



Governor Charlie Baker greets an attendee during an announcement of state affordable rental housing awards in July 2018 in Boston. The grants included support for Hearth at Four Corners, a project in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood that will provide fifty-four units of supportive, affordable housing for older adults at risk of homelessness. Also pictured are (left) Housing and Community Development Undersecretary Janelle Chan and (center) Mark Hinderlie, president and CEO of Hearth. (Courtesy photo)

# Age-Friendly Massachusetts:

## WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS

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The concept of “age-friendly” may not yet be part of our daily conversations, but you will be hearing a lot more about it in the months and years to come, particularly as the proportion of older residents in our communities continues to grow.

The World Health Organization describes an age-friendly community as one that “encourages active aging by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age.” Put more simply, “age-friendly” describes a global movement to create communities where we can all grow up and grow old together.

Age-friendly communities recognize that everyone benefits from the energy,

experience and continued contributions of older people, and they understand that the benefits of age-friendly activities accrue to all residents, no matter their age or abilities. “Age-friendly” emphasizes equity and inclusion, so everyone is part of the movement.

While the term “age-friendly” may sound simple, it takes a lot of planning and intentional leadership. Making communities more welcoming and livable for aging

residents is everyone’s work—it isn’t just the work of councils on aging—and goes well beyond individual municipal departments.

So why push to make our communities and our Commonwealth age-friendly? It is partly because of demographics, but it also represents a real opportunity for our state.

### The State of Aging in an Aging State

Thanks to scientific, medical and public health advances, people are living longer. According to the Department of Public Health, the average life expectancy in Massachusetts is nearly eighty-one years of age, putting the Commonwealth in the top tier of states for life expectancy. The 2018 Massachusetts Healthy Aging Data Report published by the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston finds that approximately 15 percent

of Massachusetts residents are age sixty-five or older, an age group that has grown by an estimated 125,000 people in just three years.

The report also found the following:

- Many rural communities have higher percentages of residents age sixty-five and older than the statewide average.
- The state’s older population has become more racially and ethnically diverse.
- Older residents have more education and higher incomes than the population as a whole.
- By 2030, an estimated one in five people nationally will be age sixty-five or older.

The Healthy Aging report also finds that more older people are choosing to age in their communities. Whether living independently, moving to assisted living residences, or receiving services that make it possible to

stay at home longer, many residents are choosing options that weren’t widely available ten or twenty years ago.

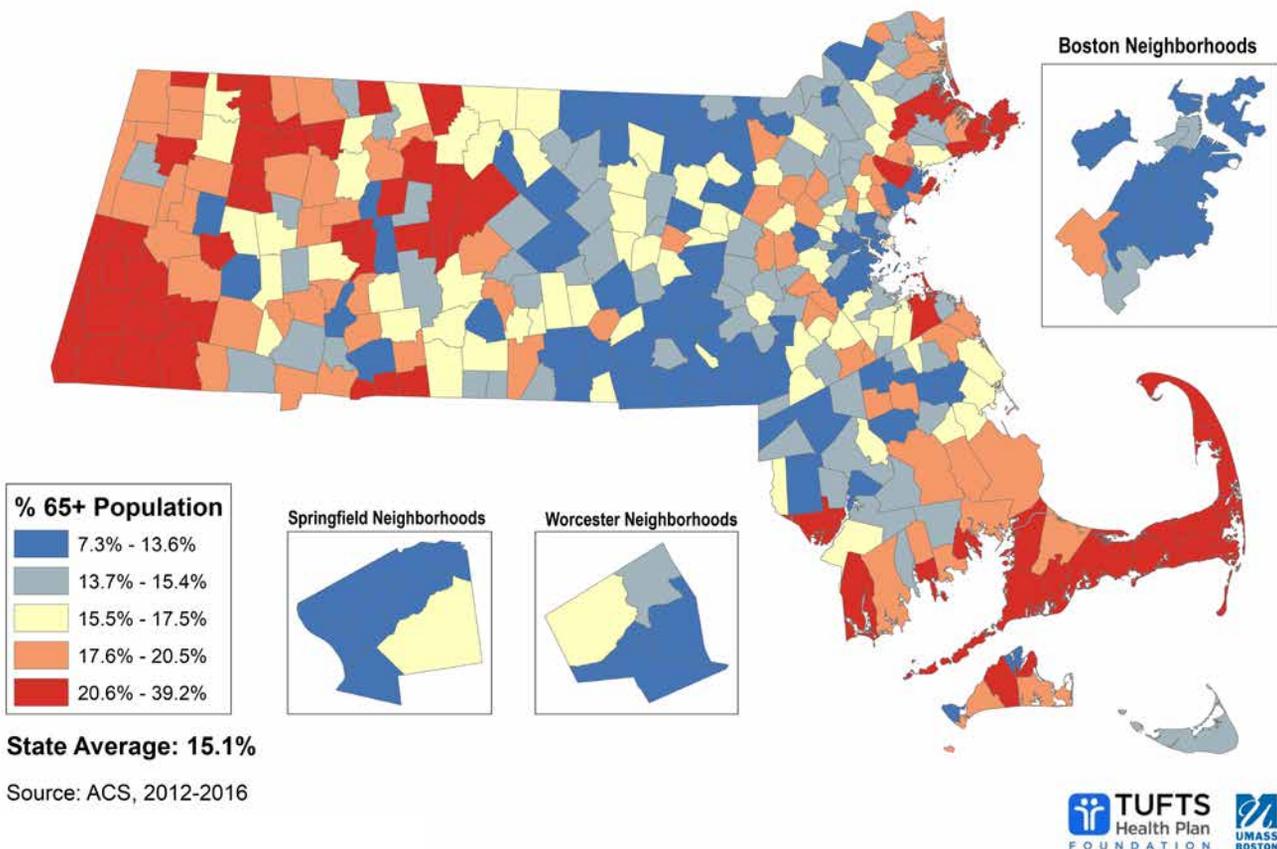
People are also retiring later. Work and volunteering give older people a sense of purpose, as well as opportunities for financial security and social engagement.

In addition, more older adults are living with dementia. Today about 130,000 Massachusetts residents are living with dementia, according to the Alzheimer’s Association, and the number is expected to rise to 150,000 by 2025. Creating communities that are responsive to the needs of adults living with dementia is a key part of many age-friendly efforts in Massachusetts. (See related story, page 22.)

### Momentum in Massachusetts

Massachusetts has become a national leader in the age-friendly movement. From

## Percentage of Population Age 65+ Years



## AGE-FRIENDLY MASSACHUSETTS

Boston to the Berkshires and every place in between, age-friendly efforts are underway in more than one hundred cities and towns. (See related story, page 18.)

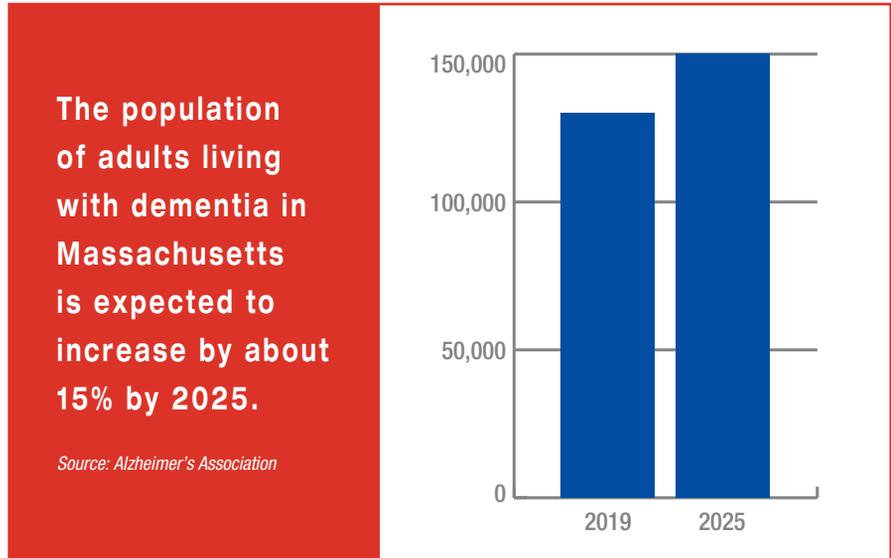
Drawing on the energy generated at the local level, state government, advocacy groups, and educational, business and philanthropic groups have come together to advance the age-friendly cause—and to make it easier for cities and towns to engage in and sustain the work of making communities more livable for people of all ages.

Governor Charlie Baker has played a leading role, by ensuring that aging policy and planning are front and center in his administration. He has challenged Massachusetts to “think differently about aging,” and committed the Commonwealth to joining the AARP’s Network of Age-Friendly States—one of the first states in the nation to do so.

In 2017, the Baker-Polito administration created the state’s first Council to Address Aging in Massachusetts, a twenty-four-member panel with representatives from government and business as well as the nonprofit, philanthropic, health and education sectors. The council is advising the state on healthy aging. The group held meetings throughout the state, listening to expert panels and more than five hundred Massachusetts residents and making twenty-eight recommendations to assist the Commonwealth and its communities.



*Newton Assessor Elizabeth Dromey provides a local perspective during a June 2018 meeting of the Governor’s Council to Address Aging in Massachusetts while David Stevens, executive director of the Massachusetts Councils On Aging, listens. The session focused on tax deferrals and other local programs to increase the economic security of older residents who are homeowners. (Courtesy photo)*



These recommendations are intended to:

- Improve the economic security of older people;
- Ensure access and affordability of supportive services;
- Promote the continued development of age-friendly communities; and
- Facilitate connection and continued engagement by older people in communities.

Massachusetts was the second state in the U.S. to join AARP’s Network of Age-Friendly States, and in January became the first state to submit a multiyear Age-Friendly State Action Plan. The plan ensures that the

Commonwealth and its partners will align and coordinate resources to bring the age-friendly movement to every city and town in Massachusetts.

### **What Does This Mean for Cities and Towns?**

From a planning perspective, city and town leaders routinely make data-informed decisions about how their communities are organized and how services are delivered. During significant demographic shifts throughout our history, schools have been built, zoning laws have changed to accommodate new housing or businesses, and town facilities and services have evolved to meet the



*Members of the Governor’s Council to Address Aging in Massachusetts meet in Boston in April 2018. The Council, established in April 2017, is the first-ever gubernatorial advisory panel on healthy aging in Massachusetts. (Courtesy photo)*



*Governor Charlie Baker poses at MIT in December 2018 with attendees of the In Good Company Optimal Aging Challenge, a global competition to identify breakthrough solutions addressing social isolation and loneliness among older adults. The challenge was an initiative of the Governor’s Council to Address Aging’s Innovation and Technology Workgroup, and was sponsored by the MIT AgeLab, GE Healthcare and Benchmark. (Courtesy photo)*

needs of residents and take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Planning for an aging population is much the same. It’s more than just responding to changing demographics.

Today, in the midst of an unprecedented demographic change, we have an incredible opportunity to shape our future—to use our creativity, our intellectual and scientific capital, the strength of our diversity, and even our New England know-how to develop new ways to help people age and thrive where we live, work and volunteer.

And we’re not alone in this thinking. It is not surprising that local communities are at the forefront of the age-friendly movement in our state, working to ensure that cities and towns are livable for people of all ages and that older residents remain engaged in the community. This makes sense, because no matter where you call home, all aging is local.

Is your city or town ready to engage in a community-wide conversation about healthy aging? If so, where do you start?

For starters, the way people think and talk about aging has to change. We need to eliminate ageist assumptions and advance creative solutions that reflect the needs and wants of older people. Municipal leaders can play a significant role in

reshaping the conversation by promoting inclusive policies and practices around aging in their communities.

Older people contribute deeply to the life of our cities and towns, and this movement aims to ensure that those contributions continue. In 2018, approximately 24,500 volunteers—many older people—provided nearly 48,000 hours per week in volunteer services to municipal councils on aging throughout Massachusetts. And, that is just one example. The Executive Office of Elder Affairs’ 2018 Annual Legislative Report identified countless other ways that older residents support their communities.

### **Moving Forward at the Local Level**

In preparing to become age-friendly, communities don’t have to do everything at once, and they certainly don’t have to do it on their own. Cities and towns can start by focusing on areas important to their residents. A local needs assessment can help identify opportunities.

In addition to planning for the future, many communities can work to improve existing policies and programs that improve the quality of life for older residents. Here are just a few examples:

- Increase awareness about existing property tax deferral or work-off programs. (Housing costs are a major concern for many residents throughout Massachusetts, including older adults on fixed incomes.)
- Review zoning laws to promote the option of “accessory dwelling units” (commonly known as in-law apartments) to assist older residents wishing to age in their community and to create additional housing stock.
- Become an age-friendly employer, and encourage other local employers to do so as well. Many older adults are choosing to work longer, and employers that harness the talents, reliability and experience of older workers are better for all residents.
- Examine the built environment of your city or town to ensure that it promotes accessibility for all residents, including older adults. Are sidewalks in good repair for someone who uses a walker or a baby stroller? Are there enough park benches, and are they in good repair?
- Ensure that existing municipal programs serving the transportation, social, civic and health needs of older residents are widely promoted and communicated.

## AGE-FRIENDLY MASSACHUSETTS

These are just a few examples. There are more throughout this issue of the *Municipal Advocate*. A *Municipal Leaders Guide to Age- and Dementia-Friendly Communities* is available at [tinyurl.com/AgeFriendly-MMA](http://tinyurl.com/AgeFriendly-MMA). These resources provide information and inspiration to get started.

“Age-friendly” may be a new term, but the values it represents are ageless: showing respect for each other; caring about our families and one another; creating inclusive communities that value diversity and neighborliness;

sharing a love of learning and wisdom; and making a commitment to solve challenging problems.

If your community hasn’t yet joined the age-friendly movement, now is the time to do so. The work that cities and towns do today is an investment in the future. By improving our communities for older residents, we’re improving the quality of life for all residents—because we are all aging.

This is more than a moment; it is a movement. Every level of government is involved, and additional communities are

starting the journey to an age-friendly future every day. We hope your community is one of them, and we stand ready to help you seize this opportunity to improve the quality of life for older adults and residents of all ages.

We are, after all, a commonwealth—a place built on the idea of providing for the common good and reserving a place at the table for everyone, working together to make sure Massachusetts remains a great place to grow up and grow old. 🌟

## Age-Friendly Guide Helps Communities Evaluate and Improve Structures and Services

*“Because active aging is a lifelong process, an age-friendly [community] is not just ‘elderly friendly.’ Barrier-free buildings and streets enhance the mobility and independence of people with disabilities, young as well as old. Secure neighbourhoods allow children, younger women and older people to venture outside [with] confidence to participate in physically active leisure and in social activities. Families experience less stress when their older members have the community support and health services they need. The whole community benefits from the participation of older people in volunteer or paid work. Finally, the local economy profits from the patronage of older adult consumers. The operative word in age-friendly social and physical urban settings is enablement.”*

—World Health Organization, *Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide*

Working in thirty-three cities around the globe, the World Health Organization asked older people in focus groups to describe the advantages and barriers they experience in eight areas of community life. In most cities, this input was complemented by evidence from focus groups of caregivers and service providers in the public, voluntary and private sectors. The results led to the development of a set of age-friendly community checklists and the WHO’s *Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide*.

The purpose of the guide is to engage communities to become more age-friendly and “tap the potential that older people represent for humanity.” The guide is intended to help communities see themselves from the perspective of older people, in order to identify where and how they can become more age-friendly.

The WHO identifies eight areas of focus where communities can evaluate whether their structures and services provide sufficient accessibility and inclusion for older people with varying needs and capacities.

The eight areas are:

- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Transportation

- Housing
- Social participation
- Respect and social inclusion
- Civic participation and employment
- Communication and information
- Community and health services

In the area of outdoor spaces and buildings, for example, communities can consider improvements to cleanliness, the availability of green space and places to rest, the condition of paved areas to facilitate walking, safety at pedestrian crossings, accessibility, the availability of public toilets, and a range of security issues.

In the follow-up stages of “age-friendly” local action, the guide states, “it is imperative that older people continue to be involved in monitoring the [community’s] progress and acting as age-friendly advocates and advisers.”

The World Health Organization’s *Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide* is available at [tinyurl.com/AgeFriendlyWHO](http://tinyurl.com/AgeFriendlyWHO).

