

Caring for Older Adults is a Women's Issue

Women's History Month



New York is known for being a pioneer in the fight for women's rights. In 1848 we were the first state to allow women to own and manage property, and in the same year the first women's rights convention took place upstate in Seneca Falls. Seventy-decades later Congress passed the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. Then in 1969, New York elected the first African-American woman to Congress, Shirley Chisholm. As we can see, it has been a long road to receive these rights and we have more work to do. That's why every March we celebrate Women's History, which includes remembering all the older women who have lived through this journey.

Supporting older adults has always been a women's issue. Since 1890 women have been living longer than men, and their needs have become more apparent over time. While working at the New York City Housing Authority, a social worker named Alice M. Brophy directed a study on the elderly between 1946 and 1963. In 1968, Mayor John Lindsay appointed her as the Director for the Office for the Aging, and in 1975 she became the first Commissioner for the Department for the Aging (NYC Aging). During her time leading the agency, the number of staff grew from four to 800, and the budget grew from less than a million to over \$30 million, which went toward providing resources and programs to older adults.

I was fortunate to work at NYC Aging early in my career under Commissioner Janet Sainer. Appointed by Mayor Ed Koch in 1978, she would lead the agency for 12 years overseeing another expansion of programs and services. One of them was an intergenerational initiative called the Foster Grandparent Program with the goal of providing the city's youth a stable influence by introducing them to an older adult who can provide emotional support. These volunteers are placed in family court, schools and hospitals, so they can be there for youth with special and exceptional needs. It's always incredible to see older residents participate in this program, some of whom have been doing it for decades.

Commissioner Sainer also expanded programs making it easier for older New Yorkers to age in their communities. In addition to transportation services being expanded, Commissioner Sainer also made sure older adults can receive nutritious food at home over the weekends, by developing the Citymeals-on-Wheels

program. Another key program she expanded was Caregiver Support, which helps New Yorkers taking care of older loved ones with information, counseling and other resources. Currently, 80% of participants are women.

Today, more women understand that aging is a women's issue and are dedicated to helping these individuals. About 70% of NYC Aging's staff are women who work every day making sure older residents can age in place. With more older people projected to live in the five boroughs than school-aged children by 2040, our work will be more important than ever. But I am glad to see a new generation of women leaders are continuing the progress that has been laid for them and know it is in good hands.



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