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Pilot Mentoring Program Paves the Way for Tomorrow's Leaders in Aging

By KRISTEN PAVLE and GAYLE SHIER

This past October marked the completion of a pilot mentorship program developed and launched by Chicago Bridge, a professional group providing support, networking and social opportunities for individuals in the early to mid stages of a career in the field of aging. In addition to the mentorship program, the group hosts monthly educational meetings across Chicago and recently launched a blog and webpage.

The Chicago Bridge Mentorship Program provides an opportunity for experienced professionals in the field of aging to give back to individuals just starting their careers. The six-month pilot matched 16 experienced professional mentors with 16 emerging professional mentees. The mentorship matches were announced last March, just before the Aging in America Conference in Chicago, Ill. Along with ASA and the New York Academy of Medicine, Chicago Bridge hosted an emerging professionals networking event at the conference, where many mentorship matches met up.

MENTORING: A TWO-WAY STREET

During the program, mentees grew professionally by adding skill sets, expanding networks and increasing confidence levels. Participants first identified three skills they would most like to develop, and nearly three-quarters of mentees believed that their mentor provided effective guidance in these skill areas. Mentors then introduced their matches to other professionals in the field; 70 percent of mentees reported meeting professionals who were new to them.

“Being relatively new to the Chicago area, it was helpful having a seasoned mentor who educated me about local organizations and introduced me to professionals who shared my passion for enriching the lives of elders,” said mentee Nike Whittemore.

According to one mentor, the program was a two-way street: mentors, too, grew as leaders through sharing their knowledge with the next generation of professionals in aging. “The Chicago Bridge mentorship program provided me with a deeply satisfying experience, both personally and professionally. I enjoyed seeing the Chicago-area aging network through Nike’s fresh eyes and learning so much from her,” said Whittemore’s mentor, Janet Takehara, program director for Housing Opportunities & Maintenance for the Elderly (H.O.M.E.) in Chicago.

A PROGRAM WITH LASTING LESSONS, IMPACTS

The mentorship program’s impact reaches beyond its six-month pilot, creating lasting relationships between experienced and emerging professionals for the betterment of Chi-

icago's older adult community. The program allowed mentors to build a legacy while mentees built a future.

During a celebration marking the end of the program, mentors and mentees were given a chance to share their experiences. One mentor expressed the comfort she feels in knowing there will be new professionals stepping into the roles current leaders will be vacating at retirement.

The Chicago Bridge program yielded valuable information about the mentoring process: the program's matches were largely fluid, allowing relationships to be mentor- and mentee-driven, according to each match's style and needs. While some matches found this empowering, others requested a more structured approach. Chicago Bridge realized that it should educate attendees about key mentorship milestones and how relationships should advance, allowing for variation across matches.

IMPROVEMENTS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

This need for direction also extended to the program's overall structure. Matches requested a formal launch and ongoing communication with the mentor committee and each other. The opportunity for arranging additional elective meetings throughout the program for those who desire group support should be offered during any future program iteration.

Chicago Bridge also found that emerging professionals' life situations are not as stable as those of established professionals, especially in the current economic climate. Many mentees moved to different cities, changed jobs, or changed roles within their position during the program's six-month duration. The program had to support mentors and mentees through these changes in ways that would allow them to continue their formal relationship while attending to new roles and responsibilities.

Overall, the pilot program was a success—judged as a great way to keep experienced professionals engaged while also supporting emerging professionals. Chicago Bridge will offer this program in the future, and continue to contribute to the development and advancement of the field of aging in Chicago.

"It was gratifying to be able...to feel that I was helping a really talented professional join the community of senior service providers in Chicago. Last, but not least, we had fun together!" said Takehara. ❖

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