

Theme Music

ROBIN: This is Reimagine Aging – an audio series exploring the innovations that help older adults thrive in Massachusetts, a state that’s committed to being age- and dementia-friendly. I’m Robin Lipson, the Deputy Secretary of the Executive Office of Elder Affairs.

Music up

ROBIN: As we age, we accumulate wisdom and knowledge, yet there is a pervasive bias against older people and the process of aging

VIDEO CLIP: I've been called many things. Little Old Lady, grumpy old man. Weak, but you didn't think that—right?

ROBIN: Many of us have heard these stereotypes before. Listen to this clip from the City of Boston's public awareness campaign, which knocks down those cliches:

VIDEO CLIP I'm the life of every party. I start trends, I'm an activist. I am in my prime. (group) I'm aging strong.

ROBIN: The desire to live a life of meaning and purpose has no age limit. In this episode, we explore programs that help older adults live purposeful lives and push back on ageism. Some of the programs are long-standing. Others are just a few years old. Yet all create opportunities for older people to stay socially connected and engaged in every aspect of life. That might be in the workforce, as advocates for social issues, as volunteers, or with friends and family.

MUSIC ends or xfades

[Laugh from Harry Pierre.]

ROBIN: That laugh belongs to Harry Pierre, a Boston Senior Companion Program volunteer. He was also one of eight models for the city’s Age Strong campaign. The

campaign was seen at bus stop shelters, on digital signs, at the airport, and at Boston Public Library branches across the city. Harry's face and wide smile were featured under the word "cranky".

HARRY: Depends on the situation (laugh).

ROBIN: At 71-years-old, Harry is far from cranky.

Emily: so what we were trying to do when we were picking models is find somebody who is the exact opposite of that.

ROBIN: Emily Shea leads the Age Strong Commission of Boston.

Emily: Harry certainly came to mind because you can hear his laugh, right? He's really the opposite of cranky. He spends all of his time trying to brighten people's lives and trying to help people.

ROBIN: Harry moved from Haiti to Massachusetts when he was a teenager. When he retired as an X-ray technician, he tried living in other states and cities but returned to Boston, the place he calls home. Harry began looking for a new purpose. He wanted to stay engaged in the community, so in 2018 he walked into City Hall.

HARRY: I was looking for something to keep myself occupied, you know, and I said, well, let me give something to Boston.

ROBIN: Harry signed up for the Senior Companion Program. The program offers one-on-one assistance to citizens who need help with everyday tasks. Because he is bilingual, Harry often works in the Haitian-Creole community.

HARRY: Almost every day I have an assignment. I take them to medical appointments, you know, and I do a wellness visit, you know, and sometimes take them out shopping, or it depends on the need.

ROBIN: Harry gets a small stipend to help cover travel and meals, but he says the big benefit for him is the connection to a community of people focused on helping others.

HARRY: I love doing it. I feel that I have a family here. You know, and everybody here we all together and I love it, you know, yes.

MUSIC - Paper Planes/Ocean Avenue

ROBIN: Harry recognized his own need to stay connected and took action to become a volunteer. Caitlin Coyle is the Director of the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging at the Gerontology Institute at UMass Boston.

CAITLIN: We know from research that engaging in volunteering, engaging in purpose-driven activity is good for us. It is good for our physical health, our cognitive health and our mental health.

Caitlin works with cities and towns in Massachusetts to better understand the needs of older people. She helps connect the dots between older adults' talents and skills and the needs of their communities.

CAITLIN: There's actually research around volunteering that suggests that people are more likely to volunteer, they're more likely to give up their time if someone asks them to do that. People feel seen, they feel heard, when someone says, you have something to offer, please come and help volunteer, help participate in our community.

ROBIN: Caitlin helped develop the Senior Civic Academy with the City of Boston. The goal of the Academy is to give older adults the tools they need to advocate for their interests with federal, state, and local governments. Two classes of about 25 older adults met each Friday for six weeks. Alice Fisher is a 2018 graduate.

ALICE: Oh, it was fabulous. It was really nice.

ROBIN: Alice has been an activist in Boston since the 1960s. She has a Ph.D. in women's studies, worked for different parts of state government, and co-owned a catering business. She was impressed with the thoughtfulness that went into forming their class.

ALICE: they kind of very carefully pick people of different backgrounds. And, a few so you weren't alone. In it, too. So there were a few LGBT folks. And there were few African-American folks. They had a really nice distribution. And what we did was basically ..learned about how every piece of government worked. Everything from the City Council to the federal offices, and everything in between.

ROBIN: The Academy participants learned how the city and state budgets worked, learned about different federal laws regarding older adults, and got tours of all the offices and the people who run them. They also got lessons in public speaking. For graduation, Academy members were asked to use their new skill.

ALICE: our final project was going to be an elevator speech on what we wanted to accomplish, what we were interested in doing.

ROBIN: The assignment was to persuade an official or funder about an issue they wanted to address in two minutes. Alice chose a scenario of trying to convince someone to join the board of her project for a virtual Senior Center for the LGBTQ community.

ALICE FISHER ELEVATOR SPEECH. I've met someone in the elevator who was a potential board member. And so I'm taking advantage of that moment to say that, I'd like to let you know we're involved in putting together a method for the dispersed LGBT seniors of Massachusetts. We think what we are doing will facilitate community and has the potential of support for one another. We're thinking of virtual communication as the possible vehicle.

ROBIN: Alice has since gained funding and support to develop her online community. It's called Outstanding Life. Another Senior Civic Academy graduate is Cynthia Cornelius from the class of 2019.

CYNTHIA: It was one of the greatest experiences that I've had. As a senior, I want to say in my life, because it's just so much information that I learned.

ROBIN: Cynthia was already an active volunteer before she went through the Senior Civic Academy, but she wanted to do more. Her education and work life had focused on early childhood education and family services. When she retired, she continued to share her knowledge about Boston's resources.

CYNTHIA: In some groups, I'm known as the resource lady...

ROBIN: Cynthia had her own database of contacts. People would call or email her, and she would connect them with the appropriate person or organization.

CYNTHIA: I have so many resources to share, you know, someone comes on, they had a fire, they know someone that you know, can't stop drinking, or they need food.

ROBIN: Participating in the Academy gave Cynthia's grassroots work a boost. She now holds regular Zoom sessions with other older adults to share resources.

CYNTHIA: So that's pretty much what I do, run a few Zoom sessions through the week, co-host or host, a group of seniors. It's called SIPP Seniors in Purpose and Power, and we just mainly share resources, you know, if someone needs something, here it is, let me know if, you know, you need my help again.

ROBIN: The pandemic put a pause on the Senior Civic Academy – but the Age Strong Commission plans to start it up again soon to help more older residents pursue their passions.

Music: Low Light - Garden of Eden

ROBIN: Not everyone wants to or is able to retire as they hit their older years – For some people, work is an important part of their identity... and purpose. But too often, we hear stories about older adults who have been pushed out of the job market because of implicit bias and ageist assumptions. In other cases, older workers looking for a new job may find their skills haven't kept pace with what a modern workplace needs. It's not a new problem.

MARIAN: So our little motto is path to employment

ROBIN: Marian Walsh is CEO and President of the non-profit Operation Able.

MARIAN: And Operation Able is in our 41st year. So we have been serving the older worker for a very long time.

ROBIN: The people served by Operation Able are culturally and economically diverse. Some are immigrants who may not be familiar with American workplaces. Others may be reentering the job market after a long absence. And some people may just need to update their computer skills. Each job seeker has a unique story, Marian says. For

example, someone who stayed home to be the caregiver for a family member living with dementia might not realize that the skills they developed can transfer to the workplace.

MARIAN: Well, that took an awful lot of independence. That took an awful lot of leadership, organization, commitment, sacrifice, those are very transferable skills to the workplace. And so we don't change anyone's story. We just listen to it and help them describe it and tell it.

ROBIN: Matching skills, Marian says, is a bit of a dating game between employee and employer. Operation Able helps job seekers match their skills to available jobs... breaking down the stigma of older workers in the workforce... and furthering each participant's purpose.

MUSIC BRIDGE - Icelandic Arpeggios

ROBIN: The Commonwealth of Massachusetts employs 40,000 people and is leading the nation as a state employer combating ageism. In 2022, the Commonwealth was certified as an Age-Friendly Employer by the Age-Friendly Institute... the first state to receive the designation..

MCCUE: to become an age-friendly employer was rigorous, there was a very comprehensive checklist and level of scrutiny to our policies, our workplace practices that we had to effectively pass.

ROBIN: That's Jeff McCue, Commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance. Previously, he was the Assistant Secretary and Chief Human Resources Officer for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Jeff says he's happy that the Commonwealth has been acknowledged for doing a great job creating a workplace that values the experience of older workers.

MCCUE: I'll give you a really interesting example. We have a number of elevator inspectors who work here for the Commonwealth.

ROBIN: At one point, Jeff looked at the ages of those inspectors – and he wasn't surprised to see that the average age was sixty-three.

MCCUE: these were largely people that had retired from private entities, still had a lot of interest, and had tons of relevant experience. We're able to bring it to the Commonwealth to help us do our work.

ROBIN: Jeff says thirty percent of the Commonwealth's employees are over the age of 55. He says a multi-generational workforce requires careful thinking about the programs and policies created for all of its employees, regardless of their age.

MCCUE: to make sure that we don't create policies that are welcomed and embraced by certain generations and are scorned by others.

ROBIN: Some Massachusetts policies are aimed at giving employees flexibility. For example, the state has a program that can ease the abruptness of retirement.

MCCUE: you're going, you know, 60 miles an hour for a certain amount of time, and then you put the brakes on, and it can get challenging, it can get lonely.

ROBIN: About a thousand people take advantage of something called post-retirement engagements. Jeff says it's a way to unwind from full-time work.

MCCUE: But it allows, you know, for transitions, it allows for continuity and the ability of folks to continue to provide certain critical services and experience they learned which is really beneficial to us as an employer. But I also think beneficial to individuals making the transition and allowing them to do some kind of step down into their retirement.

ROBIN: For those looking to create a more age-friendly workplace, Jeff has some suggestions about where to start.

MCCUE: What's your data telling you? What are your demographics saying to you, you know, demographics in terms of your hiring trends, your turnover trends? You know, what's the level of tenure that people have in the jobs, because above and beyond the fact that the age-friendly nature of our programming in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is the right thing to do – it's also, from an employer's perspective, the right strategic thing to do.

MUSIC - Letra Circle of Light

ROBIN: Ageism casts a shadow on all the work, advocacy, and volunteerism older adults contribute to society. But Massachusetts is working to remove that shadow. Here's Sandra Harris, the volunteer President of AARP Massachusetts. She's working to make sure older adults have opportunities for social and community engagement.

HARRIS: I think there's the belief that we've had our time, our turns right, and maybe it's time to sit down and let other people do the work. My answer to that is, I think it's a time where it's required that we all do the work together. And there's no us versus them, that we're in a world, in a society that requires us to all come together and work for the common good.

ROBIN: Take loneliness for example. The U.S. Surgeon General has said the problem of loneliness is similar in scale to the opioid epidemic. It affects mental and physical health and costs the economy *billions* of dollars. Through her role with AARP, Sandra became aware of the need to focus efforts to mitigate loneliness among older adults. She and Caitlin Coyle co-chair the Massachusetts Taskforce to End Loneliness and Build Community. Sandra says it's often difficult to *reach* those older adults who are lonely.

HARRIS: Who are the people who are living in loneliness? How do we find them? What's going on in your communities? How do you see this epidemic being manifested in your community?

ROBIN: The task force convenes meetings around Massachusetts to gather data and exchange ideas with others who are tackling the problem in their communities. The solutions don't have to be big or costly.

HARRIS: One program that we're really excited about is the happy-to-chat bench. It's a bench placed in a safe, welcoming space usually around a town center or something with a sign that says happy to chat if you'd like to find someone to chat – sit here.

ROBIN: Sandra is encouraged by how many older adults reach out with ideas for their own communities.

HARRIS: ...People raising their hands, you know, coming in and saying I want to be a part of that. A large number of our membership on the task force are people who are not necessarily with a particular organization, but there are individuals who just see a need, who see what's going on in their communities, and want to reach out and help to resolve this issue.

ROBIN: The older adults she meets continually remind her that there really is no age limit on living a purposeful life.

HARRIS: We still have so much to give. We've got so much experience, right? And we have the know-how and we have to embrace and honor that because we're needed.

Theme music

ROBIN: To hear more age- and dementia-friendly stories in this series visit reimagineaging.net. And to learn how your community can become more age- and dementia-friendly, visit mass.gov/reimagineaging. This story was produced with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative. Funding was provided by Point32Health Foundation. I'm Robin Lipson. Thank you for listening.