

Community needs at the heart of AAI's advocacy efforts

The Marin County Aging Action Initiative (AAI) has its eye on the future and is working to further its objectives in both the near and long term. Its efforts in the areas of the Master Plan for Aging (MPA), social responsibility, and advocacy at the county level are showing great promise on all fronts.

After surveying key leaders and stakeholders at the beginning of 2022, AAI identified caregiving, housing, and social connection as the year's priority issues. Given how the chosen three dovetail with several of California's five bold goals for older adults, the topics felt like the right ones, said AAI Program Director Linda Jackson, emphasizing how her county's aims enhance engagement at the state level. To support progress, AAI focused its September convening on the MPA; professionals working toward the well-being of older adults, including those with disabilities, attended a dedicated session for each goal. AAI also regularly updates its members on state-level advocacy and legislation to implement components of the MPA and capitalize on timely opportunities.

AAI is exploring a merger with the Marin Aging and Disability Institute (MADI), which works to serve the needs of older adults and people with disabilities. "We're just beginning to build a disability coalition to link up with AAI and work on these issues with a fully intersectional lens of aging and disability," said Eli Gelardin, co-CEO of MADI, CEO of the Marin Center for Independent Living (MCIL), and a member of the AAI Steering Committee.

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-Linda Jackson, AAI Program Director

Addressing intersectionality and equity needs in the community has been a strong focus of AAI and its leadership in recent years. "You start with DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] by looking inside yourself and your organization. We started doing this explicitly back in 2019," Jackson said. One of AAI's early steps was adding members from diverse backgrounds to its steering committee to better reflect Marin County's demographics.

The organization also began holding sessions on DEI at its annual convening, and the issue only became more urgent in the wake of COVID's uneven impact on historically marginalized communities and the racial unrest following George Floyd's murder in 2020. The first few years they offered equity training on racial justice, and in 2021 focused on immigrant populations. This year, the session featured the experiences of older women from marginalized groups; panel members included women of Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latina, and disabled backgrounds. "Part of DEI is promoting, elevating, and spotlighting these voices rather than quote-unquote experts," Gelardin said. "Experts are important, but we often hear from them, while we don't hear from the caregivers or care recipients, and those are the voices

we need to provide platforms."

Looking forward, AAI recognizes the coming wave of older adults who will need supports and services. "We've been successful in getting [county leaders] to look at what we're doing well today and think about how we'll do that work when we have thousands of more people in their 70s and 80s, about 5-7 years from now," Jackson said. She pointed specifically to housing shortages and advocacy on behalf of older adults and people with disabilities: "It's been really powerful in opening the eyes of planners."

Another major county initiative is One Door, its Aging and Disability Resource Connection – developed and supported by the county's Aging and Adult Services – that provides a No Wrong Door entry point for services for older adults and people with disabilities. AAI and MCIL help support this effort, which also ties into advancing MPA goals. Gelardin hopes to see One Door broaden its reach to also help more allied stakeholders as well as families with children. "We recognize how much need there is to help people navigate through social services, health systems, even disasters, and then get back home," he said. "We will create a more robust care coordination system over time."

Contact

Linda Jackson
Program Director
linda.m.jackson@agingactioninitiative.org

On the Web

Twitter: [@AAIMarin](https://twitter.com/AAIMarin)
Website: <https://agingactioninitiative.org/>
YouTube: [Aging Action Initiative Channel](#)