Examining Community-Based Service Disconnects in Late Old Age: Paths for Reach Through the Communication Ecology

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INTRODUCTION

As potentially eligible recipients continue to increase in number, understanding service system utilization and barriers can help ensure very old adults can access support from their communities when needed. Data collected from 1,870 individuals in an older adult needs assessment in Monroe County, Michigan **revealed a communication disjuncture between older adults and service providers.** In response, officials convened a post assessment team who formed the three-person Community Advisory Group (CAG, all >69 years old) who were partners throughout this community-based participatory research (CBPR) study.

METHODS

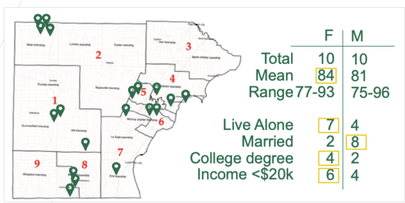
This applied, qualitative study was guided by an ecological health communication research framework[1] and community-based participatory research[2] principles as a multilevel examination of interactions among older adults and their social environment. Twenty in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (mean age, 82.5 years) were conducted based on a critical threshold of understanding achieved via researcher immersion in the community preceding this study, data collected, and CAG insight revealed through collaborative analysis.

Data Collection & Management

- Face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews
- Recruitment through community partners and contacts
- Eligibility screening
- Naturalistic settings
- Average interview was 82 min, 26 hours of data
- Otter.ai transcription software
- ExpressScribe transcription software
- Atlas.ti qualitative software, 497 initial coded excerpts per level

Collaborative Inquiry

- Research literacy and skills development
- Instrument, e.g. other people's motives, language
- Process, e.g. time, use of tech, income question
- Sampling, e.g. 75+, Commission on Aging district
- Collaborative analysis

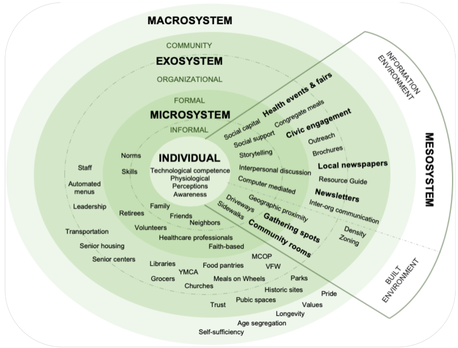


	F	M
Total	10	10
Mean	84	81
Range	77-93	75-96
Live Alone	7	4
Married	2	8
College degree	4	2
Income <$20k	6	4

Community Advisors

Pictured L-R: Sandie Pierce, Pam Lapan, with Carrie, Joe Grifka not pictured

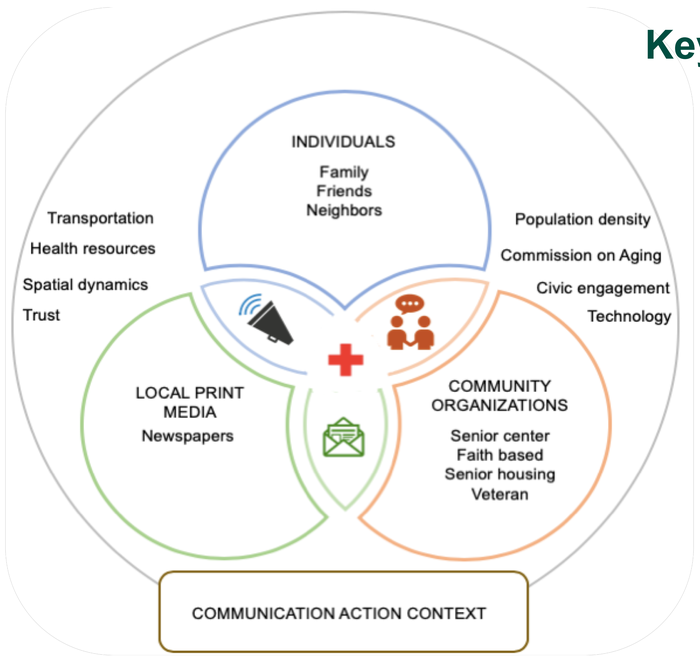
RESULTS



The quality and quantity of interpersonal connections diminish with age; a phenomenon that is most acute in late old age. Hearing and vision impedes driving to, accessing, and learning about services; family and friends are geographically dispersed and outlived. For those in their 80s who are reluctant to connect through technological means, the network of communication resources to draw from becomes even more limited. **Health based interactions and networks were identified as the greatest potential conduit for connecting with community-based services**, though adaptations were needed. Diminishing microsystems and a lack of experience and apprehensiveness to use technology implied that communication disparities increased with age. **As informal communication resources diminish in late old age, information disparities may be remedied when older adults get to sites where they can learn about community-based services through others and print media.** Communication Infrastructure Theory[3,4,5] helped to reveal how diminishing social networks in late old age interrelated with the communication environment to impede connections to services. In addition to utilization impediments, enabling elements of the communication infrastructure were identified so those resources might be leveraged to bridge the senior-provider divide.

DISCUSSION

Findings highlight **a new outreach approach for connecting to adults** in late old age **through their communication ecology**.



Key Communication Resources

Health events
Community health fairs, events and presentations lunch and learns

Micro print media
Fliers, brochures, other print materials and referral devices

Local companions
Congregate meal attendees, volunteers, shared community rooms

Micro social print media
CBO and senior center newsletters

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