

Q&A:



Experts Explain Age- and Dementia-Friendly Movements in Massachusetts

*Above: James Fuccione and Patty Sullivan.
(Courtesy photo)*

Two experts recently answered questions to help explain the age- and dementia-friendly movements in Massachusetts, and how to become involved. We spoke with James Fuccione, executive director of the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative, and Patty Sullivan, program director for Dementia Friendly Massachusetts.

What is an “age-friendly” community?

Fuccione: When we say “age-friendly,” it rightly brings older adults to the forefront. But everyone is aging! So, at its core, an age-friendly community should focus on creating a social and physical environment that supports all ages and abilities.

The World Health Organization estab-

lished the designation for cities, towns, regions and states that commit to putting that idea into action. AARP is the national affiliate for the World Health Organization, so when communities anywhere in the U.S. apply, they apply to AARP. This initiates a process of engaging residents as part of an assessment, action planning and implementation, so each city or town’s initiative is unique to that community.

The common thread of age-friendly communities is that they are accessible, equitable, inclusive, safe and supportive.

What is a “dementia-friendly” community?

Sullivan: First, we should mention that dementia is more common in older adults, but it is *not* a part of normal aging. If you

lose your keys on a regular basis or forget names, you may think you are having memory problems, but dementia goes well beyond that. Dementia is a group of symptoms that can include memory loss, but in a manner that disrupts daily life, creates challenges in planning and problem solving, and difficulty completing familiar tasks, among other symptoms.

A dementia-friendly community is a place where people living with dementia are understood, respected, included and supported in community life. People are trained to be accustomed with the disease and provide services that are sensitive to the needs of people living with the disease as well as their caregivers and loved ones. There are actions a community can take to become more dementia-friendly

so that people living with dementia and those who are close to them can have the opportunity to engage in the community, receive services and come out of the shadows of stigma despite the challenges they may face.

After completing a few basic steps and committing to the work, communities in Massachusetts are invited to be designated as a “dementia-friendly community.” To be designated, there is a pledge community leaders can sign, and a range of free education tools are available to help municipal staff, first responders and the business community understand dementia and to help provide services to the people in the community living with the disease.

Why should communities align age- and dementia-friendly activity?

Fuccione: The age- and dementia-friendly movements both recognize that community participation is essential for personal and community well-being and important to all residents regardless of age or ability. In light of this common perspective, integrating age- and demen-

tia-friendly activity can greatly reduce duplicated efforts, save time, avoid confusion and allow these initiatives to strengthen and support each other. For related information, see the state’s newly released *Age- and Dementia-Friendly Integration Toolkit*, designed to facilitate your community’s planning (tinyurl.com/AgeFriendly-MMA).

Sullivan: Some communities in the state have chosen to start with one or the other—age-friendly or dementia-friendly. Both initiatives are committed to helping meet communities where they are, and present an opportunity for municipalities to choose from a menu of activities that best meet the needs of the community.

How many communities in Massachusetts have joined this movement?

Fuccione: If you include both age- and dementia-friendly initiatives, well over 200 cities and towns are engaged in varying levels of activity. More than fifty cities and towns have been designated age-friendly and 160 are working to become dementia-friendly. Many are

working on both. This includes work in a range of both individual communities and collaborative regional approaches, from rural towns, suburban areas to gateway cities—in every area of the state there is work happening, with more communities regularly joining the age- and dementia-friendly movements.

To find out if your community is engaged in these efforts, or to see which neighboring communities are engaged, you can find a map at the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative website at mahealthyagingcollaborative.org.

Why are communities engaging in this work?

Sullivan: Because they see the opportunities that our shifting demographics represent. It’s the right thing to do, but the benefits of bringing together different parts of the community to work toward common goals speak for themselves. Communities engaged in this work know that the actions they take now to make their cities and towns more livable for older residents will pay dividends for all of their residents, now and well into the future.

Community Compact Examples



Needs Assessment & Planning

Conduct listening sessions, survey residents in multiple languages and formats, or hire a part-time consultant for a community needs assessment or drafting of an action plan

Transportation and Built Environment

Analyze bus stop’s condition and make physical improvements to increase ridership, host a travel training session, train drivers in dementia awareness, or establish a TNC partnership

Connection and Engagement

Designate businesses as age- and dementia-friendly, encourage hiring and retaining of older workers, or promote and offer intergenerational activities

Housing and Economic Security

Increase awareness of local property tax deferral programs, offer a home safety evaluation program or programs to address hoarding, or amend zoning laws to allow for ADUs

What types of funding and resources are available to assist communities with this work?

Sullivan: There are several opportunities. AARP's annual Community Challenge grant program helps communities make immediate "quick action" improvements and jump-start long-term progress in creating more livable communities for people of all ages. The funding can be used to support many of the age-friendly community areas, such as transportation, housing and community engagement activities.

Similarly, the Tufts Health Plan Foundation has been a leader in the philanthropic community through its Momentum Fund, which supports age- and dementia-friendly projects in a number of communities throughout Massachusetts, with a particular focus on under-represented communities.

Fuccione: A relatively new source of age- and dementia-friendly support for municipalities is the Commonwealth's Community Compact Initiative, launched by the Baker-Polito administration in 2015. Community Compacts are agreements between the state and local governments to support local projects of shared interest using best practices developed at the local level. Age-friendly best practices were added to the program in 2018, which means that cities and towns can now receive a state grant to support their age- and dementia-friendly work, and four communities have applied and are receiving funding.

Are there best practices available to help communities?

Fuccione: In addition to the Community Compact program mentioned above, the MMA's Best Practice Series high-

lighted "Age- and Dementia-Friendly" approaches in 2018, and the 2019 edition includes a best practice on updating accessory dwelling unit bylaws. Accessory dwelling units, known as ADUs, are a crucial part of a broader housing solution for older adults—and one where meaningful action can be taken by cities and towns. They are a good example of how to make a community age-friendly for all.

AARP publishes an annual best practice resource called "Where We Live" that features examples from across the country. But the Healthy Aging Collaborative also tracks examples closer to home.

Sullivan: The Dementia Friendly Massachusetts website, at dfmassachusetts.org, helps communities understand the process and identifies the support available to help a community become dementia-friendly. This information is also available at MCOAonline.com.

What data are available to help my community with its planning?

Fuccione: The Healthy Aging Data Report, produced by the UMass Boston Gerontology Institute with support from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, is a national model and provides comprehensive profiles on healthy aging factors for every community in Massachusetts as well as for individual neighborhoods in Boston, Worcester and Springfield. Each community profile provides detailed information on population characteristics as well as information on community engagement, access to care, chronic disease and people living with disabilities. The profiles are available at the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative website. Just click on "data reports" and select "community profiles" from the sidebar menu.

Can my community work with others to achieve our age- and dementia-friendly goals?

Sullivan: Yes! In fact, many communities are choosing to do so. Age-Friendly Berkshires, Age- and Dementia-Friendly Cape Ann, Healthy Aging Cape Cod and Healthy Aging Martha's Vineyard are a few great examples.

How can my community join the Age- and Dementia Friendly Movement?

Fuccione: The first step is to understand your community in the context of an aging population. We encourage communities to start with convening municipal departments, community-based organizations and others to talk about the data, but also to consider people's experiences. Do residents feel like they can grow up and grow old in their community? Why or why not?

Sullivan: Every community is already doing things that are age- and dementia-friendly. It's just a matter of letting people know what opportunities exist and where there is room for improvement.

Fuccione: Communities can contact either of us for guidance, connections to helpful resources, funding opportunities, and to help get recognized for their commitment to being more livable and inclusive. Applying to become age-friendly and signing a dementia-friendly pledge are ways to kick off, energize and invite members of the community to take part and collaborate with municipal leaders to join the movement. If you've already started work on age- and/or dementia-friendly programs, let us know how we can help support you! 🌟

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