

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: In an Age-Friendly community, everyone benefits from encouragement, support, and care. That includes caring for those of us living with dementia. In the Commonwealth, Age-Friendly also means Dementia-Friendly.

PATTY: In Massachusetts, we're the only people in the world who are doing them together.

ROBIN: According to the Alzheimer’s Association, there are more than 130,000 people in Massachusetts living with Alzheimer’s or other dementias – and that number is expected to grow.

PATTY: Massachusetts has a lot of older people. So we know as a state, in policy and practice, that this is an issue that we had to deal with.

ROBIN: In this episode, we’ll hear about programs to create communities that value and support people living with dementia and their caregivers.

MUSIC ends

ROBIN: Dementia is the loss of cognitive functioning. It can impact thinking, remembering, and reasoning to such an extent that it interferes with a person's daily life.

Music - Slowly Until We Get There

ROBIN: Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. One program – Dementia Friends – helps people learn how to interact with family, friends, and neighbors living with

memory loss. A worldwide initiative, the group educates people so they better understand the effects of Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia. Since 2016, Dementia Friends Massachusetts has done this primarily through workshops.

KARA-WORKSHOP: Alright, so number one: Dementia is not..

Group Answer: A normal part of aging

KARA: So. remember, not everyone who grows old will develop dementia, right?

ROBIN: Kara Showers and Rachael Cordella have come to the Senior Center in Melrose to lead the city's first workshop.

KARA-WORKSHOP:

All right, key message number two: dementia is caused by

Group Answer: diseases of the brain.

KARA: awesome, most common is Alzheimer's. Right?

BETH: We boil down tremendously complex information about dementia into a one-hour interactive workshop that's designed to be very accessible for any member of a community.

ROBIN: That's Beth Solzberg, the director of the Alzheimer's and Related Dementias Family Support Program at the non-profit Jewish Family and Children's Service in Waltham. Beth and her organization lead Dementia Friends Massachusetts.

BETH: Dementia Friends sessions attract a really wide range of people. And that's by design. They're really meant to reach everybody in a community.

ROBIN: On this day, there are twenty people in the room: two Melrose police officers, a daughter with her father, who is living with dementia; and another woman who recently noticed

a close friend is having cognitive issues and wants to better understand the changes she's seeing. Kara and Rachel split the attendees up into smaller groups for an exercise.

RACHEL: So what I'd like you to do is pick one task that everyone in your group does every day. So, an example might be brushing your teeth, packing your bag for work, (fade).

ROBIN: It may be difficult for people living with dementia to remember all the steps for tasks. This group has decided to think through the steps of a daily toothbrushing habit.

GROUP: So you got the toothbrush. Got the toothpaste. Before that, though, I have to open my medicine cabinet to get out my toothpaste.. Yes. Okay, that's a good one. ...should we get more granular, remove the cap from toothpaste? Oh uh huh.

ROBIN: Breaking down a task and trying to put it in the correct sequence, helps the group understand how a person living with dementia might struggle with the same task.

RACHAEL: everyone, come back to the table, and we can talk about the exercise

GROUP: we made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and we used 15 steps. We had brushing teeth, and we had eight steps. But there were some multi steps within each of those steps.

RACHAEL: Yeah, there's a lot of steps to remember in just a very basic waking up and brushing your teeth and making breakfast, right? But if you've been waking up and brushing your teeth every day for your whole life, and suddenly you can't remember how to do that, that's a really difficult feeling.

Again Beth Solzberg:

BETH: People come to the session for a variety of reasons. Maybe their employer is sponsoring a session at lunchtime, and so they go and sitting there, there's a spark for them and they realize, oh, this helps me understand my neighbor down the street. I've been noticing they're not out mowing their lawn anymore. When I talk to them, they seem different. You know, people realize that there are people in their circle who are living with dementia, and they may not have thought about it before. But it is so widespread that most people have some connection or another, and if they don't now, they will.

ROBIN: Kara and Rachel share phone numbers and website resources for those who may want or need more information. The list includes the Alzheimer's Association hotline, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

KARA: so thanks, everybody. Thank you guys. You're all Dementia Friends now,.. So this is exciting.

MUSIC - Take me down to the fashion show

ROBIN: Sessions like this are happening across the state. More than 14,500 people have become Dementia Friends. 800 have received additional training so they can lead community workshops. Philip Gonzalez is the Director of Community Investments for the Point32Health Foundation... an organization that helps fund Dementia Friends and other age- and dementia-friendly work. He says he's inspired by the way Dementia Friends has taken root in the state.

PHILLIP: And we're particularly impressed by the fact that there has been some great work to engage different cultural communities in this effort.

ROBIN: The workshops are offered in nine languages – and often led by trusted community members who are knowledgeable about cultural traditions. Phillip notes different communities

may think about dementia through the lens of their specific culture. The Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center is one organization that has adapted the Dementia Friends curriculum for their community.

PHILLIP: And that allows them to really engage individuals in a way that's culturally relevant, acknowledges the challenges that might be present in that community and to get them to the point of actively engaging in becoming a Dementia Friend.

ROBIN: Some people might attend a workshop for personal reasons. For others, it's the first step to making broader changes in their cities and towns. That's where Patty Sullivan and the statewide group...*Dementia Friendly Massachusetts* come in.

PATTY: I help communities either get started or work on implementation or solve difficult problems or solve political problems in some cases.

ROBIN: Patty works for the Massachusetts Council on Aging, the trade association for the 350 Councils on Aging in the Commonwealth. Patty helps cities and towns create a dementia-friendly culture.

PATTY: A culture of dementia means that if somebody on the street, or someone in the grocery store, or somebody at the library notices that a person is confused and is getting frustrated that they can't find what they're looking for, is to say, appropriately, hey, you look like maybe you could use a hand. Let's see what you're looking for on your list. Or a bank teller who notices that a person is trying to withdraw all of their money or, or a town clerk that notices that a person has paid their taxes three or four times or hasn't paid them at all after paying them on time for 50 years.

ROBIN: Patty says a community can become dementia-friendly in big and small ways. The first task is usually to bring together people from across the community to collaborate.

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PATTY: Usually, that group includes the town administrator, a select person, the Council on Aging director, the police and fire, the business community. And then anybody else who's interested, and we have a real mix of people who come to the table.

ROBIN: The next step is to ask questions of the community.

PATTY: They may do a survey of the town, they may do focus groups, they can do a variety of things, depending on the size of the community. There's a teeny, teeny town in Massachusetts. And they did their assessment by basically talking to half the people in town because they knew them all.

ROBIN: And then you decide on a plan of action.

PATTY: You take the assessment; you decide what you want to do. You make sure that you, in that process, have talked to somebody living with dementia or a caregiver, and then you get the town and that committee to sign on to a document pledging to do the work that you've laid out in your action plan.

ROBIN: Training first responders is one possible action a town can take.

MUSIC - COUNTDOWN

When a family calls 9-1-1 for a situation involving a loved one with dementia, the responders need to understand the circumstances and be ready to adapt their approach. Patty directs police and fire departments to the Alzheimer's Association, which has a free online program covering topics like wandering and shoplifting. The town of Norwell gives its first responders an additional tool.

PATTY: So everybody in Norwell, who pays taxes is going to get a note saying, we're setting up this new program. If anybody in your household has dementia, or autism, or any other special condition, we should be aware of, please fill this form out, send it back with your tax bill, or drop it off at police or fire. That allows us to create a database, and a database then allows an officer who's going to an address to look and see what he or she is walking into.

ROBIN: Ultimately, Patty says, communities benefit from looking at everything through an age- and dementia-friendly lens. Doing this helps us all look at the world differently and that could lead to physical changes, such as designing benches and bus stops that work for everyone, and even broader changes that could shift people's thinking. For instance, high school reading groups that center stories about people living with dementia. This would help younger generations have more awareness of what it means to be part of a Dementia Friendly community.

PATTY: First of all, the community is going to be warmer and more kind, just because they're starting to think about older adults in a different way. And also, people are...they're fearful. But if you give them the tools to talk to people, and to understand what's needed, then it changes the whole dynamic.

Music - Paper Planes

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.**

