

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.

ROBIN: We need to get to work, the grocery store, and the doctor’s office. We visit family and friends, go to the park, and go out to eat. Getting from one place to another takes up many hours of our lives. And, as we age, *the way* we get around can change. Maybe we biked everywhere before getting a car. Maybe we left the subway behind when we moved to the suburbs. And, as the population gets older, we need to plan for that change too. Transit planners and activists are looking at how transportation can evolve to become more age- and dementia-friendly. One way is to improve community engagement.

CONNIE MELLIS: the best solutions happen organically...when people are invested in the solution, it is more successful

ROBIN: In this episode, we’ll hear what planners in Central Massachusetts found when they asked older adults how public transportation could better serve them. But first, let’s hear how a walk down a busy street can be made easier and safer for people of all ages and abilities.

MUSIC OUT

ROBIN: Maneuvering on busy streets isn’t always simple.

MYSKA: My name is Liz Myska. And I proudly say that I'm a VIP, a visually impaired person.

ROBIN: Almost 7% of Americans over the age of 65 experience some visual impairment. Liz Myska was a fifty-year-old lawyer living in a three-story house in Worcester when she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a condition that causes cells in the eye to break down over time. She realized her life needed to change to accommodate her changing vision. The first thing she did was sell her car and move.

MYSKA: And I was always a walker. So moving downtown, I live two blocks from Main Street. I'm within walking distance of a grocery store, of the cleaners, of the Law Library, of the courthouse, so, I knew in order to age in place, I've got to be in a place where I can access these things.

ROBIN: Liz says maintaining independence was her goal. When she became legally blind, she found a welcoming community through Worcester's Accessibility Advisory Commission. After she spoke at one of their events, a young man named Hans approached her. He was an optometry student.

MYSKA: And he said, Liz, I want to work with blind athletes. Because Hans himself is an athlete, a runner. And I said, Hans, instead of just working with a segment of the blind population, again an elite segment, I'm like, Let's start something for the blind ordinary, that everybody can do. And I said, What about walking? Let's start with walking.

ROBIN: The collaboration between Liz and Hans became a program called “Walkfit”. Sighted optometry students learned how to be walking guides by traveling with people who are visually impaired.

MYSKA: My VIPs, my visually impaired people, were very skeptical, like, we're entrusting our bodies to people who don't know how to guide? (laugh) But in a very wonderful and wild way, it was kind of like, they're learning from us, we're learning from them. They're skill-building and relationship-building. We're skill-building and relationship-building.

ROBIN: Part of the training sometimes involves having a sighted person wear a blindfold so they can try navigating as a person with vision loss...

Music crossfade with outside ambiance

Walkfit has expanded over the years to train more than optometry students. One of the Walkfit groups meets each Saturday at St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester, where VIPs and guides get comfortable walking together before heading outside...

ROBIN: Today, Liz is paired with Greer Jarvis, a sighted woman in her 20s who works for the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission. Everyone stops at an intersection and waits for the audible traffic signal to tell them it's safe to walk.

MYSKA: Ok. you hear the chirper.... You heard the car, I think the car went through the light... [laugh]...Because...

JARVIS: The car did the right turn on red thing...

MYSKA: OK, all right. But, again, I can't see it. But I'm like, yeah: would he see me? That, that's my point right now. Would, would a car see me, and would a car judge: oh, well she's not crossing the street or...and then they would take the turn [loud truck goes by] and I wouldn't know that. So, again, avoidance. So we as human beings are like, ohh I'm not going to go, I'm not going to do it. I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna, you know, be imperiled. But that you know.. tanks our independence [fade out]

ROBIN: In pairs, the group navigates four crosswalks to make a full circle around the loud, busy intersection and then heads back inside. The sighted members chat about the awareness they've gained... and how many things they had to pay attention to in order to maneuver the crosswalks safely. Liz explains that it's not just people with visual impairments and people living with disabilities who benefit from making things easier to navigate. She offers elevators as an example.

MYSKA: Everybody benefits when, whether they listen to the elevator go ding as it goes up, or ding ding as it comes down. Everybody is gonna benefit with certain tools and becoming accustomed to what those tools are.

Liz says she avoids certain streets in Worcester because they are too unsafe to cross. So, she has a recommendation for the city planners:

MYSKA: The traffic needs to slow down, because I as a pedestrian want to cross the street. And I don't feel safe crossing the street because I don't think you can see me.

MUSIC - Sangria Said bysed

ROBIN: All of us need to be safe walking in our cities and towns, but studies show that older adults are disproportionately represented in pedestrian deaths. Groups like WalkMassachusetts teach residents how to advocate for a better walking environment.

ROBIN: Karin Valentine Goins is Program Director with the Prevention Research Center at UMass Chan Medical School in Worcester. She's also co-chair of the advocacy group WalkBike Worcester.

GOINS: We're standing at the corner of Pleasant Street and Park Ave in Worcester.

ROBIN: This corner is close to Elm Park, one of the largest green areas in the city. Park Avenue and Pleasant Street have lots of foot and vehicle traffic.

GOINS: You can see that it's two lanes in each direction. Each lane is very wide.

ROBIN: A high school, an elementary school, and senior housing are nearby. Adjacent streets have medical buildings, restaurants and stores.

GOINS: You have a lot of reasons why people need to cross the street, and people do it a lot, unregulated.

ROBIN: "Unregulated" explains Karin, means that people cross in the middle of the street, despite the rushing traffic, because crosswalks and stop lights are far apart. It's the sort of problem that a "walk audit"-- a survey of the conditions people encounter

when walking – can capture. People head out on a predetermined route with a map and a checklist. The goal is to observe and document conditions that make walking difficult or unsafe. Karin says walk audits often have at least one of three goals.

GOINS: raising awareness, building community in a space — getting people out together — or collecting information... you could think about an audit in this area for any one of those purposes.

ROBIN: Karin says in 2022 three organizations came together for a research project – The Prevention Research Center at UMass Chan Medical School, WalkBike Worcester and WalkMassachusetts. They wanted to see if it was possible to engage more people in Worcester to do walk audits. They got funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and recruited five community teams. They called it the Walk Audit Academy.

GOINS: I'm just constantly amazed, I think about this stuff a lot. There are people who haven't really thought about it, but you take them out into their space, and you sort of say what, you know, how does this make you feel? Does it make you feel safe? Do you have enough time to cross? Do you have any separation from cars? Is there any green space? Are there any benches? And they start to look at their space differently. They will notice things I hadn't even noticed. They will tell stories of their own close calls.

ROBIN: Karin says there are many ways to alter roadways so they are easier and safer to navigate. For example, if streets are narrowed down to one lane every now and then, cars will slow down. Or traffic signals can be recalibrated at intersections so that cars making a turn don't have an immediate right of way.

GOINS: one of the safe things you can do for people who are aging or have challenges, is give them a leading pedestrian interval. So they get to start walking before the car gets to turn.

ROBIN: Changes like this are also good for people pushing strollers or walking with small children. Karin says there's an even deeper benefit to walk audits – they create a way for people to connect with the officials who build our streets and transportation systems.

GOINS: So what we did with the Walk Audit Academy, the walk audit training, is a piece of a larger project that we have that really helps people discover and document the way systems work in their community that are important for walkability.

MUSIC POST - RICK STEEL

ROBIN: Information from walk audits can inform an area's planning, identify potential improvements or bolster the efforts of advocacy groups pushing for neighborhood changes. Karin is excited about this aspect of civic engagement. She says researchers note that, without input from the community, transportation decisions can lead to greater disparities and inequities. Walk audits are one way to identify those inequities, and Worcester's citizens are embracing the tool.

GOINS: I honestly have been really surprised and pleased with the level of excitement about the idea of doing walk audits. Like people are hearing about it, and we're getting requests. Well when is the training going to happen again? And so I think that that is really great that people are seeing in this community an opportunity to participate or to weigh in on decisions that are made about transportation. I think that's wonderful.

ROBIN: Walkfit and the Walk Audit Academy are *grassroots* efforts addressing transportation needs. Public Transit officials are *also* taking steps to better serve their communities. In 2022, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission set out to develop an Age-Friendly Action Plan. They conducted listening sessions and surveys. Constance Mellis is the transit program manager for the Commission. She says they wanted to gather input from a lot of different audiences.

CONNIE: so in the case of the Age-Friendly work, the audiences often tend to be groups at councils on aging, groups at senior housing centers, but also at community events.

ROBIN:like local fairs and school programs. For the Commission, age-friendly means communities that work for people of all ages.

CONNIE: So going to the senior center isn't somewhere that everyone is going to go and a school is not someplace that everyone's going to go but if we capture the extremes of the age, then we can likely capture most of the need.

ROBIN: By meeting people where they were, the listening sessions created opportunities for residents to give input about their transportation needs. What the Commission heard is that everyone wants more from their public transportation systems, but Constance says residents also don't seem to know what is already available.

CONNIE: We hear again and again. I never knew that service was there. You mean I can get from this location to that local... I never knew that. It's it's kind of a well ...it's a hidden gem.

MUSIC "Isolated"

ROBIN: A good example is the travel training program created by Worcester's Regional Transit Authority a decade ago. It educates people about transit options and helps them with specific transportation needs. In some cases, a trainer will accompany a rider to help them learn how to use the region's public transit system.

CONNIE: so the trainer will often meet the... I'll say student; in this case, we're all students --at most likely their home and walk them to the nearest bus stop or walk them through the process to how to get to a place of employment or a supermarket. The trainer will show them about fare, placement, safety, all of the skills required to use public transit.

ROBIN: It's important to find ways to let more residents know about regional services like this says Constance. At the same time, individual *towns* are coming up with solutions that fit their unique communities.

MUSIC "Sub-Harmonic Bliss"

A good example of a *local* solution in an area with limited public transit is the Quaboag Connector. Minibuses connect eight towns in the rural area of the Pioneer Valley, offering inexpensive curb-to-curb service for the general public.

CONNIE: And people can call for a ride, sometimes an hour in advance, sometimes 24 hours in advance. Those kinds of models have traditionally only been available to people over 60 or people with disabilities but opening it to the general public really does work in a rural area.

ROBIN: Constance says ridership on the Quaboag Connector keeps increasing. Sometimes the first step to figuring out better public transportation is to look at what isn't working.

CONNIE: In suburban Worcester, there was a fixed route bus service, which had low ridership. WRTA realized that it wasn't a good use of their buses, because, you know, there wasn't a lot of ridership and was lucky enough to get grant funding to try out a new service offered by a private company.

ROBIN: That company provides an on-demand ride-share service. Riders can use a smartphone app or call a reservation number for a pickup.

CONNIE: And that service has now exploded, it's taken off dramatically. Like ridership increases monthly.

ROBIN: Part of the increase came from an unexpected source – students from a local high school.

CONNIE: After the school buses left when students were still at school for sports or whatever programs, they then needed a ride home. Well, this service filled that gap.

ROBIN: Other towns in Massachusetts are experimenting with on-demand ride systems. Salem has the Salem Skipper – a fleet of shuttle vans which started in response to residents saying they needed a better way to get between neighborhoods. They also wanted dependable transportation for shopping, meeting family and friends, and medical appointments. Salem Hospital is piloting a customized platform that books rides for discharged patients who don't have their own transportation.

MUSIC IN - PAPER PLANES COUNTDOWN

ROBIN: Back in Worcester...The big takeaway from the 2022 survey conducted by the Regional Planning Commission is one that can guide any region: Transit planning can shift from a top-down approach to one that comes from the community,

CONNIE: the best solutions happen organically...when people are invested in the solution, it is more successful. If you try to dictate the solution for all people, it doesn't quite work as well. So that bottom-up approach is more successful.

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.**