

JULY 2024

POSITIVEAGE LISTENS: RVA VOICES FOR OLDER ADULT ADVOCACY



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

POSITIVEAGE, A LEADINGAGE VIRGINIA FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PositiveAge Listens: RVA Voices for Older Adult Advocacy aims to enhance understanding of the needs of Richmond-based not-for-profit partners with respect to older adult advocacy and public policy that advances positive aging for Virginians. Together, this group assembled to address challenges facing older adults in the Richmond region and foster opportunities for elders by coordinating and aligning advocacy efforts among individual organizations. Made possible by funding from the [Richmond Memorial Health Foundation \(RMHF\)](#) and the [Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation](#), PositiveAge engaged 23 Richmond-based not-for-profit organizations that serve older adults in two Listening Sessions to discuss the participant's perceptions on advocacy, policy impacts, and areas of need. The resulting conversations led to valuable insights and strategic recommendations on how to move this important work forward.

The Listening Session participants noted key challenges that hinder effective advocacy: lack of coordinated action, limited representation from older adults themselves, and stalled effective policy implementation. Though these challenges are indeed difficult to overcome, the assembled stakeholders displayed enthusiasm

and determination to innovate, work collectively, and design realistic solutions to address these cited challenges and enhance advocacy efforts.

To create a blueprint for change, the collaborating organizations identified solutions that address systemic barriers: engage additional stakeholders; build a coalition of voices for older adult advocacy; establish an advocacy champion program; and elevate the voices of older adults themselves by empowering them to share stories and their experiences in the appropriate forums.

When effectively executed, these recommendations will enhance the efficacy of advocacy efforts for older adults and influence positive policy change in the Richmond region. By fostering collaboration and coordinating efforts among multiple organizations to address systemic challenges, *PositiveAge Listens* aims to create a more inclusive Richmond community for older adults.

**COMMITMENT TO
DIVERSITY, EQUITY,
AND INCLUSION**

“LeadingAge Virginia is committed to using open hearts and minds to expand the possibilities of aging. We aim to be a leading advocate for all of Virginia’s aging population. To maintain this status, we promote fair and open access to our services through continuous improvement of our policies and procedures targeted to remove barriers. We join our member communities in the embrace of the diverse perspectives of residents, employees and partners representing all genders, orientations, cultures, races, economic status, and ability. We are steadfast in our pursuit to lead today, challenge ourselves in respectful dialogue, learn from the past and create opportunities to build a bright future for all who meet us.”

ORGANIZATION PROFILE: POSITIVEAGE

PositiveAge is the 501(c)(3) foundation for LeadingAge Virginia, an association of not-for-profit services organizations serving residents and clients across the aging services continuum, including life plan/continuing care retirement communities, affordable senior housing, assisted living, nursing homes, adult day centers, hospice and palliative care, and home and community-based services. PositiveAge leverages the association’s resources and reputation, positioning the foundation to seamlessly connect with the association’s 100 Virginia-based not-for-profit member organizations and their residents, clients, and caregivers. The PositiveAge team understands that actualizing its vision of **“positive aging for each Virginian”** requires bold, collaborative engagement among stakeholders and community members alike to ensure that each Virginian truly has equitable access to aging services without institutional and systemic barriers.

As the foundation of the association, PositiveAge is uniquely positioned to effectively engage aging services organizations, community members, and stakeholders around the Commonwealth to address the changing needs of older adults and strives to educate the public and lawmakers about issues concerning the older adult population. The team readily engages networks to enact collaborative, community-driven solutions to challenges facing older adults and advocates on their behalf in the appropriate forums, including Virginia’s General Assembly and Congressional Delegation.

BACKGROUND & SIGNIFICANCE

Historically, the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation and the Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation have partnered to convene not-for-profit organizations focused on supporting older adults in the Richmond region. [The Future of Older Adults in the Richmond Region: Challenges and Opportunities](#) initiative aimed to better understand the systems and structures necessary to support older adults – particularly those with low and moderate incomes – in maintaining a good quality of life and having the option to age in their preferred home and community. Stakeholders recognized that critical policies, structure, and framework were needed to more effectively advocate for the concerns of older adults to policymakers.

In 2023, RMHF and the Schaberg Foundation engaged PositiveAge to provide the needed structure and build upon the outcomes and themes identified in their earlier work through the *PositiveAge Listens: RVA Voices for Older Adult Advocacy* initiative. Through this collaboration, stakeholders explored opportunities to better engage older adults, service providers, and other community members to identify crucial issues, propose solutions, and advocate for policy and systems changes to effect positive change for older adults.

POSITIVEAGE LISTENS GOALS:

1. **Examine advocacy perceptions and needs among Richmond-based not-for-profits;**
2. **Identify current gaps and barriers in older adult advocacy efforts; and**
3. **Collaboratively identify potential solutions and future action that would result in meaningful change for older adults.**

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the *PositiveAge Listens* goals, the project team engaged Richmond-based not-for-profit organizations, aging service providers, and community organizations that serve older adults in the Richmond region. In total, 23 not-for-profit organizations, as listed in Appendix B, participated in the project's two Listening Sessions: a virtual session on October 25, 2023, hosting 15 organizations; and an in-person session on November 15, 2023, hosting 16 organizations.

Each participating organization was awarded a grant-funded, one-year membership to LeadingAge Virginia so that they could access the association's resources, engage in unique networking opportunities among aging services organizations, receive advocacy support and professional development opportunities, and weekly updates on the legislative and regulatory landscape of aging services in Virginia. This support empowered the participating organizations to stay informed, connected, and equipped with the latest field insights and tools, thereby enhancing their capacity to collaborate effectively.

LISTENING SESSIONS

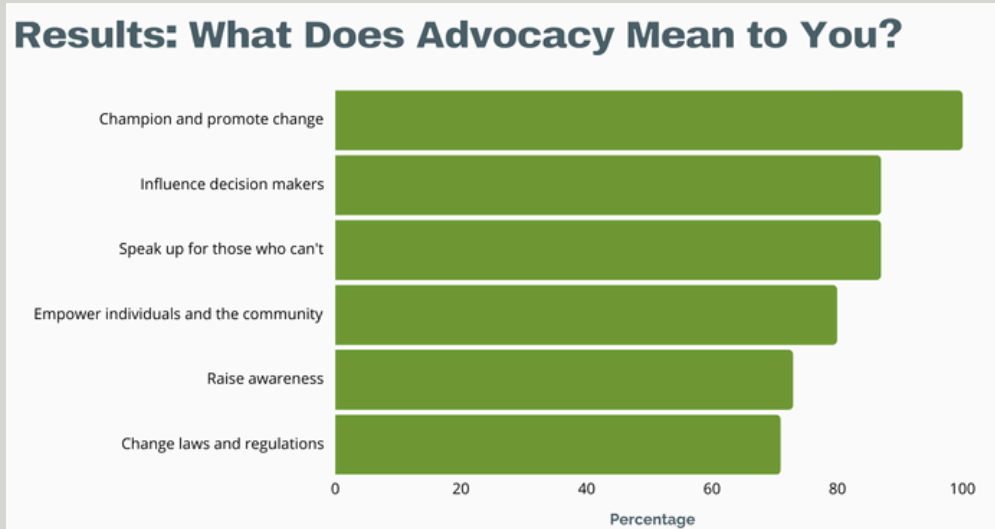
On October 25, 2023, PositiveAge virtually convened the identified organizations to set the foundation for the future of the group by facilitating collaboration among participants. The session agenda is provided as Appendix C - Virtual Session Agenda. On November 15, 2023, PositiveAge convened 16 not-for-profit organizations for an in-person Listening Session. The session agenda is provided as Appendix D - In-Person Collaboration Agenda. The following sections describe the key takeaways from these convenings.



EXAMINING ADVOCACY PERCEPTIONS

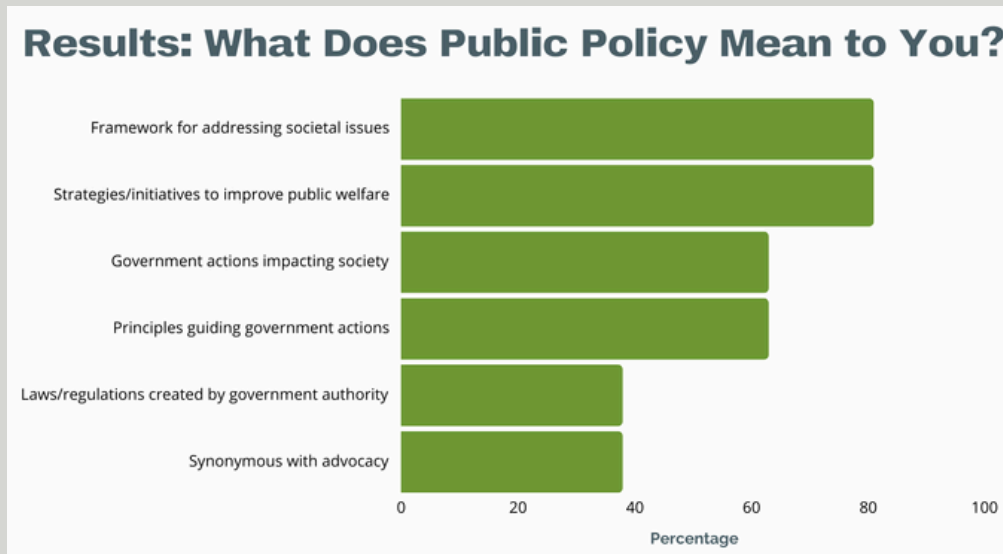
The project team utilized polling questions to better understand participant's perceptions on advocacy, public policy, impact of public policy, and areas of need. The poll results are summarized below:

1. ADVOCACY



Participants unanimously reported that the ultimate goal of advocacy is to be champions of influencing and promoting positive change.

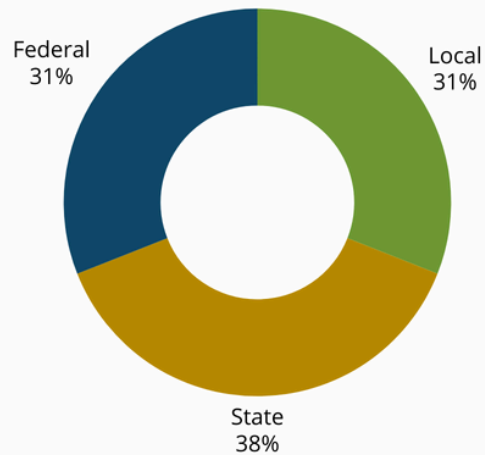
2. PUBLIC POLICY



Participants were split between the notion that public policy is “the framework set for addressing societal issues,” and “the strategies and initiatives that improve the welfare of the public.”

3. IMPACT OF PUBLIC POLICY

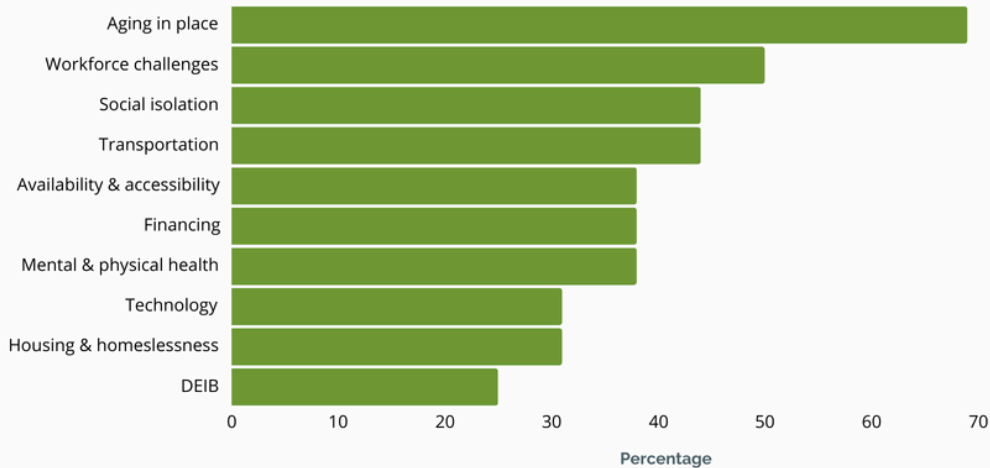
Results: Where Does Public Policy Impact You the Most?



Participants indicated that the assembled organizations are equally affected by public policy at local, state, and federal levels.

4. AREAS OF NEED

Results: Areas of Need



Participants were asked to identify the top three areas most in need of advocacy for older adults in the Richmond region. Though the results demonstrate that “aging in place” was most often selected, there is a critical need for advocacy work in multiple areas. During group discussion, participants also identified the needs of older LGBTQ+ individuals, and food insecurity as additional advocacy areas.



ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

Participants were asked to describe their ongoing advocacy activities, with attendees sharing individual efforts by their respective organizations. Some organizations are only just beginning their advocacy efforts, while others have more established advocacy efforts. Collaboration, mutual support, and collective impact were emphasized as themes to demonstrate to participants that while their individual efforts are commendable, working together to coordinate and unify their efforts and strategies would likely affect more meaningful, efficient, and impactful change. The following list of advocacy strategies summarizes individual efforts underway by participating organizations, including activities supported by their LeadingAge Virginia membership:

- **Visiting Virginia General Assembly and U.S. Capitol Hill.***
- **Hosting legislators for a visit to their organization or community.**
- **Developing connections with relevant state agencies.**
- **Educating their governing boards about the importance of advocacy work.**
- **Funding advocacy efforts and projects for other organizations.**
- **Participating in advocacy efforts organized on their behalf by associations like LeadingAge Virginia and the Alzheimer's Association.**
- **Sharing stories of older adults with lived experiences during special events such as *Older Americans Month* or *Active Aging Week*.**

**participants mostly shared individual efforts to visit legislators but noted that structured, organized, and coordinated visits are likely more impactful*

“Collaboration, mutual support, and collective impact were emphasized as themes to demonstrate to participants that while their individual efforts are commendable, working together to coordinate and unify their efforts and strategies would likely affect more meaningful, efficient, and impactful change.”

IDENTIFIED BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Participants discussed and identified gaps in current advocacy efforts, shown below.

THE TWO MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS IDENTIFIED WERE:

1. **The lack of coordination among stakeholders; and**
2. **The lack of awareness of how greatly policy shortcomings impact older adults**

PARTICIPANTS ALSO IDENTIFIED SECONDARY BARRIERS AND GAPS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED, INCLUDING IMPROVING:

- Access to resources
- Structured lobbying
- Advocacy for older adults with disabilities
- Middle market affordability and accessible housing
- Safe transportation
- Coordination/collaboration among stakeholders
- Communication and understanding
- Structured education tailored to lawmakers regarding relevant issues, services and resources related to aging services
- Diversity among advocates (advocates are not representative of those for whom they are advocating)



Participants noted a dependence on associations for advocacy, sharing that several organizations simply lack the resources and capacity to increase their existing individual efforts. This highlights the need to grow advocacy capacity within aging services organizations by teaching and sharing effective advocacy practices, while also coordinating those efforts using a common framework, structure, or system that demonstrates the collective voice of participating organizations.

STRATEGIES TO EMPOWER OLDER ADULTS IN ADVOCACY

Participants strategized ways to amplify the voices, lived experiences, and stories of older adults in Richmond, integrating them into advocacy efforts. The following activities were identified as effective means to engage and empower older adults:

1. **Organizing a reception or event with state legislators during Virginia's General Assembly session to enhance visibility and comprehension among state legislators.**
2. **Facilitating periodic gatherings of older Richmond-based adults at various not-for-profit organizations to conduct Listening Sessions.**
3. **Engaging direct care staff among aging service provider communities to advocate on behalf of the older adults for whom they care.**
4. **Establishing a centralized forum (such as an accessible online library or repository) for collecting and sharing older adults' stories and experiences, ensuring accessibility for all organizations involved to utilize in advocacy efforts.**



DEVELOPING AN ADVOCACY PLAN

Attendees participated in small group advocacy activities designed to foster collaboration among organizations by guiding participants' understanding of how to engage in grassroots advocacy and leveraging their own organization's strengths while seeking guidance from external advocacy partners. Participants were instructed to focus on working together, rather than the advocacy plan's outcome, to better learn how to navigate challenges and leverage the collective strength of their combined efforts. The following summarizes the major themes from this activity:

1. RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT

- Researching, convening, and partnering with a diverse group of stakeholders and service providers, incorporating community voices and persons with lived experiences.

2. NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

- Ensuring accessibility and inclusivity in all efforts to identify gaps, needs, and barriers, while working to align a common mission and vision among local and state partners/stakeholders.

3. ADVOCACY AND MESSAGING

- Unifying stakeholders for a clear, concise message rooted in robust research that leverages grassroots advocacy and incorporates personal stories to humanize identified issues.
- Leveraging social media and media relations to enhance visibility, establishing an online community for information sharing, and recognizing and navigating biases.

4. CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

- Recognizing the opposition's potential lack of understanding, working to overcome existing biases and changing perspectives, and acknowledging the need for irrefutable results, tangible outcomes, and deliverables.



RESULTS AND FINDINGS

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES

Participants most frequently cited four challenges that impede the progress of advocacy efforts for older adults:

1. LIMITED AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

Lack of visibility and awareness surrounding issues concerning older adults was a commonly cited challenge among participants. Many older adults' experiences and needs remain unseen and unheard, leaving their unique challenges and concerns unknown to the larger community and policymakers. Some participating organizations do not have robust knowledge and resources to effectively address the identified areas of need in advocating for older adults. There is a known shortage of education and training on advocacy strategies, policy frameworks, and best practices.

2. FRAGMENTED STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Though there are numerous organizations and stakeholders working on behalf of older adults, coordination and collaboration among them is often lacking, resulting in inefficiencies and missed opportunities for collective impact. Additionally, the absence of a centralized system through which information and updates are disseminated further silos advocacy efforts, even though these groups are working towards the same goal. As a result, many stakeholders remain unaware of key developments, events, and relevant advocacy initiatives led by peers.

3. POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE BARRIERS

Policy and legislative barriers, including complex regulatory frameworks, bureaucratic hurdles, and limited resources impede the implementation of effective policies and initiatives aimed at supporting older adults and addressing their needs.

4. LIMITED INVOLVEMENT FROM OLDER ADULTS

Though *PositiveAge Listens* focuses on advocating for older adults, there is minimal direct engagement with older adults. Their perspectives, wants, and needs are often under-represented in the planning and decision-making processes that could directly impact their day-to-day lives. Older adult advocates can attempt to relate the stories and experiences they have learned from older adults, but this falls short of empowering older adults to engage directly in advocacy activities.

Advancing advocacy efforts for older adults should always include those individuals directly impacted by policies and systems.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Although significant challenges and gaps were identified, participants were aligned and committed to improving the current policies and systems that have created these gaps through innovative ideas for change, summarized below.

1. PLAN FOR FUTURE ADVOCACY

- Develop a comprehensive plan that outlines the long-term vision and goals for advocacy efforts in Richmond, including a plan to engage prospective coalition members, ensuring that the plan realistically includes sustainability, adaptability, and a strategic approach to tackling emerging issues.

2. UNITE A COALITION OF COLLECTIVE VOICES FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

- Uniting the voices of various not-for-profit organizations and community members will amplify the impact of their efforts. This strategy requires stakeholders to invest in ongoing partnerships, shared learning, and collective impact. By speaking with a collective voice, these advocacy efforts increase attention, support, and resources, maximizing influence and encouraging policymakers and the public to act on critical issues affecting older adults and aging services organizations.

- Organize meetings, forums, or information sessions to introduce the concept of the coalition, its objectives, and the potential impact of collective advocacy efforts.
- Facilitate opportunities for collaboration, networking, shared learning, and relationship-building among coalition members through collaborative projects, working groups, or social events.
- Cultivate a culture of trust, mutual respect, and inclusivity within the coalition, recognizing and valuing the diversity of experiences and viewpoints among members.

3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Engage key stakeholders from various sectors such as healthcare, community organizations, government agencies, and academia, convening these groups to gather diverse perspectives and input on advocacy initiatives.
- Establish an online platform or community where participants and supporters can connect, share resources, and collaborate on advocacy efforts.

4. EMPOWER OLDER ADULTS AND ADVOCACY CHAMPIONS

- Actively engage older adults in focus groups, surveys, and listening sessions to understand their needs, challenges, priorities and solutions, ensuring that they are co-designing decision-making processes and advocacy activities.
- Develop and implement an Advocacy Champion program specific to the needs of this effort by using an existing LeadingAge Virginia advocacy champion blueprint.
- Provide education, training, and resources to equip champions with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively advocate for older adults' needs.
- Foster leadership development and collaboration among champions to drive advocacy initiatives forward.

5. ADVOCACY PLANNING DEVELOPMENT

- Establish a structured process for developing and implementing advocacy initiatives, including setting goals, defining strategies, and evaluating outcomes.
- Conduct research and analysis on issues affecting older adults to understand the current policy landscape, and then use that research to proactively develop targeted advocacy campaigns to influence policymakers and advocate for beneficial policy changes.

6. EDUCATION AND STRATEGY

- Organize workshops, webinars, or seminars to educate stakeholders on relevant issues, policies, and change strategies.
- Foster collaboration and shared learning among stakeholders to maximize efforts.
- Provide training and resources on effective advocacy techniques and best practices.
- Develop a social media strategy to raise awareness, engage the public, and amplify advocacy messages.



7. ADDRESS BARRIERS WITH INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

- Identify underlying systemic barriers, root causes, biases, and social determinants faced by older adults, and then devise effective strategies to advocate for policy changes that address those identified inequities.
- Develop resources or support programs to alleviate burdens and empower older adults to participate in advocacy efforts.
- Promote inclusivity and diversity in decision-making processes and messaging.
- Develop innovative problem-solving skills, continuous quality improvement cycles, and a commitment to routinely evaluate and improve strategies.
- Design effective pathways for soliciting policy solutions from those that are most impacted by those policies – namely, older adults, their families, and aging service providers – to more accurately represent the needs of the Richmond community.

CONCLUSION

PositiveAge Listens: RVA Voices for Older Adult Advocacy has effectively highlighted the need for coordinated advocacy efforts to address the challenges faced by older adults in the Richmond region. Addressing root causes and systemic issues affecting older adults begins with inventorying current policies, identifying gaps, and proposing innovative strategies. Richmond-based not-for-profits recognize that overcoming these barriers necessitates strategic collaboration among stakeholders.

The *PositiveAge Listens* sessions have set a precedent for collaborative advocacy in the Richmond region. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended participant-designed strategies, the engaged partners will maximize their collective efforts, driving positive change to meet the needs of Richmond's older adults.

ABOUT THE FUNDERS

RICHMOND MEMORIAL HEALTH FOUNDATION



The Richmond Memorial Health Foundation has a storied history rooted in community health and equity. The Richmond Memorial Hospital was founded in 1957 as a tribute to local World War II veterans and served as a beacon of inclusivity and healthcare access for all, regardless of background or financial means. In 1977, the Richmond Memorial Hospital Foundation was established to ensure financial stability during economic challenges and later evolved into the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation. Today, their mission focuses on fostering an equitable and healthy Richmond region. They are dedicated to advancing health and racial equity through responsible grantmaking and collaborative initiatives. The Foundations values of equity, learning, stewardship, respect, inclusion, impact, and transparency guide their efforts to create positive, sustainable change in the Richmond community.

BOB AND ANNA LOU SCHABERG FOUNDATION



Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation

The Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation has a rich history rooted in community service and advocacy. In the early '90s, Bob Schaberg founded the Virginia Nonprofit Housing Coalition, with Anna Lou Schaberg joining a few years later as the Executive Director. Initially a nonprofit housing coalition, it was reorganized as a foundation in 2019, expanding its mission to empower those facing difficult circumstances to thrive. The Schaberg Foundation's funding priorities include affordable housing, workforce development, and education services that foster successful learning experiences. The Foundation collaborates with and supports nonprofits involved in education, advocacy, and direct service provision, aiming to create equitable opportunities for all. Guided by values of compassion, learning, insight, risk tolerance, trust, and humility, the Foundation continues to make impactful contributions to community well-being and systemic development.

APPENDIX

A. [PositiveAge Website](#)

B. Not-For-Profit Participating Organizations

Alzheimer's Association for Greater Richmond
Beth Sholom Senior Living
Bob and Anna Lou Schaberg Foundation (funder)
Brandermill Woods
Circle Center Adult Day Services
Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond
Covenant Woods
Family Lifeline
Lucy Corr Foundation
Peter Paul Development Center
project:HOMES
Richmond Health and Wellness Program
Richmond Memorial Health Foundation (funder)
Saint Francis - Manchester
Senior Connections - CAAA
South Richmond Adult Day Center
St. Mary's Woods Retirement Community
VCU Department of Gerontology Community and Continuing Education
Virginia Dental Association Foundation (VDAF)
Virginia Down Syndrome Association
Virginia Voice, Inc.
Westminster Canterbury Richmond
YMCA of Greater Richmond

C. [Virtual Session Agenda](#)

D. [In-Person Collaboration Agenda](#)

E. [Project Resource One-Pager](#)