Age-Friendly Public Services: Rethinking Libraries & Fire Companies in Rural Tompkins County

Chenming Zhang, Kanij Fateema, and Kathy Lim

Introduction

Tompkins County–a member of AARP's Network of Age-Friendly Communities and one of the five Age Friendly Centers for Excellence in New York State–led by the County Office for the Aging (COFA), continues to make efforts to create an age-friendly environment as its older adult population continues to grow. The 2019 Needs Assessment Report identified loneliness and social isolation as a significant problem in the communities.[1] Challenges in civic and social engagement, older adult services, and social isolation are more pronounced in rural areas, which may not have the proximity or accessibility to community facilities or services and may experience resource or capacity constraints. This project looks at the untapped potential of public service facilities (i.e., libraries and fire companies) to create a welcoming and engaging environment in rural Tompkins County for older adults aging in place.

Methodology

As seen in Figure 1 below, semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted to gain insights into establishing age-friendly environments in libraries and fire companies. An examination of public services' outreach on Facebook offered a preliminary understanding of their efforts and served as a valuable starting point. Integrating interview findings, social media outreach analysis, and case studies, the study identified interests, strategies, and challenges in age-friendly engagement initiatives within rural libraries and fire companies.
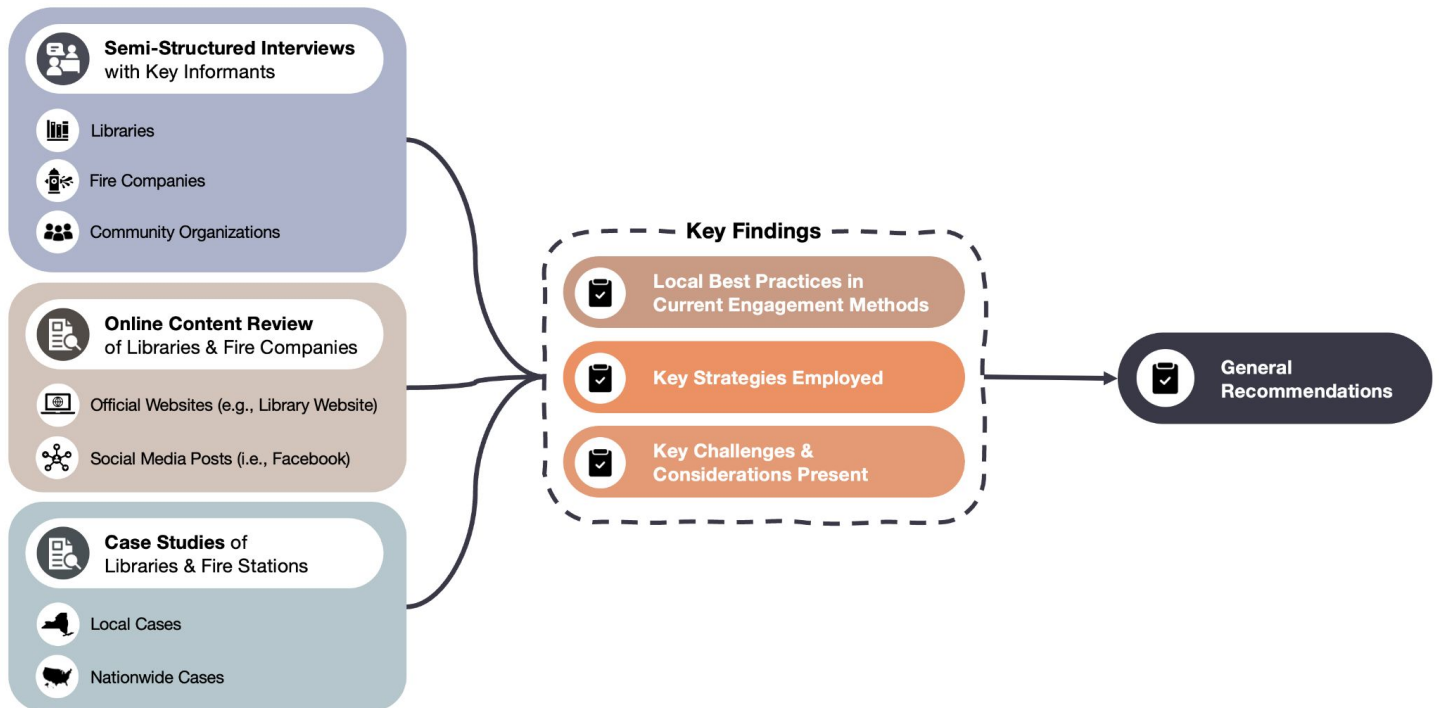

Figure 1. Methodology

[1] https://www2.tompkinscountyny.gov/files2/cofa/COFA%202019%20Needs%20Assessment%20Report%20Final.pdf

Strategies for Engagement

Rural Tompkins County public libraries and fire companies employ distinct strategies to enhance community visibility and engagement, focusing on building trust and positive community relations. These facilities foster a sense of community by promoting diverse interactive activities, ensuring accessibility for older patrons, and collaborating with other community organizations to optimize limited capacity and resources. They position themselves as comprehensive resources catering to a wide range of community needs.

🤝 Community Partnership & Collaboration

Community partnerships and cross-agency collaboration have proven to be effective strategies for hosting events. These partnerships span various levels, involving individuals, non-profit organizations, local schools, and fire companies. For instance, individual community members and organizations like Lifelong host events, such as fitness classes for older adults, at library and fire company spaces. Libraries collaborate with schools to promote youth-focused programming and team up with fire companies for larger community gatherings. Informal partnerships emerge when multiple libraries host an event with the same external guest, leveraging familiarity with the guest and readily available promotional information that other libraries have utilized. Additionally, there are instances where Library Directors assist their towns in grant applications, showcasing how cross-agency collaboration and individual partnerships not only enhance programming for various age groups but also create opportunities for the entire community.

📷 Ensuring Accessibility

Ensuring accessibility of programs or events was another priority. Certain libraries schedule adult programming on weekend mornings to best accommodate patrons. All libraries embrace hybrid programs, catering to those with limited transportation or during adverse weather. The Danby Volunteer Fire Company adopts a semi-hybrid approach for their pancake breakfasts, offering in-person attendance or convenient take-out options.

🤝 Building Trust & Community Relationships

Building trust-based community relationships was a fundamental strategy for both libraries and fire companies. Beyond providing an inclusive environment, libraries aim to create a sense of community for all ages, where community members can not only seek entertainment and education but also connect and share stories with each other. Informants have collectively voiced the importance of actively "showing up" for community events, meetings, local businesses as a crucial step in building trust and raising awareness about the various roles and programming that libraries provide. Informants further share that a friendly "customer service" approach and initiatives like waiving late fees contribute to a welcoming atmosphere, emphasizing accessibility for those in need. Managing these relationships may also involve civilly navigating difficult conversations with patrons. In contrast, fire companies establish connections by engaging with community members during fundraising or educational events. Some fire companies shared that they keep an eye out for older adults with repeated emergency events such as falls.

📣 Active Outreach & Promotion

To boost turnout and community relevance, libraries actively promote events through various channels. They actively utilize multiple outlets, such as Facebook (which is most preferred by middle to older-aged adults), newspapers, quarterly magazines, or radio announcements to promote programs, with the aim to create a snowball effect through word of mouth and social media sharing. For youth programs, they collaborate with schools to spread the word or distribute permission slips for events. Some libraries support promotion of broader community events. The Newfield Public Library is pushing forward the "Improving Communication in Newfield" initiative to raise community awareness about local events, by distributing event information to applicable outlets on behalf of all Newfield organizations. While the official library website calendar only highlights library events, posters of upcoming community events are uploaded in slideshow format for easy community access.

🖼️ Assessing Community Demands & Needs

Addressing the ongoing challenge of low turnout in library programming and services requires a strategic focus on correctly assessing community demand. Consulting with community members through everyday conversations, surveys, and focus group discussions is crucial, particularly for long-range planning. To maximize community input in gauging community demands, libraries conducted surveys by distributing them through diverse channels, including local businesses, schools, social media, newspapers, and newsletters, via both online QR code and paper form.

Challenges in Engagement

Despite the unique community-serving functions of libraries and fire companies, they face challenges in service provision. Limited capacity and funding constrain an already limited workforce. Despite earnest efforts in organizing community-oriented events, low turnouts often result from insufficient awareness and promotional opportunities. Additionally, regulations and liability issues can restrict these facilities from expanding their roles within the community.

🤲 Funding

Both libraries and fire companies wrestle with funding challenges. Libraries, despite playing a critical role–both formally and informally–to serve their community, often struggle with financial limitations. As a key informant stated, "We do a great job pivoting in difficult situations such as the pandemic and continue to serve the community but are not the best advocate for ourselves," sharing the need to support staff who can then support the community more effectively. Expressing the need for better staff compensation and recognizing the pivotal role of "people" in community service, the informant voiced the necessity for increased funding, especially for essential benefits like health insurance. Likewise, increased funding for fire companies would strengthen their vital community role, particularly in securing essential fire and emergency equipment and reducing the burden of fundraising amidst struggles with limited manpower.

🤲 Limited Capacity & Availability of Time

Both libraries and fire companies grapple with challenges stemming from limited capacity and time constraints. Libraries, often juggling multiple community service roles, encounter obstacles due to insufficient capacity and a shortage of experts to meet the growing social service-related demands of patrons. The issue is compounded by a lack of full-time staff, exemplified by Groton, which has only one full-time member. Balancing diverse roles within limited time frames presents additional challenges for organizing programs and events, as brainstorming ideas, finding field experts, scheduling, and promoting programs all demand substantial effort and time. Volunteer-run fire companies face significant manpower hurdles, hindering not only their primary roles in firefighting and rescue but also limiting their capacity for broader community engagement. Although semi-rural fire companies near universities manage to address the manpower crisis by recruiting students, rural communities often lack this luxury.

📑 Regulation & Liabilities

Fire companies experience challenges related to regulations and liabilities. Hosting for-profit events is restricted for many companies with the exception of a few fire companies classified as independent private corporations, and the premises are off-limits for activities involving alcohol or gambling (e.g., Bingo). Safety issues prevent the use of commercial kitchens for community purposes, although the usage of plug-in crockpots are allowed. In exploring the possibility of fire companies assisting with fall prevention through grab bar installation campaigns, concerns with liability and certification issues were expressed.

🧑‍🏫 Low Turnout

Despite investing time, funding, resources, and manpower into events, achieving good turnout remains a major hurdle for rural libraries. For similar reasons, low participation in digital literacy classes has prompted libraries to offer such assistance on a one-on-one basis on demand.
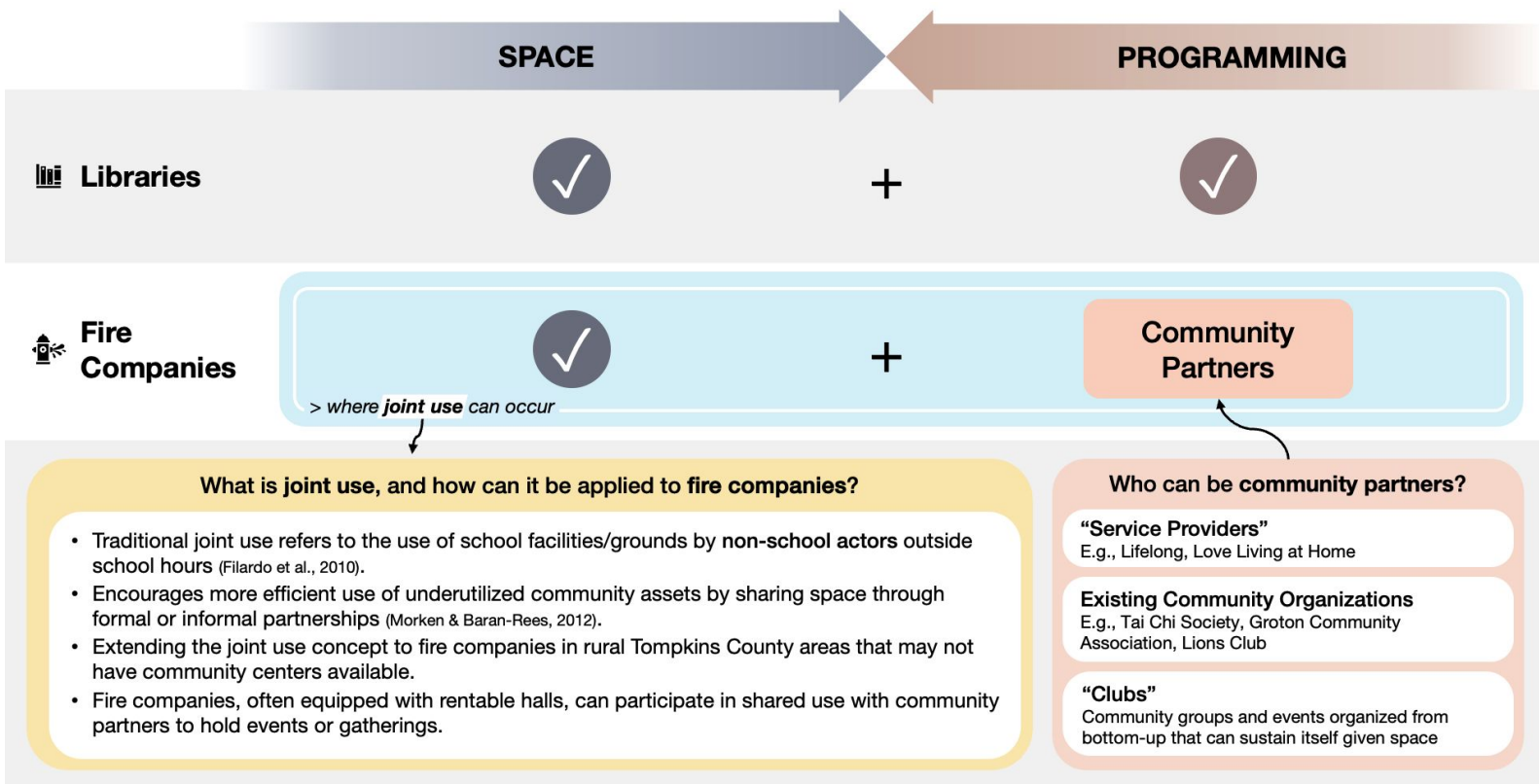
Figure 2. Where space meets programming–we see large potential for older adult and community engagement at fire companies via joint use.

Recommendations

We find untapped potential that is particularly present in fire companies. While libraries have the capacity to offer both space and programming, fire companies possess large halls but have difficulty in organizing events due to lack of manpower. By offering fire hall space for shared use with community partners, fire companies can host events, maximizing existing resources. A number of fire companies already partake in joint use (see Figure 2), such as the Trumansburg Volunteer Fire Company offering space for fitness classes by Lifelong or Tai Chi classes by the Taoist Tai Chi Society, or the Danby Fire Company providing its space periodically for a magic club meeting. This collaborative approach not only optimizes available resources but also addresses capacity gaps, enabling them to better serve the community collectively.

To combat low turnout and inadequate promotion, we further propose the possibility of centrally promoting (e.g., through COFA) resources and events for older adults, in addition to the existing channels already used by libraries and fire companies.

Lastly, taking inspiration from the successful grab bar installation initiatives in fire companies in other states and the Varna Volunteer Fire Company's reflective street numbering campaign, a future study can delve into the real impact of regulations and liabilities and potential avenues for making them more flexible to introduce grab bar installations as a proactive measure for fall prevention.