gracia:** That's excellent. And you spoke earlier about the fact that you had these lessons learned. You had examples of these types of programs in action.

And now being able to match that with the resources and couple that then to with the needs in states and communities, it's really a perfect moment, right, in terms of being able to address these health needs for individuals who live in rural communities. And you touched upon some of the programs and initiatives that will be underway that specifically address the needs and health and well-being of older adults, right? Dementia care, long-term care, community health workers, all embedded in these public health principles.

Are there any other highlights you'd like to share if we drill down a little further in how states are planning to use these funds to support healthy aging? Because that intersection between rural health and older adults is truly an important one.

[00:14:30] **Alan Morgan:** Yeah, I definitely do. Thank you for giving me that opportunity. And thank you for also acknowledging I'm a little bit excited about this.

Yeah, let's be honest, health policy isn't always the most exciting topic to be on, unless you're in on it. But when you have been engaged as long as both you and I have, and you actually see the funding matched with the programs, and you finally see efforts that we've been working on for decades, really at the point of implementation, you can't help but not get excited about.

[00:15:01] **Alan Morgan:** So to answer your question, this concept of strengthening workforce capacity, we need to be training and recruiting professionals who specialize in aging care, but they need to be coming from rural communities themselves. It has to be. And when we can't do that, when we can't do that, then we need to make sure that we have this coordinated technology that through telehealth, telemedicine, and other tools to be able to bring them into the communities electronically.

Access is key. There needs to be population-specific prevention and wellness programs, and we're seeing this funding is going to support evidence-based programs that help older adults live healthier, more independent lives in rural settings.

[00:15:52] **Alan Morgan:** And I mentioned at the beginning, I want to circle back to this concept of coordinated community care and the infrastructure for that. Many, many states, I won't say all, but many are building regional care models or hubs that are going to connect these aging service, home and community-based care and chronic disease management programs all together in a coordinated care fashion.

Again, gets right back to the fundamentals of the 4M program that we've been working on for so long. And now you're seeing them in a specificity in these programs.

[00:16:33] **Dr. Gracia:** That's terrific, Alan. You know, hearing you get excited about this, when funding actually matches the program, it's an important opportunity and you seize upon that opportunity to really meet the needs of communities.

And I appreciate you continue to weave in this message around innovation and that opportunity in rural communities, whether it's through telehealth, or other types of initiatives, and then acknowledging, as well the importance of strengthening workforce capacity. That is a national issue that we recognize the need to really bolster workforce capacity.

And as you noted, having that workforce come from rural communities themselves because of the understanding of the community, the investment in the community is really an important strategy to be able to assure that you can bring tailored services that meet community needs.

[00:17:24] **Dr. Gracia:** Why don't we transition now really to talking about how these efforts actually are implemented? One of the things that we know is you can't do this alone.

And partnerships are so key. And a lot of our focus at TFAH is how public health can work with other sectors to be able to improve the health and well-being of communities and that importantly includes older adults.

What partnership opportunities do you see between public health and state rural health associations, for example, to be able to advance healthy aging in rural communities?

[00:18:01] **Alan Morgan:** Yeah, absolutely. That's such an important point.

[00:18:04] **Alan Morgan:** Rural America is known for its silos on farms and ranches across the U.S., and that's great. We love that. We just can't have silos in healthcare.

And in fact, one of the strengths of rural health care, as highlighted through the Institute of Medicine's landmark study, quality through collaboration, they mention and call out the ability for entities to collaborate across sector, whether it's hospitals with Meals on Wheels, long-term care with business leaders, community schools, long-term care facilities, all working together as a cross-collaboration effort.

[00:18:47] **Alan Morgan:** Honestly, the future of rural health aging depends on this cross-sector collaboration. So, I'm going to pull out the need to have public health as a key component of this. What we're seeing and what we're going to see is an alignment of clinical care with social services to address the issues we've already touched on of transportation, nutrition, housing, broadband.

You're going to see a coordinated emergency preparedness planning for older adults as well too, something that really has been brought to the forefront. And an unfortunate fact is the natural disasters and emergencies that do happen in rural communities.

We can't forget about older adults and planning for these. There needs to be, and there is, an expansion in fall prevention, chronic disease management, and vaccination outreach through trusted community channels.

That's a whole separate podcast you and I can have on that one. I think we both can agree, unfortunately. And perhaps, if not most importantly, a critical component, and that is leveraging the shared data systems to identify high-risk populations and to intervene early when necessary on that.

[00:20:07] **Alan Morgan:** Because you can see in this whole discussion, we're just weaving in so many different aspects of the delivery care system all focused in a proactive public health manner for our nation's older adults.

[00:20:23] **Dr. Gracia:** Absolutely, Alan. And you've woven in just so many areas that are, you know, longstanding public health priorities, whether it's in chronic disease prevention or emergency preparedness.

You talked about the disproportionate impact of emergencies, whether that's extreme heat or other natural disasters, infectious disease outbreaks that can have a disproportionate impact on older adults to the delivery of care. And that what I really loved you saying was that you said the future of rural health aging depends on cross-sector collaboration.

[00:20:54] **Dr. Gracia:** That is the moment that we're in and that has to become the norm so that it's not unusual to see these sectors working together.

And I appreciate the examples that you provided. You talked about that we can't have silos.

So is there other advice or guidance you'd give to our audience, whether it's examples or how to effectuate these types of cross-sector collaborations to truly support older adults in rural communities.

[00:21:23] **Alan Morgan:** Yeah, this is such a critical time right now in the process of this. Gosh, thank you for, you keep hitting all the perfect questions as we're going along.

And for listeners right now, if you have not already reached out to your state office of rural health, if you're not engaged with your state rural health association. What a great time to Google and make the connection there.

Obviously, depending on where you're at within a rural aspect, whether you're in a hospital, a clinic, whether you're a rural community leader, maybe you're just a rural community leader that's not elected, but you feel strongly and passionately about your community.

What a great opportunity to get involved and ensure that this federal funding goes through the states, into your community, and where is most needed. At this very moment, the federal government is looking at the overall goals, objectives that the states have submitted.

They're going to approve those, and the states very soon are going to start putting forward these grant opportunities and contracting with individuals to carry out everything that I've said so far.

[00:22:38] **Alan Morgan:** Make sure that your voice is heard. Make sure that you're involved in this process. Make sure that your rural community is not left behind. It's just such an amazing opportunity. We don't want to let it go by.

[00:22:50] **Dr. Gracia:** Thanks so much, Alan, for that really great advice for our listeners. Truly helpful in this moment and I can't believe that we are already coming to the end of our time together, but I do want to offer just an additional opportunity as we close to you.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners today?

[00:23:12] **Alan Morgan:** Yeah, let's make this easy. Go on to any search engine, Google, Yahoo, Bing, type in the words rural health.

That's all you need to remember, rural health. Our website's usually the first, second, or third thing that comes up. And on that, we actually have a transformation page.

You can click on that and you can get detailed information of what your state is planning for this particular topic that we've been talking about.

Get informed, get involved, and make a difference. And I appreciate all your listeners for caring about our nation's older adults as we move forward.

[00:23:46] **Dr. Gracia:** Well, Alan, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure speaking with you.

[00:23:50] **Alan Morgan:** This has been fun, right? This has been a lot of fun.

[00:23:53] **Dr. Gracia:** Yes, it's been absolutely fun.

And I must say, rural communities are in great hands having an advocate like you in the leadership of the National Rural Health Association. And we are so honored to continue to partner with you to



continue to advance health and well-being for individuals and families and older adults in particular who live in rural communities.

[00:24:13] **Dr. Gracia:** 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 Initiative on our website at [afphs.org](http://afphs.org).

That's A-F-P-H-S.org.

Thanks, everyone.