

MAY 31, 2022

Age and Dementia Friendly Monson

Community Assessment and Action Plan



Presented To
The Town of Monson



Acknowledgements

The Age and Dementia Friendly Monson Community Assessment and Action Plan was developed with technical assistance from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC) through funding from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, the dedicated staff from the Monson Senior Center and the Director of Community Development, and with the oversight of an appointed Age and Dementia Friendly Monson Working Group. This team of municipal and community representatives included the following individuals:

- Lori Stacy, Director, Monson Senior Center
- Dan LaRoche, Director, Community Development
- Mary Hull, Monson Selectboard
- Nikki Liquori, Assistant Director, Monson Senior Center
- Elizabeth DePaola, Hampden County Sheriff's Department
- Lisa Hamill, Monson Fire Department
- Nancy Dahlin, Monson Savings Bank
- Hope Bodwell, Director, Monson Free Library
- Betty Holmes, Resident
- Karen O'Toole, Resident

Contents

- Introduction.....1
 - Background.....2
 - Community Engagement.....2
- Dementia Awareness and Support.....3
- The Built Environment.....5
 - Housing.....5
 - Transportation.....7
 - Buildings and Outdoor Spaces.....10
- Public Safety, Health & Community Services.....11
 - Health & Community Services.....12
 - Public Safety.....13
- The Social Environment.....15
 - Communication and Technology.....16
 - Social Participation and Inclusion.....17
- ACTION PLAN.....21
- Appendix A - Lunch & Learn Forum Comments.....30

Introduction

The Age and Dementia Friendly Monson Working Group was appointed by the Monson Selectboard to oversee the development of a Community Assessment and Action Plan for making Monson an Age and Dementia Friendly Community. This initiative was completed with assistance from staff from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission through funding from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation (now Point 32 Health). The Community Assessment draws from existing plans and reports; the results of a survey targeted to older adults and their care partners living in Monson; and comments collected in a series of topic-based discussions with municipal staff, service providers and older residents to understand the assets and challenges to growing older in Monson. Findings are organized by the nine domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community, a model developed by the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative that combines the eight domains of an Age Friendly Community (developed by the World Health Organization) with the ten domains of a Dementia Friendly Community (developed by Dementia Friendly America).



Figure 1: The Domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community

Source: Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative

Background

The Town of Monson has a total population of 8,741, 25.8% of which (2,254 people) are over the age of 60 and 16.9% (1,473 people) over the age of 65. This compares to 21.2% over the age of 60 statewide, and 15.1% over the age of 65. Almost 25% of residents over the age of 65 live alone (compared to 30.2% in the state). Data gathered by the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative indicate that Monson fares better than many communities in terms of mental and physical health conditions but has a higher rate of obesity compared to the statewide average. Notable health and demographic data from the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative's Community Profile include the following:

	Monson	State
Household owners over 65 who spend >35% of income on housing	21.4%	20.4%
People over 60 have a mortgage on their home	40.9%	34.1%
People over 65 are veterans	19%	18.8%
People over 65 have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia	11.3%	13.1%
People over 65 have self-reported hearing difficulty	18.4%	14.2%
People over 65 have self-reported vision difficulty	5.1%	5.8%
People over 65 have self-reported ambulatory difficulty	15.3%	20.2%
People over 65 diagnosed as obese	23.1%	19%

Community Engagement

Older adults and stakeholders that serve older populations were engaged in discussions about the domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community through Working Group meetings, the Livable Monson Community Survey, and a series of Lunch and Learn discussions at the Monson Senior Center. One session (Civic Engagement, Social Participation, Communication & Inclusion) was postponed due to the pandemic but was held later in the Monson Fire Station. A total of 107 people responded to the survey,

approximately 72% of whom were over the age of 60. Lunch and Learn discussions were well attended, possibly due in part to the lunch and door prizes (drawings for gift cards) being offered. Graphics advertising the survey and Lunch & Learn discussions are in Figure 2.

TAKE OUR SURVEY!
Help us make Monson an Age and Dementia Friendly Community!

We want to know what you think is needed to create a safe, healthy and inclusive environment for older adults, people living with dementia and the people who care for them.

Online
<https://tinyurl.com/AFMonsonSurvey>

Pick up a Paper Copy
at the Monson Senior Center
106 Main Street, Monson, MA 01057

Complete the survey by December 15th to be eligible for a drawing for two \$25 Gift Cards!
Surveys submitted after December 15th will still be accepted.

Lunch & Learn
Join topic related Lunch and Learn discussions as part of Monson's Age and Dementia Friendly Community Initiative.

Each event will include a short presentation and opportunities for discussion and feedback from the audience on how aspects of Monson's social and built environments can be improved to meet the needs of older adults (and people of all ages).

RESERVATIONS FOR LUNCH MUST BE MADE BY 2 PM ON THE MONDAY BEFORE EACH EVENT.

ALL LUNCH & LEARN DISCUSSIONS START AT NOON, AND LUNCH WILL BE SERVED AT NOON.

The suggested donation for lunch is \$2.50 for people sixty and older
Those under 60 must pay \$3.50.
Space will be limited so call soon!

Transportation, Buildings and Outdoor Spaces
NOVEMBER 30TH 12:00-1:30PM
Discussion will include transportation services; infrastructure for bicycles and pedestrians; ADA accessibility of sidewalks, parks and public buildings.

Housing
DECEMBER 29TH 12:00-1:30PM
Housing supply and Aging in Place

Civic Engagement and Employment, Social Participation, Communication and Technology, and Inclusion
JANUARY 26TH 12:00-1:30PM
Includes discussion of volunteer and employment opportunities; access to technology, overall communications.

Health & Community Services, Public Safety, and Dementia Awareness
FEBRUARY 23RD 12:00-1:30PM
Access to health services, long-term care, working with emergency service providers to ensure safety for older adults and people with dementia.

Don't forget to take our Livable Community Survey!

Online
<https://tinyurl.com/AFMonsonSurvey>

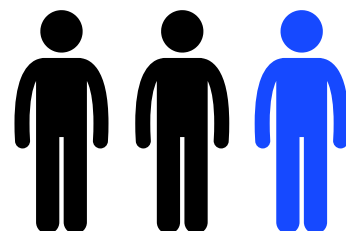
Pick up a Paper Copy
at the Monson Senior Center
106 Main Street, Monson, MA 01057

Figure 2: Graphics advertising Community Survey and Lunch & Learn Discussions

Dementia Awareness and Support

Awareness of how to recognize signs of dementia, how to communicate with people with dementia, and providing support for people with dementia and their care partners is an important component within all of the domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community. As people live longer, the number of people with dementia increases.

It is estimated that **one in three** people who live past the age of 85 will have some form of dementia at the end of their lives.



The Monson Senior Center has started a support group for caregivers of people with dementia and has plans to develop programs in which caregivers and people with dementia can participate for social connection and support. This work as well as providing forums for businesses, emergency service providers, banks, community members and all sectors of the community on how to recognize and work with people with dementia will result in a more supportive and welcoming environment for people living with dementia and their care partners.

Dementia Awareness and Support Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 1:** *Build awareness, acceptance, and a culture of support for people living with dementia and the people who care for them.*

Actions

- 1.1 Develop a Dementia Friendly Monson Committee to implement a public awareness campaign around recognizing and working with people with dementia. Provide resources for training for municipal staff, businesses, banks, emergency service providers, community members, etc. on how to recognize signs of dementia and communicate with people with dementia.
- 1.2 Connect family caregivers with support programs, resources, and opportunities to meet with other caregivers of people with dementia.
- 1.3 Meaningfully engage people with dementia and caregivers in developing programs and services such as support groups or memory cafes at the Library, Senior Center and other locations in the community.

The Built Environment

The domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community may be roughly organized into three different groupings: the Built Environment (Housing, Transportation, Buildings and Outdoor Spaces); the Social Environment (Communications and Technology, Social Participation and Inclusion, Employment and Civic Engagement); and Health, Community Services, and Public Safety. There is overlap between these groupings - for example, Communication spans all domains as information about available housing, trails, and transportation services is critical to people's use of these resources - but organizing them in these three groupings also points to the departments, committees, or organizations that may play a role in implementing the actions associated with these domain groupings. The built environment - Transportation, Housing and Buildings and Outdoor Spaces - are also included in communities' comprehensive plans and Open Space and Recreation Plans (mainly the Outdoor Spaces domain) under the purview of the Planning, Conservation, and Public Works departments of the municipality.

According to responses from the Livable Monson Community Survey, Housing and Transportation were the top two areas that people think that the Town should focus on in the next five years to improve the community for people as they age. Health and Community Services was also high on this list, suggesting the importance of supportive services for people who are "Aging in Place" or staying in their homes as they age.

Housing

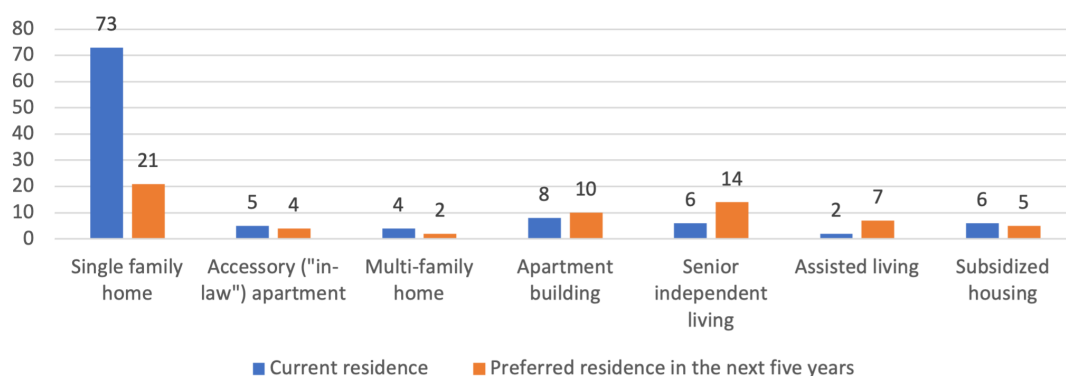
The need for additional housing units to allow for older adults to downsize to smaller, more affordable homes, is consistent across many communities in the Pioneer Valley. A Lunch and Learn discussion held at the Monson Senior Center drew the interest of many older residents who voiced their frustration about the lack of places to move to when their single-family homes become more than they need and expensive to maintain. According to the director of the Monson Housing Authority, the waiting list for senior or disabled housing units in Monson has 900 people on it, and only 78 units of subsidized housing for seniors are in place (and fully occupied), meaning the wait for such units could be many years. Although this list

draws from a statewide list of applicants, the waiting list is too long for people who need to move to a more affordable location in the near future, especially if they want to remain in the community.

Participants in this discussion advocated for converting former mill buildings into housing for low or moderate incomes, and “middle income” housing for those who do not qualify for subsidized housing but are looking to downsize into something more affordable than their single-family homes. The Town is taking steps to complete environmental assessments of former mill buildings and investigation into the feasibility of converting these properties into housing for older adults. The Town has a Community Preservation Committee which can access funds for housing planning and development.

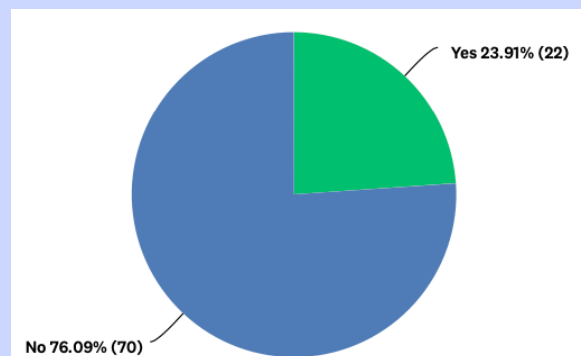
Figure 3:

Q19 Which of the following best describes your current place of residence? In the next 5 years if a change of health requires that you move, what type of housing would you prefer?



There are not currently any facilities that offer assisted living or long-term care (Continuum of Care Communities) located in Monson.

Seventy percent of survey respondents said that it was extremely important for them to be able to stay in their own homes as they age, while 20% said it was very important. For those who do want to “age in place,” basic tasks such as shoveling snow, mowing the lawn, or basic home maintenance can become increasingly difficult as physical or cognitive impairments limit one’s abilities to do these tasks on their own.

Figure 4: Q25- Do you need help with basic tasks or errands (e.g., changing a light bulb, shopping, shoveling snow)?

Housing Goals & Actions

- ★ **Goal 2:** *Ensure that a range of safe, affordable, and accessible single and multi-unit housing options are available to meet the needs of the aging population in Monson.*

Actions

- 2.1 Engage older adults during the development of a Monson Housing Production Plan to understand the existing needs of older adults living in the community and wishing to downsize or move to facilities that include access to supportive services.
- 2.2 Investigate the possibility of remediating and redeveloping existing properties (e.g. the Omega Mill property), and/or building affordable senior housing on town-owned land; partner with private and/or non-governmental organizations to create additional affordable housing units to meet 10% goal for the Town.

- ★ **Goal 3:** *Provide support for all Monson residents in locating affordable services to support aging in place.*

Actions

- 3.1 Develop a volunteer-based or intergenerational community service program to assist people aging in place with home upkeep and landscaping.
- 3.2 Assist homeowners in finding and applying for funding to rehabilitate housing to improve safety, accessibility, and basic upkeep and maintenance.
- Home Modification Loan Program is available through the PVPC
 - Connect homeowners with Fire, Police and Hampden County Sheriff's Department to conduct home safety assessments
 - Identify licensed contractors who can implement recommended improvements for safety and fall prevention

Transportation

The Transportation domain includes both transportation services and transportation infrastructure that affects older populations – mainly streets and sidewalks that are comfortable and safe for people of all ages. According to the Livable Monson Community Survey, most people (87%) still drive themselves. However, many also rely on rides from

spouses, children, friends or neighbors. Twelve (13%) out of 89 people who responded to this question said that they walk to get to where they need to go.

Transportation Infrastructure

Of those who said that there were times when they did not feel safe in the community (10% of survey respondents) said that they did not feel safe. Several people commented that they didn't feel safe because there are not enough sidewalks or streetlights. In the lunch and learn discussion about transportation, attendees also commented that pedestrian crossings are not visible enough for drivers to see them and to slow down for pedestrians or people in wheelchairs crossing the street. One woman who relies on a wheelchair also commented that the sidewalks and street crossings are often not navigable for her in the winter when there is snow on the ground.

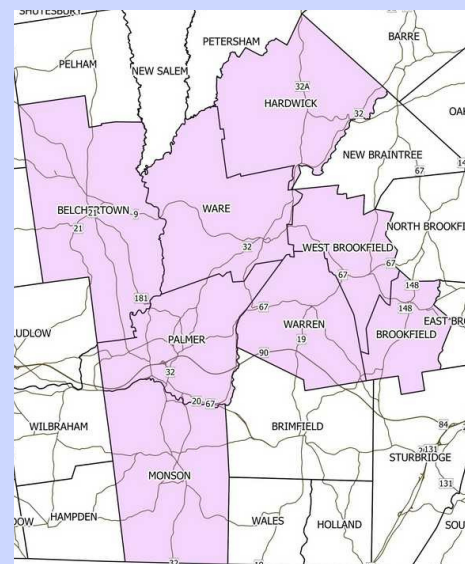


The 2012 Monson Master Plan lists several locations that are dangerous for pedestrians or for cars pulling onto major roads due to poor visibility. The Town has been making improvements as funding becomes available and has plans to make several improvements on Main Street. The Town could also benefit from adopting a Complete Streets Policy in order to become eligible for funding to develop a Complete Streets Prioritization Plan and to access funding for infrastructure improvements. The Complete Streets Program, managed by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, encourages communities to consider users of all transportation modes (including walking, biking, transit, wheelchair, cars and trucks) when planning for roadway maintenance or improvements.

Transportation Services

As people age, many lose their ability to drive as physical or cognitive limitations make operating an automobile more difficult or dangerous. Although it is one of the few communities not served by a Regional Transit Agency (RTA), Monson is served by the Quaboag Connector, a regional transportation service that is operated out of the Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation (QV CDC) in cooperation with the Town of Ware.

Figure 5: Quaboag Connector Service Area



The Monson Senior Center offers van service for medical rides and shopping trips for people 60 and older and those who have disabilities that prevent them from driving themselves. The Senior Center had planned to expand van services to all community members who needed transportation services, but this plan was delayed by the pandemic and driver shortages. Almost 16% of survey respondents said that public transportation was either not available or inconvenient, and 7% said that Senior Center transportation was unavailable or inconvenient.

Transportation services can allow people to remain independent as long as they can call for services (in the case of the Quaboag Connector or Senior Center van), the services are affordable and provide rides to places where people want to go and at times they want to travel. In order for these services to be cost effective, the number of people who use them must justify the cost. Some communities fill in needed transportation services with volunteer drivers who use their own personal vehicles to provide rides, or micro transit which involves a contract with a business that coordinates rides for people who need them.

Transportation Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 4:** *Ensure that roads, sidewalks and trail networks are safe and comfortable for use by people of all ages and abilities.*

Actions

- 4.1 Implement recommendations for safety improvements in the downtown including traffic calming, crosswalk improvements, improving visibility of intersections by creating clear zones, and reducing the number of curb cuts, and creating more flexible parking requirements.
- 4.2 Encourage the Town to consider adopting a Complete Streets Policy and program to enable the Town to access funding for identifying, prioritizing and building infrastructure improvements that will make streets and sidewalks safer and more comfortable for all modes of transportation and all abilities.
- 4.3 Evaluate town-wide public parking infrastructure (lots and on-street) and policies for safety, lighting, convenience and accessibility for those with special needs, i.e. low vision, physical or cognitive impairments

- ★ **Goal 5:** *Ensure that transportation services are available to residents of all ages and abilities to allow access to food, medical appointments, employment, and education.*

Actions

- 5.1 Continue to collaborate with the Quaboag Connector to expand transportation services as needed to meet the needs of older residents.
- 5.2 Revisit the costs and benefits of using the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority or other transportation service programs to provide transportation services in Monson.

Buildings and Outdoor Spaces

Parks, sidewalks, bike paths and bike lanes, accessible buildings and restrooms are all facilities that are important for inviting active transportation and social interaction inside and out. The amount of physical activity that people engage in is related, in part, to the availability of safe and convenient places to walk, roll, or ride a bike. Outdoor spaces such as parks, trails, and outdoor restaurant seating became especially important during the pandemic, and many of these spaces continue to be popular places to gather.

Infrastructure for pedestrians and people on bicycles is discussed in the Transportation section above. Other facilities including parks, shared use paths, trails on conservation land are discussed in the Town's **Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP)** that is updated every eight years. Monson's most recent update of the OSRP occurred in 2021. The OSRP lists all of publicly and privately owned

conservation land, parks, and recreation areas available in Monson, and includes an ADA survey. Some recommendations that were included in the OSRP that pertain to older adults and people with disabilities include creating accessible trails in Flynt Park and a walking loop around Veteran's Field, creating a trail guide (this recommendation should also include levels of difficulty and accessibility), and developing recreational programs for people of all ages.



Figure 6: Outdoor Space in Monson
Source: Monson OSRP 2014-2021

Buildings & Outdoor Spaces Goals & Actions

- ★ **Goal 6:** *Provide opportunities for use of public buildings and outdoor spaces by people of all ages and abilities.*

Actions

- 6.1 Engage older adults and people with disabilities in the development of an ADA Assessment and Transition Plan to understand buildings and public spaces most in need of accessibility improvements.
 - a. Encourage the Post Office and business owners (where applicable) to improve entry doors (automatic doors where possible, no step or adequate ramp access) for people with disabilities.
- 6.2 Completed an accessible walking loop around Veteran's Field.
- 6.3 Improve accessibility of parks and trails and create a map that shows level of difficulty and accessibility.
- 6.4 Create a centrally located and accessible community garden space. Support the installation of accessible raised bed garden spaces at Housing Authority properties.

Public Safety, Health & Community Services

The care needs of older adults who are aging in place can vary from assistance with basic tasks such as cleaning, shopping, cooking, yard work, snow shoveling, and minor home maintenance projects; to full-time medical or home health assistance provided by professional or family caregivers. The pandemic highlighted the need for assistance with accessing food either due to difficulties in accessing transportation, fear of going out during the pandemic, or financial insecurity.

Local and regional police and fire departments are key resources for older adults and have become increasingly involved in programming with senior centers and Councils on Aging to enable people to live safely in their homes for as long as possible.

Health and Community Services

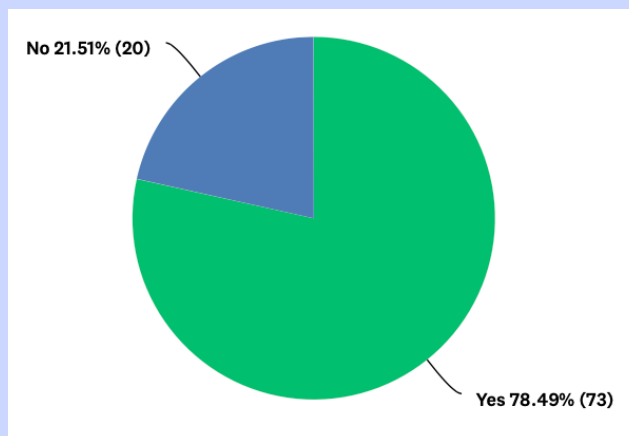
Approximately 50% of survey respondents rated their overall physical health as Excellent (6%) or Very Good (43%), 34% rated their health as Good, and 18% rated their health as fair or poor. More survey respondents rated their overall emotional well-being as Excellent (18%) or Very Good (48%), and 8% said their overall emotional well-being was fair (7%) or poor (1%).

Health care services available to Monson residents include Baystate Wing Hospital in Palmer, which offers a range of services and a new Convenient Care walk-in clinic that is open seven days a week. Baystate Wing is also working with the Alzheimer's Association to become a Dementia Friendly hospital. Greater Springfield Senior Services and WestMass Elder Care also offer services for caregivers, and home health care services for income-eligible older adults.

In addition to offering congregate meals and a brown bag pickup program, the Monson Senior Center offers health insurance counseling through the SHINE program, rides for medical appointments (with some provided by the Quaboag Connector), and a support group for family caregivers of people with dementia. The Senior Center plans to expand their educational and support programs for people living with dementia including a Memory Café and educational forums for how to recognize the signs of dementia and work with people with dementia for a broad range of businesses, municipal staff, and community members.

The greatest need expressed by people who attended the Lunch and Learn discussion on Health and Community Services was for help with basic home and yard maintenance for people aging in place.

Figure 7: Q24- Do you have a friend, neighbor or relative within 30 minutes who would provide help if you needed assistance with a minor task or errand (e.g., changing a light bulb, shopping, shoveling snow)?



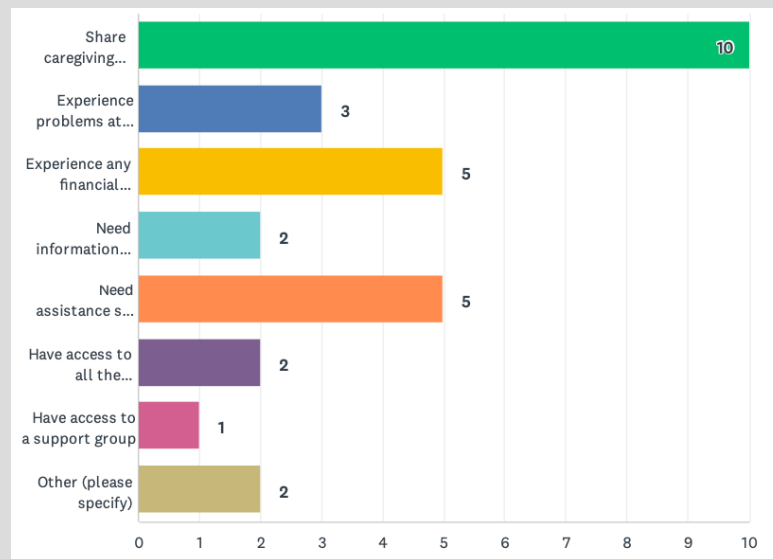
Health and Community Services Goals & Actions

- ★ **Goal 7:** *Ensure that older residents of Monson have access to health care and community services that support their ability to live long and healthy lives.*

Actions

- 7.1 Develop a volunteer-based assistance program to help people aging in place with basic tasks such as shoveling snow or yard work. Work with area schools to recruit high school students to help with this program. Raise funds to pay for supplies and to stipend volunteers.
- 7.2 Offer educational opportunities for community members about how to recognize the signs of dementia and available resources for families living with dementia. Encourage families and caregivers to ask for help.
- 7.3 Work with area service providers to post services on 413Cares.org and provide outreach to service providers and residents on how to find information on this resource. Develop print materials that provide a basic list of resources and instructions for accessing resources online and ensure that materials are available at the library and Senior Center.

Figure 8: Q31- If you provide caregiver services to a friend or family member, do you (check all that apply)



Public Safety

Police, Fire, and other emergency service providers are closely involved with the safety of older adults as they are often the ones that people call when they are not feeling safe or have had a fall. The Fire Department maintains a Persons at Risk database, a list of individuals who are at risk of wandering due to dementia, autism, or other cognitive

impairments. The Hampden County Sheriff's Department can assist communities with the development of a Triad Program or Seniors and Law Enforcement Together (SALT). Triad is a national organization initially started by the National Sheriffs' Association, the International Chiefs of Police, and the AARP. This is a community policing initiative in which older adults, law enforcement and other service providers increase safety through education and crime prevention.

Staff at the Monson Fire Department are also implementing a Senior Awareness of Fire Education (SAFE) program in which staff provide educational forums for older residents around home safety. The department will install smoke and Carbon Monoxide detectors for free for households of older adults, manages a street numbering sign program provides visible house number signs at any household that requests them, conducts fire safety checks of homes for older adults, and will install lock boxes upon request so that emergency personnel can access a house key in case of emergency. Staff at the Senior Center and Monson Fire Department assist residents with filling out File of Life documents that include important medical information and are stored in a prominent location in case of emergencies. Over the winter the Fire Department also sponsored the Sand for Seniors program in which 5-gallon buckets of sand were delivered to homes of older adults to prevent slipping on ice.

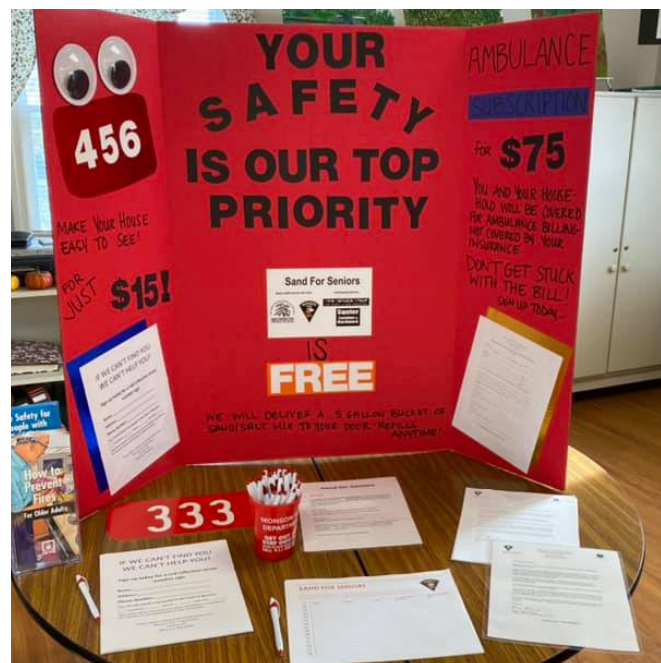
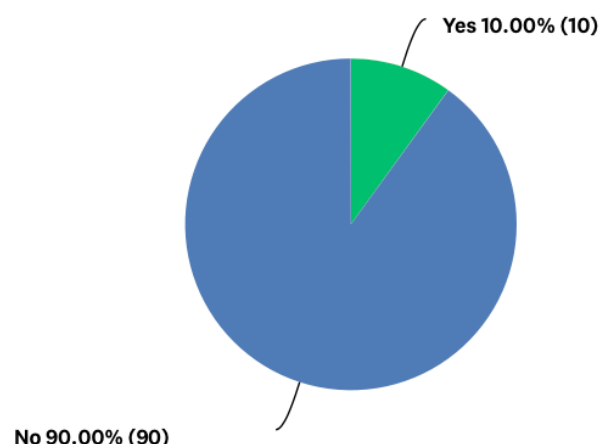


Figure 9: Poster from Senior Health and Safety Fair at the Monson Senior Center

Source: Monson Fire Department Facebook, 10-23-2021

Figure 10: Q7- Are there times when you do not feel safe in your community?



Public Safety Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 8:** *Ensure the safety of all residents, including older adults and people with dementia, through multi-sectoral partnerships and programming.*

Actions

- 8.1 Consider implementing a Triad Program (a collaborative between the Senior Center and Police, Fire, and Emergency Services) to expand existing programming including:
 - Encourage residents diagnosed with dementia to register on a database of potential wanderers;
 - Install lock boxes that are accessible to emergency personnel;
 - Install free smoke and CO detectors and street number signs
 - Fill out and update File of Life documents
 - Offer Sand for Seniors in winter months
- 8.2 Ensure that all public safety personnel are educated about how to recognize the signs of dementia and how to communicate with people with dementia.
- 8.3 Collaborate with the District Attorney's office to have trainings on internet and phone scams.

The Social Environment

The social environment is not often the subject of municipal planning but is a key element of a community that supports the needs of older adults. The social environment is determined in part by the built environment in that there must be places to gather, both indoors and outside; a safe transportation network and broadband system that allows people to connect with one another; and housing that is located close to public spaces or that provides spaces for social interaction.



Figure 11: Event at the Monson Senior Center

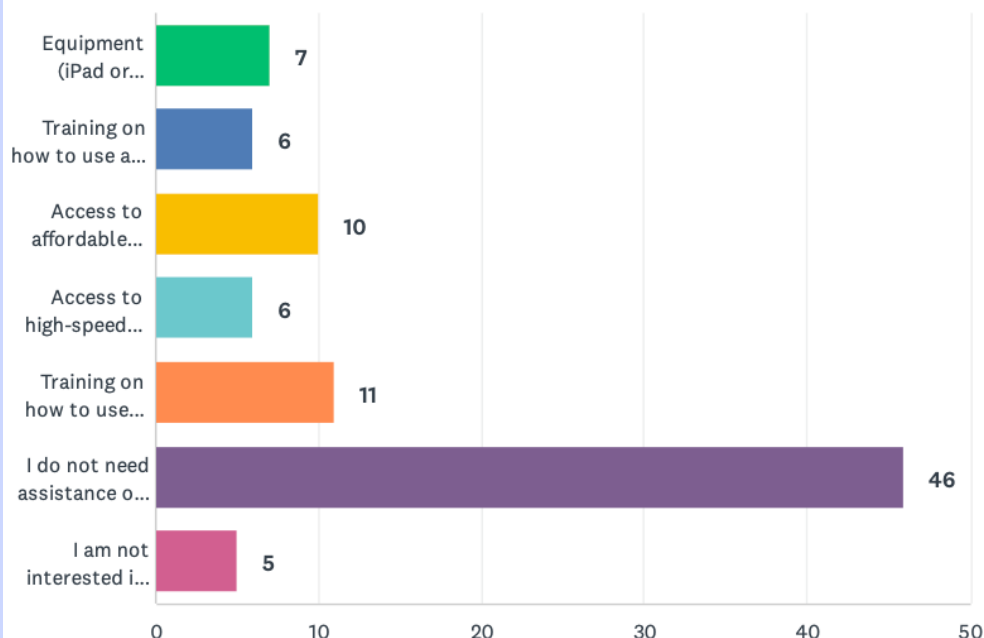
Opportunities for participation in social or civic events must also be inclusive of all members of the community. For older adults, this may mean holding events at times that are convenient for those who may need to take public transportation or walk to an event. For non-English speakers, translation services or events held in other languages contribute to an inclusive social environment.

During the pandemic, use of technology – including access to equipment, training on how to use it and access to high-speed internet – became a primary means for social and community engagement while public buildings were closed to the public. Holding virtual meetings and programming also allows people who have difficulty with transportation to participate in social and educational programming from their homes.

Communication and Technology

Communication access to technology as a means for getting information is essential to the success of all of the domains of an Age and Dementia Friendly Community, as residents must know how to access information about programs, services, and places that are age and dementia friendly in order to use and appreciate these resources. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for technology to communicate with one's community, shop for groceries and other products, and participate in fitness programming and telehealth services when the Senior Center and area hospitals were closed to the public.

Figure 12: Q36- Do you need assistance in accessing any of the following in order to use technology to access basic information or to attend programs online? (check all that apply)



The Monson Public Library offers a number of resources for people who are new to using technology including free WiFi and hotspots for internet access as well as I pads for loan and training on how to use them.



Communications & Technology Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 9:** *Ensure that all residents have access to information about policies and programs that provide opportunities for health and community engagement.*

Actions

- 9.1 Direct older adults who are less comfortable with technology to resources available at the Monson Public Library or the Monson Senior Center where they can get free access to the internet, equipment and training on how to use it.
- 9.2 Collaborate among sectors (Municipal Departments, Library, Faith Community, Police & Fire, service providers) to share information about resources, services and programs available in Monson and surrounding communities. Use all communication formats including newsletters and newspapers, local cable access TV, and social media to reach a broad range of residents.
- 9.3 Consider developing a Town Communications Plan to coordinate outreach efforts and to maximize the efficiency and impact of communication resources.

Social Participation and Inclusion

Participation in social activities, either formal or informal, is important to one's mental health. Conversely, social isolation and loneliness can cause poor health outcomes. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of premature death and has been associated with a 50% increased risk of dementia as well as increased risk of heart disease and stroke, depression, anxiety, and suicide. This research also highlights increased risk of loneliness among more vulnerable populations of older adults including immigrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) populations; minorities; and victims of elder abuse.

The pandemic increased concerns about social isolation among many older adults as they were advised to stay home. Transportation services and places where people had the opportunity to socialize were closed during the first year of the pandemic, leaving outdoor spaces such as parks and walking trails some of the few places where people could connect with others in person.

The Monson Senior Center was open for much of 2021 to provide congregate lunches to older adults, offering a place for social interaction as well as a nutritious lunch.

22 SURVEY RESPONDENTS
REPORTED THEY WERE CONCERNED
ABOUT BEING SOCIALLY ISOLATED

Social Participation & Inclusion Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 10:** *Ensure that older adults and people with dementia have opportunities for social interaction through access to technology, programming and planning of events.*

Actions

- 10.1 Meaningfully engage people with dementia and caregivers in developing programs and services such as support groups or memory cafes at the Library, Senior Center and other locations in the community.
- 10.2 Continue to collaborate among community resource providers including the Senior Center, Library, Schools and Cultural Council to provide social programming for community members of all ages and abilities.

Employment and Civic Engagement

Every community benefits from an active and engaged population. Many older adults who have retired from their lifetime careers have time and interest to participate in volunteer activities, and decades of life and job experience. Some choose to work after retirement in a new area of employment, to earn additional income or to keep busy, and others choose to participate in volunteer opportunities.

The Massachusetts Council on Aging provides training and support to improve the job seeking process for older adults through the 50+ Job Seekers Program with funding from the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA). The content and delivery of the program are guided by professional Career Coaches and has collaborations with AARP, EOEA, SCSEP, and MassHire. Adults who are 50 and older may access these services at www.50plusjobseekers.org.

Area businesses can become more welcoming and supportive of families living with dementia by educating staff who are customer facing to recognize the signs of dementia and how to communicate with people with dementia. Many municipalities are considering implementing a “dementia friendly business” certification program that looks at a number of aspects of the social and physical infrastructure of local businesses.

The Town of Monson is actively encouraging older adults to volunteer for Town boards and committees, recognizing that the population of people over 65 is a growing age group whose voices should be heard. The Monson Schools are also working with the Senior Center to provide opportunities for intergenerational programming and volunteer opportunities.

Employment & Civic Engagement Goals & Actions

★ **Goal 11:** *Provide opportunities and assistance for older adults who want to work and volunteer in the community.*

Actions

- 11.1 Work with area businesses and municipal departments to educate staff about how to recognize signs of dementia and how to accommodate customers who have dementia.
- 11.2 Consider implementing an Age and Dementia Friendly Business certification program similar to others (e.g. Boston Strong) to create a welcoming environment for older adults and people living with dementia.
- 11.3 Ensure that all older residents are aware of municipal volunteer opportunities and the Property Tax Work-off program which allows property tax rebates in exchange for volunteering in municipal departments.