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Researchers: Maine residents who can benefit most from survey data are resisting most



Gabor Degre | BDN

Belfast-area seniors gather for the inaugural meeting of the Belfast Senior Center in this photo from January 2017. Seniors center provides activities, information and socialization and are an important source of community support for older Mainers. Buy Photo (http://store.bangordailynews.com/Other/Week-of-july-24-2017/i-7w4NRDg)

By Meg Haskell (http://bangordailynews.com/author/meg-haskell/), BDN Staff
Follow on Twitter (http://twitter.com/MegatBDN)
Posted July 28, 2017, at 12:34 p.m.

Older residents of Waldo County love where they live — that much is clear. Despite concerns about transportation, future housing needs and social isolation, more than 1,000 county residents 50 and older polled in a recent countywide survey were “effusive” in their dedication to staying in their homes and communities as they age, according to survey organizers.

Importantly, those organizers say, residents most in need of support services to help them remain safely in their homes and active in their communities were the least likely to participate in the survey process, potentially increasing the risk of not having their needs identified.

“We weren’t received well everywhere, but in other places they couldn’t do enough for us,” said Wendy Kasten, a retired educator and researcher who helped design and distribute the survey for the organization Aging Well in Waldo County (http://agingwellinvaldocoounty.org). At a scheduled public meeting in one small town, she said, a mention of the group’s affiliation with the senior advocacy group AARP, meant to be reassuring and legitimizing, instead drew an angry outburst from a local resident.



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By Samsung

“She said she didn’t like AARP because they ‘support the left,’ and she wasn’t going to tell anyone where her guns were kept,” Kasten recalled. No surveys were distributed or collected at that meeting. Another time, residents of a low-income senior apartment complex expressed such open hostility toward the survey and the volunteer seeking people to fill it out that she left without a single completed survey.

Kasten said volunteers were surprised to be met with this “huge undercurrent of distrust” when their goals were to deal openly with seniors, connect them with existing services and explore new ways to keep them living independently in their homes and communities. “Maybe they’ve had unsuccessful experiences with other organizations that made them wary,” she speculated.

Despite some rejection, though, the group succeeded in collecting 1,047 surveys from across the far-flung territory to help them understand the diverse needs, interests and attitudes of older county residents.

Building an age-friendly county

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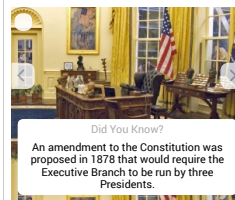
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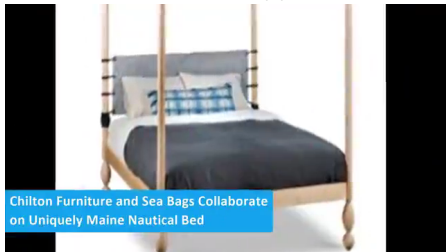
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“As a population, we have moved away from the idea that we’ll eventually move into a facility or move in with younger family members to wanting to age in place, in our own homes and communities,” Jess Maurer, co-chair on the Maine Council on Aging, said. “We really are seeing a shift now at the community level as people realize no one is going to build [an age-friendly community] for me, so I better build it myself.”

There are about 80 groups in Maine “at various stages of doing something” to strengthen community livability for seniors, Maurer said. Most are organized and run by retirement-age volunteers.

Article continues below highlights



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Maurer also heads up the [Tri-State Learning Collaborative on Aging \(http://agefriendlycommunity/\)](http://agefriendlycommunity/), which supports and shares age-friendly solutions developed at the community level in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. The organization’s resources, including online workshops and webinars, community profiles and an upcoming summit in Portland, are available to community organizers, municipal leaders and nonprofit groups.

As this “aging in place” trend takes hold across the country, Aging Well in Waldo County is one of about 80 such grass-roots groups in Maine that are working to improve the health, safety and quality of life of older residents. What sets it apart from other efforts is its countywide scope and its commitment to identifying strengths, weaknesses, needs and resources across all 26 municipalities within the county borders.

From coastal Belfast — the county seat and service center, a popular retirement destination and home to a vibrant arts community — to more traditional rural outposts such as Frankfort, Searsmont and Palermo, Waldo County’s population of about 39,000 represents a broad swath of income, education, health status and other demographic variables, according to AWWC founder Samantha Paradis. Paradis, 26, works as a staff nurse at Waldo County General Hospital in Belfast, holds a master’s degree in public health and recently announced she is [running for mayor of Belfast \(https://www.facebook.com/paradisformayor/\)](https://www.facebook.com/paradisformayor/).

“Belfast has a lot of services and resources that the rest of the county doesn’t,” Paradis said. “If we had taken a Belfast-centric approach, it would have alienated a lot of people, and we wanted to make sure everyone had a voice in this process.” Accordingly, Paradis and other organizers sought input and representation from all the towns, including the island community of Isleboro, developing a diverse steering committee they hope will keep the project broad and balanced in its scope.

As it organized, AWWC, founded about a year ago, consulted other aging-in-place projects, some of which have been at work for five years or longer. “We looked at all the options,” Paradis said, including small-scale interagency collaborations, multi-municipality partnerships and regional organizations such as the “village” model of At Home Down East, a membership-based program serving seniors on the Blue Hill peninsula.

Eventually, the team settled on a model built on AARP’s “[Eight Domains of Livability](http://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2016/8-domains-of-livability-introduction.html)” (<http://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2016/8-domains-of-livability-introduction.html>), developed to help communities become more age-friendly. The domains are as follows: outdoor spaces and buildings; transportation; housing; social participation; respect and social inclusion; civic participation and employment; communication and information; and community and health services.

Taking it to the people

With a \$6,000 organizing grant from AARP, the group developed a 20-question survey addressing these domains and set about distributing it at church suppers, public meetings, local restaurants, library book clubs, veterans organizations and other venues where seniors gather. More than 16 volunteer “research assistants,” most retired professionals, were trained to present and administer the survey. The survey also could be filled out online.

A total of 1,047 surveys were completed, submitted and analyzed by a computer program at Waldo County General Hospital. Results showed that transportation is a primary concern for rural elders, especially for those who can’t drive any more or who are uncomfortable driving in unfamiliar places or after dark. Transportation barriers also contribute to a second concern — social isolation — making it difficult for seniors to take part in community gatherings such as public suppers, exercise classes or entertainment. A third concern is for future housing needs, with many seniors expressing worries they won’t be able to stay in their homes because of future heating and maintenance costs but unable to afford to downsize to something more manageable. And in many communities, affordable housing options for seniors are simply unavailable.

2,873 Amazon.com customer reviews

Seniors also were asked to identify community resources that enrich their lives and make it possible for them to live independently. These included churches, libraries and food pantries — all small-town institutions that face their own funding and organizational challenges.

Going forward, AWWC will use the results of the survey to develop a plan of action, Paradis said. This could include, for example, expanding existing public transportation services, providing better access to food pantries and delivered meals, developing a volunteer network of carpool drivers for community events, building stores of community firewood and connecting homeowners with volunteer handyman services to improve home safety and heating efficiency.

Importantly, AWWC will continue to look to the small towns and rural areas of Waldo County for representation of resident needs. Improving conditions for older people, Paradis said, will make the county more livable for its residents.

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