

Healthy Greenfield – A Good Place to Grow Old

Can We Make It Even Better?

**Walter Leutz, Ph.D., Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University,
Principal Investigator.**

Elizabeth Leutz, M.Ed., Lead Co-Researcher

Greenfield Co-Researchers:

**Pamela Barber
Charles Kinney
Anne Skowron
Marsha Stone**

Brandeis Intern: Arianna Sjamsu

When asked how his town could support healthy aging, an older adult resident of the western Massachusetts town of Greenfield replied that the town could “do a better job handling the senior glut.”

This answer about the challenges of the “senior glut” (it’s also been called the “silver tsunami” and the “retirement boom”) reflects a widespread concern about the wave of aging Baby Boomers who are starting to enter our health care, social care and retirement systems. In the 2010 Greenfield Census, there were 2,566 persons age 65 and over, representing 14.6% of the Town’s population. If the Town follows national projections, the proportion of seniors will grow to 19% of the town population in 2020 and 23% by 2030. Whether or not Greenfield tracks national trends exactly, there will surely be many more senior residents in years to come than there are today. Is Greenfield ready?

One way to help ensure Greenfield is prepared for this growth in the senior population is through a focus on “healthy aging.” This is the idea that older adults themselves can do things to stay healthier and that their local communities can provide supports for their efforts. Both the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum and the World Health Organization (WHO) have models for healthy aging and age-friendly communities.¹ Healthy aging also focuses a lens on the ways in which seniors continue to make contributions to overall community wellbeing. That is, it has a positive feedback loop: What older adults do to be healthy – like volunteering - makes for a healthier community, and so on. Even better, most things that are healthy for older people – safe walkable streets, access to fresh, healthy

¹ WHO (2007). *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide*. Geneva, World Health Organization. Leutz, W. (2009). *Healthy Aging in the Commonwealth: Pathways to Life Long Wellness*. [Massachusetts Health Policy Forum](#). Boston, MA.

foods, etc. - benefit not just seniors, but everyone in the community.

This study – conducted by Greenfield seniors – is a community self-assessment of two questions about healthy aging in Greenfield:

- What do Greenfield seniors do to be healthy?
- How does Greenfield support healthy aging?



Photos courtesy of Tufts Health Plan Foundation

Our research team of 6 Greenfield seniors was led by a Brandeis University gerontologist (also a Greenfield resident). In the summer and fall of 2015 we put these questions in interviews to 13 professionals in Town and County government and private agencies working with seniors in Greenfield, as well as to 53 participants in 8 focus groups of Greenfield seniors. The focus groups were formed to draw on varied backgrounds and experiences: volunteers at the hospital and senior center; users of the Y, the Senior Center and the food pantry; residents of senior subsidized housing; members of one of three informal neighbors support groups; and members of our study team and seniors who considered joining the team but could not.

We analyzed how interview and focus group responses compared to 6 healthy aging behaviors from the Massachusetts Health Policy Forum and 7 characteristics of age-friendly communities from the WHO. Avoiding disease and disability is only one dimension of “health” in these models – healthy aging also encompasses things like being physically active, having a good diet, being socially connected, being safe and secure, and finding meaning in life. More detailed descriptions of these models of healthy aging, our research methods, members of our Advisory Committee, and our findings are found in our full report².

In this paper we highlight our most important findings and some thoughts about ways that Greenfield could support healthy aging in the future. Of course there are limits to how much an age-friendly community and healthy seniors can help with the coming wave of senior citizens. The welfare of Greenfield’s seniors now and in the future is heavily reliant on national safety net programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security that are outside of a city or town’s control. But there is much that Greenfield can do beyond the safety net. Promoting healthy aging is one of those things.

Findings

Based on our small, qualitative study, Greenfield has many characteristics of an age-friendly community, and many of its senior residents are models of healthy aging. But we also identified how Greenfield and its seniors could do even more, particularly by doing more to help and include seniors who have a harder time participating in community life and healthy activities due to illness, disability, social isolation, and/or low income. We detail these

² W Leutz et al., The Healthy Aging Study in Waltham and Greenfield, MA. Report to Greenfield, April, 2016.

findings below in five categories – the first four primarily about Greenfield as an age-friendly community, and the last about seniors themselves as models for healthy aging:

- **Physical infrastructure:** outdoor spaces, buildings, transportation, and housing.
- **Services:** health care, home care, social services, and meals, as well as communication and information about services.
- **Social participation and civic engagement:** cultural activities, religious groups, the local community college, and volunteer opportunities.
- **Safety and security:** financially, at home, and in the community.
- **Healthy seniors:** Is there a model and can we expand the circle of healthy aging?

We conclude with a discussion of some things we learned about Greenfield more generally, and about where the Town might go from here to sustain an even healthier community by and of older adults.

Physical infrastructure

There are two strong anchors in Greenfield's built environment and outdoor spaces: an attractive and accessible downtown, and numerous open spaces around the town with paths for walking, biking and recreation. In the words of a participant in the Y focus group, Greenfield has a "real downtown" with a department store, movie theatre, restaurants, shops, services, and entertainment venues, which some Town respondents see as a core of Greenfield's plan for sustainability, and also as good for seniors. Seniors use and appreciate the downtown and open spaces, and most of the suggestions we heard for improvements were more on the order of fine-tuning than overhauls, e.g., adding benches on Main Street, upgrading some curb cuts and cross walks, safer sharing of paths by bikers and walkers, opening up the high

school track, and free parking for walking and picnics at the Nash's Mill recreation area. The one element of the built environment that received more criticism than praise was the out-of-date Senior Center space. We heard widespread support for the effort to replace it, including from one non-profit respondent who called it physically "uninviting, depressing, and irrelevant." In May 2016 the Greenfield City Council agreed to the plans and funding for a new senior/community center.

In terms of housing, much of Greenfield's subsidized senior/disabled housing is well located in or near the downtown, which allows seniors and people with disabilities living there to access downtown services without transportation. Greenfield area agencies also offer supports for seniors who wish to "age in place" in single-family homes, including low-interest repair loans and real estate tax breaks for low-income homeowners. Overall, 14% of Greenfield housing meets State affordability criteria, which is above the State's 10% target. However, more could be done. First, many senior homeowners struggle to find help with home maintenance and snow shoveling – respondents suggested that these needs could be met by skilled retirees and youth respectively. Second, even more units of affordable and supportive housing are needed. A Town respondent's statement reflected others: "The High Rise has 90-100 apartments right by downtown. We need another." Recent Census data show that 30% of senior-headed households had incomes of \$20,000 or less, and that half of these low-income seniors live at or below the poverty level. All would qualify for subsidized housing, were more available. Another way to help seniors to remain safe and supported at home would be to pass the accessory apartment bylaw, which would allow a senior to move into a newly-created apartment, closer to town, possibly with a family caregiver, in a single family home - or vice versa.



Photos courtesy of Tufts Health Plan Foundation

In terms of transportation, Greenfield offers alternatives to foot, bike and automobile travel, which are no longer options for less mobile seniors. Some transportation options are specialized and subsidized, and many seniors who use them report that they fit their needs. But others experience barriers: e.g., living in neighborhoods without bus service, the prohibition of FRTA bus drivers to help passengers with packages, and difficult processes to schedule specialized ride services. Interview respondents from two agencies serving seniors pointed to the need for transportation to more than medical appointments. One said, “Seniors can’t get to appointments, shopping, or social events.” Another pointed to the need for “social transportation”: “My clients have problems visiting friends when they can’t drive anymore.” Fine-tuning of existing transportation services would help, but respondents pointed out that some needs might be better met by a volunteer-based transport system modeled on those developed in other communities.

Health and community services

The story with community and health services is much the same as with infrastructure: many strong agencies serving a range of healthy aging needs – but also room for improvements. First, federal and state safety net programs are prominent in supporting services – in the form of LifePath (formerly called Franklin County Home Care), as well as health care covered by Medicare and Medicaid. The presence of Baystate Franklin Medical Center – and its recent expansion – is a major strength.

There are also niche players like the Franklin County Sheriff’s TRIAD officers, who combat scams aimed at seniors, make sure seniors’ smoke alarms are working, and more. Said one Town respondent: “(The officers) ... have become almost like social workers now” since there are “so many needs, loneliness, depression and losses.” Agencies and groups that foster physical activity (e.g., the Y and the Senior Center) and healthy eating (e.g., congregate meals programs in faith communities and senior discounts for healthy food from the Just Roots Farm) help seniors live more healthy lives.

The Greenfield Senior Center is the hub of many senior services and activities. It has a core of loyal and satisfied participants, but some senior and agency respondents thought it could do more to broaden its programming and appeal. A new building will help with that effort, and our respondents suggested other ways to broaden its appeal. A participant at the Food Pantry focus group suggested the need for, “a place we can go to, to sit down, to have coffee together.” That participant also said that the, “dollar for a cup” charged for coffee is just “too expensive.” Another focus group participant recommended collaborations with GCC, the Y, “and other big players in town who do a lot with seniors.”

Regarding services as well as other senior issues, respondents pointed to the need for improved communication and information

(communication is a stand-alone WHO age-friendly category). Seniors' needs for information change with their own changing needs for services, so seniors are often playing "catch-up." The system needs to be able to help them find what they need and then help them understand the detail.

Social participation and civic engagement

This category refers to the availability of social and cultural events, intellectual pursuits, volunteer opportunities, and ways to engage in civic and community action. It is the category where there is the strongest feedback loop in healthy aging, i.e., an age-friendly environment fosters participation, and seniors who participate enrich themselves and their community.

Greenfield's many free or low-cost concerts, festivals, and community meals are magnets to get out and mix in the community, as are agency offerings at the Senior Center, Greenfield Community College, within faith communities, and other settings. Greenfield seniors are also big-time volunteers: They're active in organizing events, leading and supporting non-profits like Greening Greenfield and the Just Roots Farm, volunteering at the hospital, participating in Town politics and on civic agency boards, volunteering to deliver meals to and visit with isolated seniors at home, and much more. Their participation clearly strengthens the community. A professional from an agency with many volunteers reported that volunteering leads to "personal satisfaction, social interaction, new friends, and a sense of belonging to something." A senior in the Volunteer focus group said that volunteering is "so good for the soul."

Physical and financial security

We also heard how Greenfield fosters physical and financial security for its seniors. Overall, respondents reported that Greenfield is a safe

town: The outdoors are perceived to be safe, emergency services are good ("We have great fire and police, very responsive to all" – Baystate focus group), and (through TRIAD) the County offers help with in-home safety and protection against scams.

The income data above show that many Greenfield seniors are not financially secure. In the Neighbors focus group discussion of how Greenfield could do more to support healthy aging, a participant illustrated the fiscal limits of what the Town can do to help seniors facing financial insecurity: "I can hardly bear the thought of taxes increasing. I'm worried I will need to leave my home." Nevertheless, the Town and local agencies can and do help in targeted ways, particularly through Community Action and LifePath, which draw on federal, state, and local funds to help low-income homeowners with low-cost home repair loans, fuel assistance (important because "many seniors live in cold houses" – Town respondent), and real estate tax credits for volunteering. Discounts from Town merchants are also available, e.g., on CSA shares and at the Greenfield Coop and the movie theater. The monthly game night at Hope and Olive, which offers free soup, is an example of a community-spirited collaboration of local restaurants.

Elements of healthy aging in Greenfield and the need to widen the circle

The 13 public and agency respondents had ideas about what seniors do to be healthy, but the richest material came from seniors themselves. We know that the sample is biased toward more active and able-bodied seniors, but we did not have the resources to organize focus groups for seniors who could not travel. We will discuss them shortly.

The basic elements of healthy aging that we heard about tracked closely with the

Massachusetts Health Policy Forum model – eat healthy foods, don’t smoke, don’t drink too much, keep physically active, keep socially connected and active in civic affairs, be proactive about health by seeking needed medical care and preventive services, and try to find meaning and purpose in life. Our detailed report provides many examples of seniors’ successfully pursuing these elements and the ways Greenfield supports them. Seniors provide immense value to the Town, particularly through volunteering and providing leadership in many civic and service organizations.

Although we found many things that make Greenfield an age-friendly community and many seniors fitting the healthy aging model, we also heard about seniors who are too often left out of the picture. The most prominent disparities lie along two intersecting dimensions: poor health/functional status and low income. One Town respondent had this advice: “Watch out for vulnerable seniors: they’re older, more isolated, more likely depressed, get less information, spend more of their incomes on meds and rent.”

Seniors who have debilitating chronic illnesses and/or disabilities are at risk of being isolated in their homes with inadequate care, nutrition, and social connections. For these seniors the first level of healthy aging may have a narrower horizon of getting needed help with personal care (e.g., bathing) and household tasks (e.g. cleaning) that they can no longer perform, while maintaining their ability to perform other tasks. Family and friends are often the first line of support in these areas, and Greenfield also has agencies that provide help. If these basic needs are met, these seniors can participate in the next level of healthy aging. Examples of this next level are things such as getting out of the house to participate in social, educational, cultural and religious activities, and making new friends when faced with loss of close friends and family. Community agencies, faith communities, families, neighbors and volunteers can again all

play roles here.

Second, low income and limited assets block access to many components of the healthy aging paradigm. The things that seniors who are financially secure enjoy – trips, restaurants, club memberships, going to movies – are less available to low-income seniors. Fortunately, Greenfield has many free and discounted events and services that foster economic inclusion (e.g., free meals and concerts, subsidized transportation and housing), but we heard about ways Greenfield could be even more inclusive (e.g., offer free or very low cost coffee at the Senior Center). A member of the Housing Authority focus group shared her experience of how low income can also block access to services: “I have dentures that hurt all the time and need implants but no one pays for them and I cannot afford them.” Identifying ways to address service access and affordability issues, which are mostly related to coverage weaknesses in federal and state safety net programs, is a thorny issue for a locality.

Three elements of a Greenfield “identity”: Activism, Friendliness, and Sustainability

Before discussing our thoughts about possible actions regarding healthy aging, we can’t resist sharing some alternative ways of framing what we heard about Greenfield in general. Many of the seniors who are pursuing healthy aging in Greenfield – as well as many Town, County, and agency staff – seem wrapped up in elements of a larger Greenfield identity, which is characterized by combinations of widespread volunteering and a “can-do” attitude about civic action; genuine friendliness and neighborliness; and a drive toward “sustainability,” manifested most often in our study in the form of growing, serving, and distributing locally grown food. We wouldn’t be surprised if there are other elements of a Greenfield identity, but these kept surfacing in our interviews and focus groups.

These are all consistent with Greenfield's 2014 Master Plan – "Sustainable Greenfield." The Plan describes Greenfield as a forward looking community with both an industrial and agricultural past – a community that views its future as sustainable, green, and alive with possibility. Some elements of this identity are highlighted in the Report's Executive Summary: "The driving forces behind this Comprehensive Sustainable Master Plan are rooted in a commitment to preserving the small-town heritage of Greenfield while embracing changes that will allow sustainable renewal of the Town as the economic and cultural hub of the region."

Volunteering provided the most complex and moving pictures of how seniors stay healthy. They turn out at the medical center (where most of the 329 volunteers are said to be seniors), the library, the Farmer's Market, various congregate meals programs, and many other venues. A senior in the Food Pantry focus group summed up the benefits of volunteering:

"I do better when I have a schedule. There have been days I didn't get off the couch. I need something to get me out of bed. Volunteering gives me a reason. You feel good about yourself when you're doing things for others."

The "can-do" attitude is another side of the frame as seen in numerous citizen activists who help with ambitious initiatives, e.g., the Town's Sustainable Master Plan, Greening Greenfield solar initiatives, the year-round Farmer's Market, and the Just Roots Farm. According to an interviewee from Town government, the strength of activists was shown in the coalition that included many seniors who recently blocked approval of a biomass power plant:

"You go to (other communities in western MA); they approved a

distribution center in one night! It would never happen in Greenfield."

Another side of a Greenfield identity we saw was friendliness, neighborliness, and concern for others. We heard this in numerous descriptions of social relationships and interactions:

"There is a sense of caring for neighbors and a lack of pretention that is very refreshing" (Baystate focus group).

The most common suggestions regarding social participation were to suggest reaching out and connecting with people:

"Don't be a loner. Join a group, talk to people" (Baystate group). "Invite people who don't drive out with you to the movies" (Volunteers group). "Smile – pay compliments" (Food Pantry group). This sense of friendliness makes "neighborly" people feel good and it brings others into the circle.

Finally, the sustainability side of the Greenfield identity that we heard about most was related to growing, distributing, and serving local food. Healthy food seems to form the nexus of many of the ways that the Town supports healthy aging and that seniors get involved in the community. Everywhere we turned we encountered stories of people helping other people to get healthy food: the TRIAD officers picking up vegetables from Butynski's Farmstand and distributing them to seniors at home, the Free Harvest Supper on the Common, the monthly free soup and game night at Hope and Olive, the interfaith Bread of Life meals program (which provides weekend meals to people who are weekday recipients of Meals on Wheels), the numerous free congregate meals programs, and more. For

Greenfield, growing and distributing healthy food not only fosters healthful eating but also serves as a vehicle for volunteering, civic action, inclusivity, and neighborliness.

What's next?

This paper and our full report make public our findings and recommendations. Additional pieces of information about healthy aging, the study, and the study team is posted on our Facebook page.

<https://www.facebook.com/GreenfieldHealthyAging/>.

We will do our best to share our work as broadly as we can around the Town, including residents of all ages, Town officials, and local agencies working with seniors. We would welcome local newspaper coverage and opportunities to speak to interested groups. Our small research team is ready to do more to investigate and promote healthy aging, but we need to see who else is interested and what interests them.

Our findings point to many specific things large and small that Greenfield could consider to support healthy aging, for example:

- Expanding affordable and accessible housing.
- Making the new senior center a model for the state.
- Filling gaps in transportation.
- Exploring how volunteers and neighborhood groups could connect with and more fully support seniors who are isolated at home.

Greenfield could also consider becoming a WHO age-friendly community. There's an official five-year process for achieving this status that takes a commitment from the Town. A quicker alternative might be to use this study's findings on the WHO and other healthy aging criteria to undertake a more bottom-up age-friendly initiative. Our study started as a bottom-up

initiative. Perhaps it could show that actions for age-friendliness can also be initiated through grass roots efforts.

We didn't hear thoughts on either of these strategies in either interviews or focus groups, so making this choice would require a broader and deeper discussion.

Whatever the direction Greenfield takes on becoming more "age-friendly," the Town's can-do culture, strong volunteer base, and neighborly nature offer a great foundation for making further strides. Let's start talking about what's next.