AROUND THE STATE Local Age-Friendly Efforts Provide Models for Success

BY ANTRON WATSON AND AMANDA BERNARDO

Scores of cities and towns across Massachusetts have begun the journey to become age- and dementia-friendly communities. Cities and towns that have not yet become age- and dementia-friendly can benefit from best practices as they take steps toward becoming more livable for all. The following are some exemplary programs that can serve as models for others.

Boston: What's in a Name?

The Commonwealth's capital city began a five-year journey to become more agefriendly by joining AARP's Age-Friendly movement in 2014. From the beginning, a key component of the city's strategy was to ensure that the local government was listening to and learning from older residents in each of Boston's diverse and

Antron Watson is Age-Friendly Director for AARP Massachusetts, and Amanda Bernardo is the Director of Policy at the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (www.mass.gov/ orgs/executive-office-of-elder-affairs). unique neighborhoods. The commitment to inclusion resulted in the city's holding thirty listening sessions in four languages, generating a resident survey in multiple languages, and soliciting input from more than seventy organizations throughout the city. The voices of more than four thousand older adults informed the seventy-five action items contained in Boston's Age-Friendly Action Plan, released in 2017.

In its first-year achievement report, Age-Friendly Boston (www.boston.gov/ age-friendly) documented a number of successes that can be replicated in other communities. A first-ever Civic Academy invited older residents to learn about the local, state and federal governments and how to become effective advocates for issues they care about. The city worked on making parks more inviting for older residents and sidewalks more walkable. Based on feedback from age-friendly listening sessions in each neighborhood, the city mapped every public restroom and posted a searchable database on its website. Older residents said that knowing where such public accommodations are located can make traveling around the city more comfortable. This is a prime example of how age-friendly planning serves young and old residents alike.

In his 2019 State of the City address, Mayor Martin Walsh announced that the name of the city's Commission on the Affairs of the Elderly would be changed to the Age Strong Commission. The objective is to revamp the perception of the agency and its constituency.

Here are strategies that worked for Boston that can be replicated in other communities:

- Engage older residents at every step: Boston's focus on inclusion and diversity made its age-friendly plan stronger. By listening to and incorporating the views of older residents, Boston built support for its efforts throughout the city's twenty-three neighborhoods.
- Break down silos: Look at everyday touch points for residents and ask how



Boston Mayor Martin Walsh gathers with seniors who have adopted the slogan "Older and Bolder." The mayor announced in his 2019 State of the City Address that the city's Elderly Commission would be renamed the Age Strong Commission. (Photo courtesy City of Boston)



Age-Friendly Berkshires takes a regional approach to its planning. The group solicited feedback during a forum and through a survey of older residents throughout the thirty-two communities that make up the county.

(Photo courtesy Age-Friendly Berkshires)

they can be improved through an "aging lens." Boston's drive to become more age-friendly is a shared mission across departments that focuses on improving city services and venues regardless of agency jurisdiction.

• **Reframe aging:** How we talk about aging informs how we think about it. Ageism is real, and finding new ways to improve societal beliefs about aging is an important component of becoming an age-friendly community. Boston's creation of the Age Strong Commission was a powerful statement that will help change the conversation about aging from one that is primarily problem-based to one that is strengthbased, and will set the foundation for continued conversations in the future.

The Berkshires: Better Together

In Massachusetts, only Cape Cod and the Islands have a higher percentage of older adults than Berkshire County. Recognizing the shifting demographics, the county established Age-Friendly Berkshires (https://agefriendlyberkshires.com), with a mission to create a more livable region for people of all ages and focus on the needs of its aging population.

The Age-Friendly Berkshires Action Plan represents the first regional agefriendly planning effort in Massachusetts. A coalition of local leaders and stakeholders began the planning effort in 2014, and over the next several years they conducted a public survey of county residents that generated 2,500 responses and a summit that attracted more than one hundred residents and stakeholders.

Supported by several funding sources, including grants from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation and AARP, the group developed a comprehensive three-year action plan to focus on each of the AARP/WHO age-friendly community domains that will make Berkshire communities more livable for all residents. For example, Age-Friendly Berkshires launched a grant-funded pilot project that brought together several councils on aging to share transportation resources across municipal boundaries to help residents get to medical appointments. In rural settings, medical appointments often occur in communities other than where an individual lives. The group also created an "Aging in Place Workbook," a guide to home renovations intended to help residents age safely and independently in their homes.

Here are strategies that worked for the Berkshires that can be replicated in other communities:

- **Collaborate:** With age- and dementiafriendly planning and implementation, there is strength in numbers. The early decision of thirty-two municipalities to participate as a region ensures that progress, momentum and lessons learned will be shared across communities.
- **Prioritize sustainability:** As the number of planning partners and funding sources has grown, Age-Friendly Berkshires has adopted a planning and

management model that prioritizes sustainability. In 2017, the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission was designated as the "backbone agency" for Age-Friendly Berkshires. Making the region's planning agency the coordinating entity will help to ensure that age- and dementia-friendly principles will inform future planning projects in the county.

• Create a comprehensive plan, but keep realistic expectations: Planners understand that it's unlikely that all of Age-Friendly Berkshire's goals will be achieved during a three-year period. But having a detailed plan allows for both prioritization and agility in making progress based on evolving needs and resources.

Cape Ann: Bringing Age- and Dementia-Friendly Together

Thirty-two percent of the residents of Cape Ann, comprising the city of Gloucester and towns of Essex, Manchester-by-the-Sea and Rockport, are sixty or older. This demographic is expected to grow to 40 percent by 2030. With this in mind, in 2017 SeniorCare Inc., Cape Ann's nonprofit aging services agency, and other community stakeholders launched Age & Dementia Friendly Cape Ann (https://adfca.org), the state's first regional effort to incorporate age- and dementia-friendly features in planning efforts from the beginning.

With funding from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation and the state's Community Compact Initiative, Cape Ann's



Robin Lipson, chief strategy officer at the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, speaks to attendees of Age & Dementia Friendly Cape Ann's Aging Together Summit, a May 1 event where the region's combined age- and dementia-friendly plan was released. (Courtesy photo)

planning efforts are aimed at improving livability in focus areas that combine key elements of both age- and dementiafriendly frameworks. To inform their efforts, the Cape Ann group commissioned the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging at the University of Massachusetts Boston to produce a detailed community needs assessment.

Here are strategies that worked for Cape Ann that can be replicated in other communities:

- Integrate age- and dementia-friendly planning from the beginning: The age- and dementia-friendly movements developed separately, which resulted in each movement producing similar but distinctly different guidance. For example, the dementia-friendly movement incorporated legal and public safety guidance specific to the experience and needs of people living with dementia. These separate frameworks resulted in some communities focusing on one movement or the other, rather than both. Age & Dementia Friendly Cape Ann determined that it was important to include elements of both frameworks in its planning.
- Start with a solid assessment: A robust community assessment process that includes older residents, including those with dementia and their caregivers, along with other key stakeholders, has ensured that Cape Ann's actions going forward will be evidence-based, with strong community input.

• Leverage the Community Compact program: Age & Dementia Friendly Cape Ann successfully obtained funding and other resources to support its planning efforts. Community Compacts are an opportunity for state and municipal governments to enter into an agreement on shared priorities, and for municipalities to receive state funding to support such work. In December 2018, Essex became the first community to sign a Community Compact and receive funding (\$20,000) under the age-friendly best practices area of the Community Compact Initiative.

Salem: A Community for All Ages

Salem Mayor Kimberley Driscoll often refers to the city she leads as "hip and historic." Making it a community for all ages fits nicely with this identity. In 2016, the city of Salem was the first community on the North Shore and the third in the state to join AARP's network of Age-Friendly Communities. In November of that year, Salem submitted to AARP its age-friendly action plan, "Salem for All Ages." Led by Mayor Driscoll, the Salem for All Ages initiative (https://salemforallages.org) is made up of city officials, residents and stakeholders representing various agencies and organizations.

The Salem for All Ages Task Force was formed to implement the action plan, with subcommittees for each of the eight AARP/WHO age-friendly domains. The task force meets monthly to review progress.

In addition to the task force, the Salem for All Ages Leadership Council, chaired by the mayor and composed of community leaders and other elected officials, meets twice a year to review the work of the task force and provide feedback.

In partnership with the Salem Chamber of Commerce, Salem for All Ages this spring launched an Age-Friendly Business initiative to recognize businesses that act to make their spaces and operations more inclusive for patrons of all ages and abilities. These businesses provide resting areas, non-slip flooring and other physical attributes, as well as specialized training to staff.

Here are strategies that worked for Salem that can be replicated in other communities:

• Curate and provide user-friendly aging resources and information: The Salem for All Ages website, launched in the fall of 2018, provides access to content gathered from several websites to provide a one-stop hub on healthy aging for residents. Salem for All Ages also created a printed resource guide, in English and Spanish, with helpful information on a variety of topics for older adults in the city. The guide was initially mailed to all residents age sixty or older citywide. Going forward, the guide will be mailed to residents on their sixtieth birthday, and updates will be posted on the Salem for All Ages website.



Salem Mayor Kimberley Driscoll (left, standing) greets residents during the Council on Aging's St. Patrick's Day lunch. Mayor Driscoll has prioritized age-friendly policies by chairing the Salem for All Ages Leadership Council. The city shares information about resources available to older residents through a new website and resource guide for residents age sixty and older. (Photo courtesy City of Salem)

The "Salem for All Ages Resource Guide" is mailed to city residents on their sixtieth birthday.

- Implement awareness training for municipal employees: Salem for All Ages realized early on that improved social participation and inclusion begins with good communication skills. In 2018, Salem for All Ages piloted communications training for staff in Salem's Council on Aging and the Parks and Recreation Department using the International Council on Active Aging's "Guidelines for Effective Communication with Older Adults."
- Explore transportation opportunities: Recognizing that mobility for older adults is a nearly universal concern, and that lack of mobility often leads to social isolation, Salem for All Ages obtained a \$30,000 grant from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation to conduct a study on the feasibility of establishing a citywide shuttle program. The study reviewed the potential costs of implementing the program and concluded that such a program was feasible. The city is now using the study recommendations to launch a pilot program.

New Bedford: Aligning Work, Improving Public Spaces and Promoting Diversity

New Bedford, a Gateway City in Bristol County with a population of 95,000, is the sixth-largest city in Massachusetts. Approximately one-third of the city's residents are over the age of fifty.

The city submitted its Age-Friendly Action Plan to AARP in December 2017

after a nearly two-year assessment phase that included a citywide survey of older adults (including non-English-speaking residents), focus groups, and a review of various city and regional planning projects to identify areas of possible synergy.

Following assessment activities, the Age-Friendly Advisory Committee formed seven subcommittees for each focus area of the city's plan. Membership of each subcommittee includes residents, subjectmatter experts and representatives from various city departments. New Bedford's age-friendly efforts are coordinated through the Council on Aging, in collaboration with Coastline Elderly Services, a nonprofit elder service agency.

Here are strategies that worked for New Bedford that can be replicated in other communities:

- Avoid duplication and seek partnerships: New Bedford is home to several organizations and public agencies whose missions are closely aligned with age- and dementia-friendly planning. By integrating with the successful public health prevention effort known as Mass in Motion, coordinating closely with Coastline Elder Services, and reviewing its own Master Plan as well as other regional plans in areas such as transportation, New Bedford is leveraging ongoing efforts, aligning with partner organizations and avoiding reinventing the wheel.
- Focus on the built environment: Whether it's Mayor Jon Mitchell's Blue

Lane initiative, which improves safety and accessibility for walking and biking paths, or improvements to the city's more than thirty public parks and recreational spaces, New Bedford is focused on creating welcoming, accessible public spaces for all residents. As part of its planning, the city passed a "complete streets" ordinance to ensure that infrastructure work considers the needs of all residents, including older adults and those with disabilities.

Enhance healthy aging for vulnerable populations: New Bedford's plan is noteworthy for its emphasis on supporting community mental and behavioral health services for older residents. This includes a commitment to provide additional training for staff in the city's aging services sector to reduce the stigma of mental illness and increase awareness of the effects of social isolation in the community. The city has partnered with the Tufts Health Plan Foundation and Boston University's CADER Institute to provide the training. The city has also committed to enhancing its involvement in public safety and protective service initiatives for older adults, a particularly important area of focus for municipalities as their residents age. As more residents choose to age in the community, including those with dementia, there will be an increasing need for community strategies to prevent and respond to elder abuse and neglect. **#**



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New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell (right) cuts a ribbon in front of Buttonwood Senior Center on April 25, officially reopening the center after a lengthy period of renovations. The city's reinvestment in the senior center is part of "our commitment to being an age-friendly city," Mitchell said. (Photo by Seth Thomas)