

Healthy Aging in Waltham – Going Places?

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Introduction

When asked what older people could do to be healthy, a Waltham City official told us, “They need a reason to get up in the morning, a sense of purpose – to get out of the house.” According to a MA Health Policy Forum report, having a sense of purpose in life is one of several keys to healthy aging.¹ Are Waltham seniors finding purpose? Where and how? And how are seniors doing in the other dimensions of healthy aging (being proactive about health, good diet, getting exercise, making social connections, and feeling safe and secure)? A related question is - What is Waltham doing to support healthy aging? Is it living up to World Health Organization (WHO)/AARP age-friendly

community standards,² as several other MA communities have pledged to do?

These questions are addressed in our new Report to Waltham from The Healthy Aging Study in Waltham and Greenfield, MA.³ We are a team of 10 Waltham seniors, including our study leader from the faculty at the Heller School at Brandeis and nine volunteer Co-Researchers. In the summer and fall of 2015 we put the questions to 17 professionals working with seniors in Waltham, as well as to 57 participants in 8 focus groups of Waltham seniors. The focus groups were formed to draw on varied backgrounds and experiences: users of the Y and the Senior Center; residents of two senior subsidized housing sites; members of the League of Women Voters; seniors who

² <http://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2014/an-introduction.html>

³ W Leutz et al., The Healthy Aging Study in Waltham and Greenfield, MA. Report to Waltham, April, 2016.

¹ Leutz, W. (2009). Healthy Aging in the Commonwealth: Pathways to Life Long Wellness. [Massachusetts Health Policy Forum](#). Boston, MA.

expressed interest in the study; Spanish speakers; and members of our study team.

We analyzed how their responses fit with the six healthy aging behaviors from the MA Health Policy Forum, as well additional characteristics of WHO age-friendly communities (e.g, physical infrastructure and accessible health and social services). A draft of the study was shared and discussed with an Advisory Committee of City and agency officials. More detailed descriptions of these models of healthy aging, our research methods, and our findings are found in our full report.

Our study was based on the idea that older adults themselves can do things to be healthier and that their local communities can provide supports for their efforts. It also focuses a lens on a feedback loop: the ways in which seniors make contributions to overall community wellbeing. In other words, what older adults do to be healthy – like volunteering – can make for a healthier community, and so on. Even better – most things that are healthy for older people are good for people of all ages – safe walkable streets, access to fresh, healthy foods, etc.

In this paper we highlight our most important findings and some thoughts about ways Waltham could support healthy aging in the future. Of course there are limits to how much an age-friendly community and widespread health among seniors can be realized. The welfare of Waltham’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 Waltham can do beyond the safety net. Promoting healthy aging is one of those things.

Findings

Based on our small, qualitative study, Waltham has many characteristics of an age-friendly

community, and many of its senior residents are models of healthy aging. But we also identified how Waltham 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, immigrant/non-English-speaking status, and/or low income.

We detail these findings below in five categories – the first four primarily about Waltham 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 Waltham more generally, and about where the City might go from here to sustain an even healthier community by and of older adults.

Physical infrastructure

There are two strong anchors in Waltham’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. The downtown has a movie theatre, restaurants, shops, services, and entertainment venues. _In the words of a Mill Housing focus group participant, “Waltham has everything.” Seniors use and appreciate the

downtown and open spaces, and the suggestions we heard for improvements were more on the order of fine-tuning than overhauls, e.g., even safer and more accessible sidewalks, longer times for particular crosswalks, more accessible toilets, and adding benches on Main Street and at bus stops (“A young person may be there half an hour but for senior citizens staying there, without sitting is not good” - Spanish-speaking focus group).

In terms of housing, much of Waltham’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. We also heard praise for exercise programs, meals, and health screening in senior housing. Several interview respondents were enthusiastic about the senior supportive housing site on South Street, which is a collaboration of the Housing Authority and Springwell. (“It’s a real family over there right now.”) Waltham also offers supports for seniors who wish to “age in place” in single-family homes, including low-interest repair loans and support with safety at home from the City’s TRIAD officer. However, more could be done. First, many senior homeowners struggle to find help with home maintenance and snow shoveling. Second, even more units of affordable and supportive housing are needed. Recent Census data show that 26% of senior-headed households had incomes of \$20,000 or less, and that 20% of these low-income seniors live at or below the poverty level (both figures are below state averages). All would qualify for subsidized housing, were more available. Both seniors and interview respondents pointed to the need for long-term planning for housing in Waltham, including this statement from a housing expert:

“Waltham could rebuild its downtown to accommodate limited mobility and make a village environment for people and especially the elderly to stay socially connected.”

In terms of transportation, Waltham 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, which can keep home care workers from getting to their jobs, as well as difficult processes to schedule specialized ride services. A participant in the Senior Center focus group felt that the Ride “is not very good” because it requires a separate call for pick up after drop off: “When you go to an appointment they drop you off. For pick up you have to call and wait around.” Also, “social transportation” (rides to visit friends or attend events) is an important way to combat social isolation, but it is not covered by public subsidized services. Finally, on weekends bus service is cut back, and the commuter rail stops altogether. Fine-tuning of existing transportation services would help with some of these issues, 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 home care and support services from Springwell, as well as health care covered by Medicare and Medicaid. Locally, the Waltham Senior Center is the hub of many senior services and activities: In the words of one participant in the Senior Center focus group, “The Senior Center does an awesome job.”

There are also important niche players like Neighbors Who Care, a volunteer home-visiting

program. Agencies and groups that foster physical activity (e.g., the Y and the Senior Center) and healthy eating (e.g., Healthy Waltham and congregate meals programs in faith communities) help seniors live more healthy lives. Recommendations for improvement include better coordination of medical and social services, improved substance abuse and medication management services, and making the Senior Center more inclusive of non-English speakers

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. This is the category with the strongest feedback loop in healthy aging: An age-friendly environment fosters participation, and seniors who participate enrich themselves and their community. Waltham's many free or low-cost concerts and festivals are magnets to get out and mix in the community, as are agency offerings at the Senior Center, within faith communities, and other settings. A member of the study team focus group described one she liked: "Every Sunday they have country western jamborees at the French Club on Elm Street. I dance all afternoon." The most frequent suggestion for improving social participation was to be more inclusive in activities by ethnicity, generation, gender, economic status, and ability.

Regarding civic engagement, both agency respondents and seniors in focus groups agreed that senior volunteers are active in organizing events, leading and supporting non-profits like the Farmers' Market and Waltham Fields Farm, 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 strengthens the community. A Y focus group participant gave several examples: "There are community meals programs; there are food-pantries. We can check on our elderly neighbors." A broader idea being explored by a group of seniors and the City is to follow a few other area towns and form a "Village," a senior membership organization that provides mutual aid, social activities, and facilitated access to support services. Participation in these kinds of service and civic activities was seen to have a variety of benefits, e.g., a sense of being helpful and helping others, a means of staying socially connected, and a way to find and maintain meaning and purpose in life.

Physical and financial security

We also heard how Waltham fosters physical and financial security for its seniors. Overall, respondents reported that Waltham is a safe town: The outdoors are perceived to be safe, emergency services are good, and (through TRIAD) the City offers help with in-home safety and protection against scams.

The income data above show that many Waltham seniors are not financially secure. Although it is beyond the capacity of a locality to increase the incomes of low-income seniors, the City can and does help in targeted ways, particularly through the WATCH, which draws on federal, state, and local funds to help low-income homeowners with low-cost home repair loans and real estate tax credits for volunteering. Discounts from the Y and Bentley University pool are also available. We also heard requests for more discounts, e.g., at restaurants, to events like

the Breezer's Ball, and to the BOLLI adult learning program at Brandeis.

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

The 17 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 or interviews of seniors who could not travel. We will discuss them shortly.

The basic elements of healthy aging that we heard about tracked closely with the MA 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 pro-active 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 Waltham supports them. Seniors provide immense value to the City, particularly through volunteering and providing leadership in many civic and service organizations.

Although we found many things that make Waltham 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 three intersecting dimensions: poor health/functional status, immigrant/non-English speaker status, and low income (just discussed under Physical and Financial Security).

First, 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 Waltham 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, Waltham has significant and growing populations of immigrants – from Latin America, Africa, and Asia – who often face barriers accessing agency services and activities in the community. Better outreach and language inclusivity would help:

“The Americans, they have these centers where they receive support. They have services that help the elderly to fill the taxes. We have nothing in Spanish.... I do not know anything that currently exists, only the ‘Aging Council,’ but the problems are, one, it is not in Spanish.” (Spanish focus group)

Broader Strategies for Waltham

Waltham is clearly a complex, dynamic, and diverse place. We seem to be revisiting our industrial past with growth in the high-tech sector. The new apartments downtown are near good transportation and culture and should be attractive to both young adults and seniors. Could Waltham become a hub – a destination – rather than a little city that's seen better days? A participant in the Advisory Committee meeting suggested the tag line: Waltham – Going Places

(?) The question mark raises the question of whether Waltham will take an active rather than passive role in shaping its future. A vision for healthy aging and empowered seniors could be a piece of this plan. For example, an age-friendly town would set accessibility standards for new apartments.

Another way that Waltham is going places is in diversity: by income, ability, ethnicity, language, race, age, and long-time versus new residents. How do we get Waltham going to a better place regarding diversity and not leave people out because they don't speak English, they are isolated due to illness/disability, or they can't afford the price of admission. We heard about strategies and actions that could foster inclusion of diverse seniors by agencies, the City, and friends and neighbors. These strategies and actions are relevant to inclusion of non-senior residents as well.

In regard to strategies for making Waltham more age-friendly, two options stand out. One is to pursue age-friendly status through the WHO/AARP initiative. This takes a 5-year commitment by local government to go through a self-assessment, planning, and implementation process toward more age-friendliness. We did not hear of anyone advocating that Waltham enter the WHO process. However, since we included the 8 WHO categories in our study, Waltham might have a path to bypass the WHO process and say, "We already have a study of strengths and weaknesses – now let's get going." Our study started as a bottom-up initiative, and perhaps it could show that actions for age-friendliness can also be initiated through grass roots efforts. That will depend on the community's response to our findings and recommendations.

Another strategy is the "village" model, which is designed to help seniors stay at home and connected even as they age and have more difficulties maintaining their residences and getting out to do things. Seniors join the village, pay dues, and volunteer as able to help one another and keep the village functioning. The

village organizes trips, activities, mutual support with things like rides and shopping, and help with choosing handyman, personal care and other supports. Waltham village advocates, City officials, and representatives of other Waltham agencies are discussing a village aligned with the Senior Center, which keeps dues low and thus widens membership. It could be pursued on its own or in conjunction with a broader age-friendly strategy.

What's next?

This paper makes public our findings and recommendations, which are detailed in our longer report. Additional pieces of information about healthy aging, the study and the study team is posted on our Facebook page

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

We will also be presenting our findings to City and agency audiences and interested seniors. We welcome local newspaper coverage and opportunities to speak to other groups. Our research team is ready to do more but we need to see who else is interested and what interests them. Besides the strategies outlined above the larger report has many more limited and specific actions to consider. We hope the study offers a strong foundation for making further strides towards healthy aging and an even more age-friendly community. Let's keep talking about where Waltham is going next.