

## Champions for Social Good Podcast

### Empowering the Aging Population to Thrive: A Conversation with Dr. John Feather of Grantmakers in Aging

**Jamie:** Hello and welcome to the Champions for Social Good Podcast, the podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, Director of Marketing with the corporate and foundation solutions division of Blackbaud. I'm here today with Dr. John Feather, chief executive officer of Grantmakers In Aging, the national society of grant-making foundations and other organizations that work to improve the lives of older people. Dr. John Feather is also a recipient of the ASA award, the highest honor of the American Society on Aging for his work in policy, practice, and education. Welcome John!

**John:** Well, thanks, great to be here.

**Jamie:** Yeah, it's great to have you. Can you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself, and your background, and a little bit about Grantmakers In Aging?

**John:** Well, sure, as you mentioned Grantmakers In Aging is an association and really the only national association in the world that focuses exclusively on aging issues and works with those who provide funding for organizations that work in these arenas. So most of our members are grant-making foundations but also includes corporate support groups, and corporate funding groups, some individuals, and other kinds of public charities like the United Ways of the United States. So we have a variety of members, most of whom are regional or local funders. In terms of my own background, I've worked in the field of aging, now, for 35 years primarily on the healthcare side. Even though I'm an organizational sociologist by training, I worked in the medical school for a long time in one of the first geriatrics programs in the country in Buffalo and then it moved on to AARP. Then, I have been in this current position with Grantmakers In Aging, now, for six years.

**Jamie:** Great. Can you talk a little bit about how you work with your members to increase the effectiveness of their programs, or share knowledge, education, that sort of thing?

**John:** Sure. Like most membership associations, we do educational work that includes, for us, a monthly webinar series as well as a variety of other kinds of educational programming. We have an annual meeting and additional meetings throughout the year for funders who are interested in the specific topics. Our annual meeting is our big national get together. We facilitate networking in a variety of ways: We have a members-only portal that allows our members to ask each other questions and those kinds of things, as well as more informally just helping people to get together around specific topics.

**Jamie:** Okay, that's great. What are some of the main trends that you're seeing today? Some of the themes that you're seeing in philanthropy focused on aging issues?

**John:** Well, I think one thing for everybody to understand is that aging remains a very difficult... It's a hard sell in philanthropy as I often say. It's less than 2% of American philanthropy currently from the foundation point of view. There's actually been some recent research that looks at it as an issue across funding in general, all individual funding. They only come up with 3% of American philanthropy goes to aging issues. So, and this is in a context where 20%-25% of the population will be over 65 in the next 10 years. So it remains a difficult one but we are actually moving forward in a variety of ways to look at aging as a limb to help funders think about their own programming. So if you're a funder that works on rural development, for example, the highest concentration of older people anywhere in the United States is in rural communities. Mostly because we had outmigration for many many decades, often. The people that are remaining are often older folks who are often isolated. What we're trying to do is increase the number of folks who include aging in their thought process and

in their grant process by having them understand that aging issues are a part of whatever they do. Whether that's housing or health or, in this case, rural, or arts, or whatever it is that they do.

**Jamie:** Right, so what comes to mind for me is... The first thing that comes to mind for me is healthcare, and so I imagine that you get intertwined with a lot of healthcare issues, right?

**John:** Right. No, we do lots of work on healthcare and obviously that's an incredibly important issue around aging issues. I think one of the difficulties in answering the question about what trends we see is that there's certainly major topic areas like elder abuse and elder justice or family care-giving or other things along the specific lines that have remained important issues. But we're in a context right now where it's just very difficult to predict on health or anything else, where exactly all this is going because for the first time in a long time we're actually challenging the basic assumptions around which all of this programming takes place. So for our numbers that's a very complex thing. If Congregate Meals, for example, is dropped from the federal budget, it's very likely that the place where people will go for support of that will be through their local foundation community.

**Jamie:** So, do you see some of these foundations preparing to step in where maybe there might be these deficits?

**John:** Well, that's the difficult thing. I think there's a lot of caution right now and a lot of seeking of information right now about whether or not this is the time to really start doing major investments in completely new areas, particularly for their local foundation members who are serving a particularly community or geographic region. I think everybody is kind of doing a wait-and-see right now because we just don't know what's gonna be coming, and it may be that some of the traditional aging programs that are funded by the federal government or the state government will decrease or disappear, but we don't know that at this point. So one of the things that we try to do is just simply provide as good of information as we can by providing...

**John:** Basically, we're doing our Washington Insiders series, so we have speakers come and talk on the phone to our members just basically saying, "This is what we're hearing." It's not verified fact one way or the other, it's just what some people that spend a lot of time paying attention to these issues are hearing about the issues and how it might impact them at the local level.

**Jamie:** Gotcha. Can you tell me a little bit about Grantmakers In Aging, the age-friendly initiative that you have going on?

**John:** Sure. This is one of the real success programs of the aging-movement around the world, in a way that I think has surprised a lot of people including those who came up with the idea. It originally started with a group of international cities, so it wasn't age-friendly communities, but it was age-friendly cities initially. They came together about 10 years ago under the aegis of the World Health Organization and started talking about "how do we make cities," at that point and now communities, "good places for older people to live as they grow old?" So a lot of those... And what they came up with is a document that sort of lists eight major areas of work and then kind of a process that people can go through to be part of this effort.

**John:** I think truthfully like most programs like that, it's a wonderful thing to start, everybody was excited, and then you kind of expect it to fade away, and it really hasn't. There are now something like 350 of these communities around the world in, I think, 40 countries. There are 100 and something that are part of the official process here in the United States, so this is something that's just exploded. And so, what we're trying to do now is to catch up with that. We've been very involved in it from the beginning pretty much, in terms of we had funding to create a system with five different regions in the country to help them create age-friendly communities in their regions. And we're continuing that work now with different communities in Massachusetts and probably expanding that to the rest of New England over the next couple of years.

**Jamie:** Great. So can you tell us a little bit about what makes one of these communities different? What are some of the features?

**John:** Well, the thing is that what the model says is that to really have a place where older people can thrive, it's basically many of the things that you'd want for anyone to thrive. So safe neighborhoods, decent housing, access to healthcare, all of those kind of things. But it says that in order to make that happen, we have to actually pay attention to the specific needs of the population in general but certainly in this case to older people. So the way different communities do it is based on what they find as the most pressing needs for their community. So it could be as simple as thinking about sidewalks or street lights or any of those kind of real infrastructure stuff. But it also has to do with, if you have the best healthcare system in the world and it's in a place that's inaccessible to anyone that doesn't have a car, it's basically pointless.

**John:** And so looking at those kind of issues, how do you integrate all the pieces together? How does transportation allow people access to healthcare in a way that may not be possible otherwise. And that's really the notion, as you start looking at how these pieces fit together and help the community grow stronger. Overtime what happens is that people start to see those connections more clearly and they start to ask, "But why does the bus route go right past the senior center and stop six blocks away?" Well, because no one ever talked to the people that run the bus system and ask that question. It's not typically that people are looking for ways to make older people's lives difficult, it's just that it's a failure for all of our systems to come together because they're so complicated.

**Jamie:** Yeah. So when one of these communities, if a person wants to create one, who is generally the person that approaches you or the people that run this program? "Hey, I want to create one of these." How does that work?

**John:** Well, it happens in any of a number of ways. It does require some local leadership, and that comes from a whole variety of places, sometimes from academic settings, sometimes from folks who are in charge of aging programs, sometimes from political leaders, sometimes from community activists. So it comes in a different place. The process sorta starts with the mayor and the city council doing a formal resolution saying, "We want to do this." And that's where a community enters into the formal process. But unlike what sometimes communities think, it's like, you're not an age-friendly community now, you've just started the process of becoming an age-friendly community.

**John:** What basically the resolution says is that we commit ourselves to working on these issues over the next five to 10 years to try to make our community a better place because these are very long range things. New York City has a 50, five-zero, year plan, to create an age-friendly community. And when that came out, people were like, "Well you know..." And the notion is, because you don't do infrastructure development all at once, so you're not gonna replace all the sidewalks in the city of New York in the next 10 years, but over 50 years you will. But if you don't build in design standards and so forth that makes it more acceptable for older people to use, it still won't happen. And that was Mayor Bloomberg's point is that 50 years from now we won't have an age-friendly community if we don't start now.

**Jamie:** Right, right. And I imagine technology plays a big role. So when you said they have a 50-year plan, I would imagine that the driver-less car is a part of that 50-year plan, which would be extremely helpful for lots of people. Any other examples of technology being factored into some of these communities?

**John:** Well, certainly that's an interesting one. There's a lot of interest in the driver-less cars, autonomous vehicles, whatever we're calling them. It's certainly getting a lot of attention and a lot of lawsuits at this point. But it's yet to be clear whether or not that in and of itself will be an essential piece. But one of the things we're working on, interestingly enough, is how do you take not only that kind of technology, but others, into rural areas? And everyone's a little skittish about this because it's like, "Well, how would you make that work?" and so forth.

**John:** But you're starting to see models kind of emerge where, not so much the driver-less cars yet, but things like Lyft and Uber and that kind of system, where basically in a town that could never support a taxi system, for example, you have people that have a car, they're working part time, they're doing this. In some communities

they're buying the vehicles and then using a Lyft or Uber-type system to get the drivers involved. There's a whole variety of new kinds of models that are coming out, particularly needing places which are not urban, so the density of the population is not sufficient to carry that. But even in urban areas, there's a lot of interest and a lot of experimental work going on already with, to give an example, the Veterans Administration system is one of the biggest users of transportation vouchers in the country, which most people don't know.

**John:** They pay for veterans of certain income levels, basically give them a taxi voucher to come up and back. In some places, this work well, in many places it doesn't. And so, okay, now instead of it going to your credit card when you use Lyft or Uber, we charge it to the VA. And so, lots of different approaches and models at this point... We don't know exactly where all that's going, but transportation is a central issue everywhere, all the time. And I think one of the things that we forget is that if you're in one of these post-war, cul-de-sac communities, if you lose the ability to drive, you're a prisoner of your neighborhood. And that leads to depression and isolation and lots of other things, if we don't have a way to get people in and out.

**Jamie:** Yeah. Do you see any of your members looking for other new solutions? Are they directing their grant dollars towards "what are some new ways we can solve problems that older people face?"

**John:** Yeah, absolutely. One of the interesting ones of our members is, we have the consumer technology association has a charitable foundation which is entirely focused on the use of technology to improve the lives of older people. And so they're particularly engaged in all this, but many are. I think the caveat is while all these exciting new things are developing, we're still back to wondering about is the basic infrastructure gonna hold underneath it because of all the political stuff that's going on at this point.

**Jamie:** Another initiative that caught my eye was the Reframing Aging initiatives. It caught my eye 'cause I just think that maybe it's a matter of the fact that I'm getting older so I feel differently about aging, or I just think that people are living longer and I think people are remaining vital a little longer, and so to me in my mind, aging has become reframed a little bit when I see older people interact and watch how their lives unfold, and it just seems a little different than when I was younger. And so that it just seems, in a way, naturally be reframing a little bit, but what are you guys doing to push that along and create a reframed idea of aging?

**John:** Well, we're working with eight national aging organizations that include AARP, National Council on Aging, American Society on Aging to really pull together around this issue of why is the issue of the way we understand aging so difficult to push past? Why is ageism so pervasive in our society? Why would we still always joke about... A wonderful example for me is how often, now that I'm 65, people go into a store and something like, "Well, young man, what can we do for you today?" Now, I know that the person doesn't mean that as an insult, but they're basically saying it's better to be a young person than an old person. I've got white hair, I'm clearly not a young person. But that's a really pervasive sense within our society.

**John:** So what we ended up doing was commissioning a couple large studies from a group called the FrameWorks Institute, which has won a MacArthur prize for one of the innovative organizations in the world. What they do is look not just at perceptions around a particular issue, but how do people put all those perceptions together into a frame, into a framework of understanding. Their first report, if you just Google the words, "Gauging Aging". G-A-U-G-I-N-G. So measuring aging. Gauging Aging. They will come up, really fascinating and particularly fascinating is the fact that they look at the way people like me, who work in the field, think about aging, versus the way the American public does.

**John:** And to give one of many interesting examples, is American individualism, the notion that we work hard, we do good, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps has this in some ways devastating impact on the way we think about aging, which is that if you get to be an older person and you've got health problems or you don't have enough money, "Well gosh, you didn't do the things you were supposed to have done. We told you to eat better, we told you to exercise, we told you to stop smoking." Of course, it doesn't take into account that a large part of this may be genetically based. You're not gonna go back and pick better parents this time. But it really does feed into the sense that, "Well, why should I worry about your problems 'cause you didn't do the things you were supposed to do?" There's lots and lots of insights around this and so forth. We're getting ready for

another major report which really talks more about, "So how do we talk about aging in a way that's gonna help people, not reinforce all the negative stuff, but is going to help us talk to people about a more nuanced sense of how the aging process works, and how they can help on it."

**Jamie:** Yeah. It's interesting too because everything you're saying I think is true, and some of it's rooted in culture, and so when you look at traditionally some of the Asian cultures, they seem to have a higher respect for older people and feel like they can draw wisdom from them. I think certain professions have a pretty intense apprenticeship, sort of pass that they won't even consider you a master of something until you hit a certain age. So age is actually more highly respected. So how do you disrupt maybe a cultural root there and change that? It seems a little bit harder to change. Is there anything in particular that this initiative does or the people that you're working with, anything that they're focusing on that can unhinge that a little bit?

**John:** Absolutely. That's the whole issue is that the whole notion of a framework of understanding is that it's a complete system that encompasses everything that we understand about a particular issue. In this case, aging. And aging is one of the really firmly held sets of beliefs because we all experience it ourselves. We see it in our families and our loved ones. You may feel strongly about climate change for example, but it's not something that you probably experience day-to-day in your life. And so for most people they may have an idea about it and a belief system of why it's important, but it's probably not as firmly held. So one of the things we're better understanding is this is gonna be hard to change. The cultural issues are very important, and so we can't talk about a single mainframe American model that's gonna fit everybody. That said, it's also true that in many cultures throughout the world that we've traditionally thought of as having a stronger sense of connection with older people, that model is fraying or collapsing.

**John:** China is a wonderful example, in 20 years there'll be 300 million Chinese over the age of 65, and that's larger than the entire population of the United States. And what's happened in the last 50 years is that most younger people have continually moved into the cities, leaving older people in the countryside. And so they may see them once or twice a year. And so that notion that the family group somehow is gonna make all this work... The Chinese government is exploring every possible option because it understands that its traditional model of addressing these issues is simply not going to work.

**John:** And interestingly enough, if you look at the top 10 countries in the world which will have the fastest growth in older people, all of them are in the developing world. So we think of Malaysia, or Kenya, or places like that as "young populations." And they are, but they are gonna get older faster than the United States or any European country ever did.

**Jamie:** Yeah. It's... And just the fact that people are living longer, it puts a lot of pressure there. Really, to me it's a fascinating topic because I think people are healthier longer. They're, I think, maybe working longer by choice, and then living longer, which has implications there. Really interesting.

**John:** Right. Let me make one more important point. There's a lot of discussion about the "Age Wave" as... The "Silver Tsunami" is probably a very common term, and the thing is that really does feed into this negative perception. So think about what a tsunami is: It's a natural disaster where everyone dies. I don't think that's really what we want to talk about when we talk about that this is a historic bonus of longevity that our society, and every society in the world, has been given. We have to do a better job at it. We have to do a better job with it. But it's not a bad thing that people don't die at 35 anymore. [chuckle] But you get this like, "Oh my god, what are we gonna do? There's all these old people, they're all helpless, they're all pathetic." And that kind of... Reinforcing those stereotypes, even with people that are trying to talk about aging in a different way, is something that we're gonna have to do a much better job at. And that's really the point of this reframing effort.

**Jamie:** Yeah. I agree and it's, since when you look at it like a tsunami and I think people are looking at it as, "It's gonna be a burden, it's gonna be a big economic kind of obligation there." And politicians look at that and people try to figure that out, but I think that also people are contributing longer. So if they're working longer, they're contributing longer, and I think that needs to be highlighted as well as part of the re-framing.

**John:** So our friends in Atlanta and Kansas City have recently done some really fascinating economic work using the standard models that everybody uses to predict the regional economic growth of an area. And they asked a fairly simple question, "If you were able to add 1,000 people to your community, every year for the next 20, 30, 40 years, would you rather have working-age people or people over 65?" So if you ask any mayor, if you ask an economic development council which would they say? 100% of the time, 'cause I've done this now enough, they will say working-age people. And that's the wrong answer. It turns out if you use these standard economic models, well, people over 65 contributed about four times that rate.

**John:** And that's because they don't use public schools, you could redo it... If you didn't have everybody going to work and coming home from work at the same time, you could redo your transportation system to make better use of it. And they bring wealth with them in terms of pensions, and social security, and all the rest that they're not competing with the workforce you have there. So it really is true that part of our problem is we tend to think of older people as dependent, and there certainly are some but they're a small percentage of the total.

**Jamie:** Right, right, right. Moving on to the engagement initiative, this also I think is worth delving into a little bit. I understand the project resulted in more than \$5.3 million granted from 22 foundations to address aging-related projects. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**John:** Sure, this was a project to work with regional associations of foundations, so basically organizations that all work in a local region of the country, to have them work more effectively in terms of providing information to their members about aging issues. It created a lot of interest in a lot new thoughts about aging funding. Now we are continuing to work with the regional associations to try to incorporate that and to expand that so that we have a lot of knowledge and interest in the field of aging, obviously. For most local foundations, they do the ballet, they do the little league, they do Girl Scouts, they do all across the board, and they probably have a small program on aging. The person in charge of that program may or may not have any background in the field at all. That's obviously a large part of what we do, but it can be something that we can share more effectively if we have folks who are working with these local groups and trying to engage them at the local level around issues that will include older people. It's not setting up a new program on aging, it's really thinking about of all the things you do, and the aging piece you do, how can we help you get there better?

**Jamie:** That's great. Another question that may be related a little bit to this. You're able to track that you have \$5.3 million granted. Do you have any other measurement programs in place that can see more where those funds are going and what some of the outcomes may have been and what some of the impact may have been? Do you have any measurement programs like that in place?

**John:** We certainly are continuing to try. I think one of the difficulties in this is that, just for example, the difficulty in deciding what's an aging program. What most of the organizations that collect this kind of information do is it has to say something like "aging elderly something" in the title of the... We can have arguments all day about whether, for example, cancer research should be counted as aging because 80%-85% of people with cancer are older. Those are not typically included in any of this stuff. So yes, we do try to measure that. Unfortunately, the one that we pay the most attention to because of our particular work is this one about what's the change in the philanthropic field in terms of funding towards aging. And it's not... It has not been positive, it has been stable for a long time, for at least 20 years. Even as the population of older people increases rapidly.

**Jamie:** Where do you see the field going, where do see like five to 10 years out, philanthropy and programs that are devoted to aging?

**John:** It's hard to say exactly, of course, but I think what we're going to see is more cross-cutting kinds of programs, and once again, rural aging is a good one because it's a major component of any rural community, but we need people who are already engaged in those communities to pay more attention to the aging issues specifically. I think that's where the growth is going to be. Not in the wonderful organizations that are supporting aging programs primarily, of which there are a few, but not many. In terms of the subject matter areas, those have a tendency to wax and wane depending on a whole variety of factors, including what a

specific foundation is interested in. Many of them are gonna be perennial. I think the big question mark, now, is that we're in a moment where we're really looking once again at some of the basic assumptions about what the role of government is in guaranteeing some basic things about the older people in the United States. That is now this huge question mark in the middle of everything else because we sort of have assumed that the basic structure of that was gonna remain intact pretty much no matter what. And now, really serious questions about whether that's, in fact, the case or not.

**Jamie:** What can we learn from other countries about this?

**John:** Well, we are in fact working internationally with a number of countries, and it's interesting how similar and different the issues are. In most countries, there's not an organized philanthropic sector of the size of the United States. Basically there is none around the world. So that aspect is certainly very different. But the questions about how does a government or non-governmental agencies work together to try to improve the community as a whole? Not just children, not just older people, not just something in-between, but around everyone is something that we see everyone struggle with. So the notion that somehow in Finland, or Ireland, or wherever, they've got it all figured out. I mean, all you have to do is talk to the Finnish and Irish folks working on age, and they'll just burst out laughing.

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**John:** You know, it's very much... There, however, the issue really does revolve almost entirely around what it is that the government is willing to fund. That is always the first place where programmatic money is found.

**Jamie:** Right.

**John:** So, you know, I think that it's a good thing in some ways, but the bad thing is that it makes sort of the experimentation that we're sometimes able to do here using sometimes government money, but often philanthropic money, more difficult, I think. But it also makes the process of how the government serves its people much more a part of the issue. And I think the contrast between some of the Asian countries, with China being the big example but many others, and European countries and the US, it's probably sort of three models. Certainly in the Asian countries the government is also a very predominant player, but how involved they are at aging specifically? How much they leave that to their traditional family structure, which is evolving very quickly and may not be able to provide that anymore.

**Jamie:** Right.

**John:** That's what they're struggling with. The European countries are struggling with "how do we continue to provide all of these services in a coordinated way, in a way that's not cost-destructive." And here, once again, we're really basically challenging some major assumptions about what is the relationship between our citizens. Particularly our older citizens and the government and its support.

**Jamie:** Right. Right. That's great. So do you have anything to add?

**John:** It's very important for everyone to think about both in their own life, and also in terms of the way that they think about the issues of aging, to think really carefully about how it is we understand, we as individuals understand the issues around aging. Do we think it's basically up to us as individuals, and if you don't make a successful go of it then it's your fault? How are we supporting one another? How are we thinking about what the role of philanthropy, government, individual activities, the family? Are we paying any attention to these issues? And I think that's really a central thing. We have to engage in a conversation that's more productive than we've had in the past. Maybe one of the good things to come of the current political environment is that we are having a lot of those discussions right now. You know it's mainly a screaming match so far as we can tell, but...

**Jamie:** Yeah.

**John:** But at some point people of good will on both sides are going to need to say, "So this is how I think we should do this." And hopefully that will also lead us to a better place for our rapidly aging society, which includes all of us.

**Jamie:** All right, that's great. John, thank you so much for joining us today. It was really a great conversation.

**John:** My pleasure.

**Jamie:** Now, for our listeners, I hope you enjoyed this episode of Champions for Social Good. To learn more about Grantmakers In Aging, you can visit [GIAging.org](http://GIAging.org) and also follow them on Twitter @GIAging, and you can learn about all these great programs that they have in place, and you can read more about those. Make sure to subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss an episode. And keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @jamieserino, @microedgellc, and @blackbaud. Thank you for listening.