

SUCCESSFUL AGING IN PLACE: BOWDOINHAM, MAINE

PROJECT GOAL

To create within local government a mechanism to articulate and address the needs of an aging population in a rural community so that residents may remain in the community for the entirety of their lives.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Northern New England is a rapidly aging region and Maine is the “oldest” state in the nation. Wherever they may reside, older Americans face numerous challenges, but those who live in small towns and rural areas face additional problems related to the lack of access to services, poor mobility options, often living on fixed incomes, and insufficient support for those services necessary for a rich and rewarding life. Bowdoinham, Maine, a rural community almost equidistant from Portland and Augusta, has a population of approximately 3,000 with nearly 13 per cent of its residents aged 64 or older. This segment of the town’s population has grown over the years due to the out-migration of younger residents, retirees moving into the community and the normal processes of resident aging. A town document suggests that by 2030 approximately half of the town will be 60 years or older.

As part of its 2012 Comprehensive Plan, a “needs assessment” of elders living in the community was carried out. The resulting document, entitled “Aging in Bowdoinham” recommended, among other things, the establishment of an Advisory Council on Aging to guide policy and programs to assist the community’s older population. The Advisory Council subsequently was established and applied for and was selected to pilot the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Age Friendly Communities Indicator Guide. Among the 15 communities around the world selected to assess the Guide, including such cities as Shanghai, Tehran, Washington, DC, and Nairobi, Bowdoinham was by far the smallest and most rural community chosen.

The criteria to define an age-friendly community included such factors as physical access to public facilities, transportation, health facilities and housing, social and community participation, access to information, inclusion and respect. Bowdoinham has made significant strides in all areas save for access to transportation for which the town and the Advisory Council continue to pursue solutions. Buildings and public areas have been made more accessible; an aggressive sidewalk program has been implemented to provide greater safety and access to village areas, especially for those requiring wheelchairs and/or walkers; older residents are actively involved in and sought out for participation in local organizations, such as the Merrymeeting Arts Center,



Tool Table at town office

Friends of the Library and others; a program to remove ice from the steps of homes and facilities has been instituted; a “tool table” has been placed in the Town Office with such items as jar openers, hammers and other devices; the number of handicapped parking spaces in town has been increased; and a full palate of activities for seniors, from kayaking to cribbage games, trips to other communities and cultural institutions to lifelong education opportunities, Tai Chi classes to improve balance and similar exercise programs, mushroom identification to cheese-making demonstrations. Perhaps most importantly, the position of a part-time Coordinator for Older Adult Services has been created and staffed by a licensed social worker who helps to bridge the energy provided by volunteers and town services, and to act as an advocate within local government for the needs of Bowdoinham elders.



Kayaking in Merrymeeting Bay

LESSONS LEARNED

While challenges continue to exist in Bowdoinham for seniors –most especially in the realm of transportation access to vital services such as health care—what is happening in this one rural community strongly suggests that a positive attitude and an aggressive approach to the needs of a community’s seniors can make a real difference in providing the possibility of “aging in place.” Older rural residents often have long-established ties to the community in which they have lived for several decades, some based on family ties, others to churches and other social and community organizations. When such ties and the social capital they provide are severed, the overall quality of life for older individuals and communities can suffer substantial harm. Strategies such as those adopted by Bowdoinham, Maine, can go a long way to assuring that elders continue to have a vital place in the very communities that they have helped to build. The active encouragement of town officials, together with the harnessing of volunteers within and without the senior population, can create a climate in which a sustaining place for elders within the larger community can be achieved.

For More Information: <http://www.bowdoinham.com/aging-bowdoinham-committee>