

Wellesley Council on Aging (COA): Planning for the Future

A Community Needs Assessment

Caitlin Coyle, PhD

Beth Rouleau, MS

Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging

Gerontology Institute

University of Massachusetts Boston



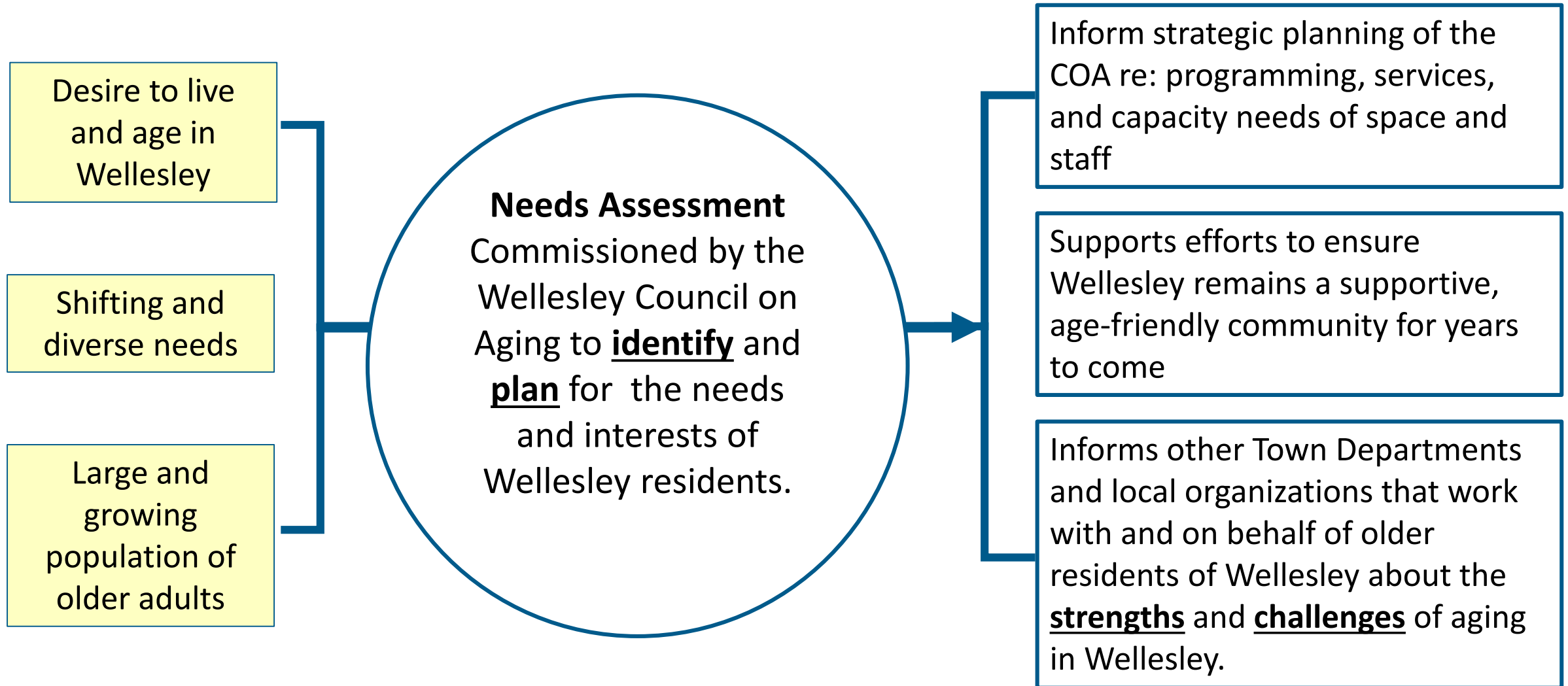
Acknowledgments

The Community Needs Assessment was supported by:

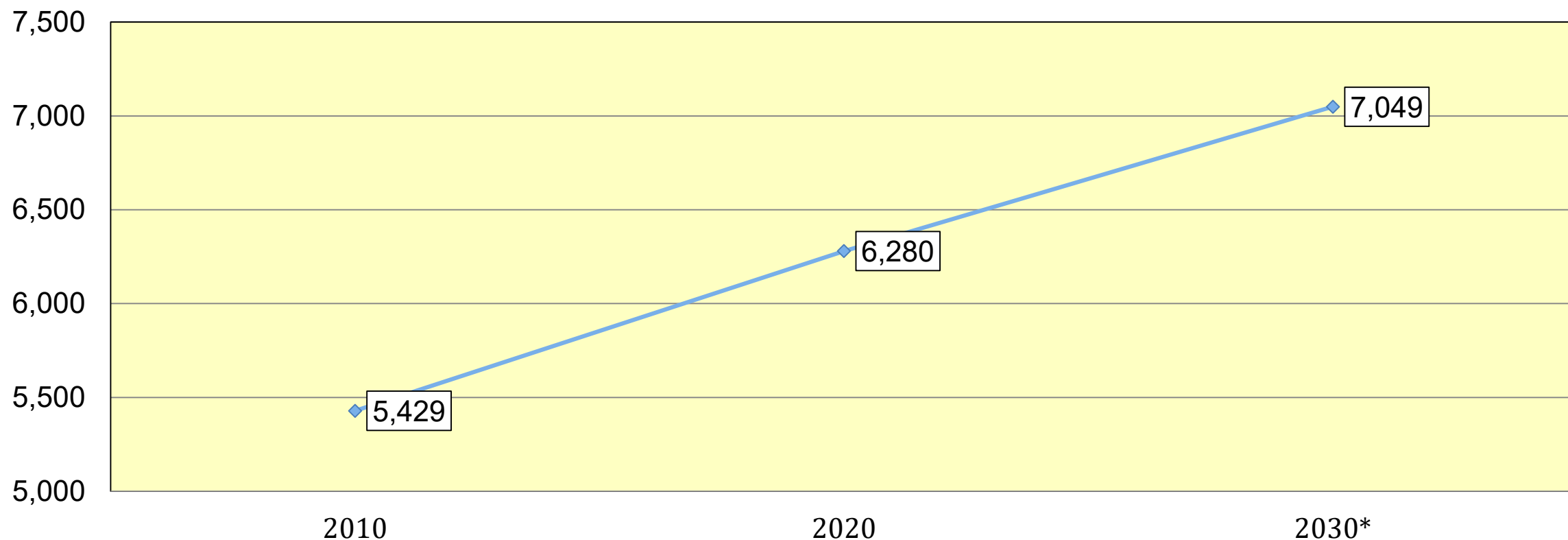
- The generosity of the Friends of the Wellesley COA, and funding provided by the New Era Fund
- Members of the COA Board of Directors, guided by Chair, Judy Gertler and Former Chair, Kathleen Vogel
- Tolles Parsons Center Staff
- Stakeholders and residents who shared their time to participate in interviews, focus groups, and the survey



Background & Purpose



Projections suggest that 26% of Wellesley residents will be age 60+ by 2030



Source: 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census; 2030 Projections from Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts

Components of the Wellesley Needs Assessment

Demographic profile

(Source: American Community Survey, 2019-2023)

Key Informant Interviews (7): Chair, Council on Aging, BOD; Member, Select Board; Community Social Workers, TPC and Health Department; Public Health Nurse, Health Department; Chief, Police Department; Chief and Lieutenant, Fire Department

2 Focus Groups (n=20): Older adults and residents of Wellesley Senior Housing Properties

Community Survey of residents age 60+ (n=1,482) (30% response)

Who did we hear from?

	Number of survey responses	Age distribution (%), survey responses	Age distribution (%) of Wellesley 60+ population
Age 60 to 69	559	39%	46%
Age 70 to 79	510	36%	31%
Age 80 and older	359	25%	23%
Total*	1,428	100%	100%

** Total does not include 54 respondents who did not report their age.*

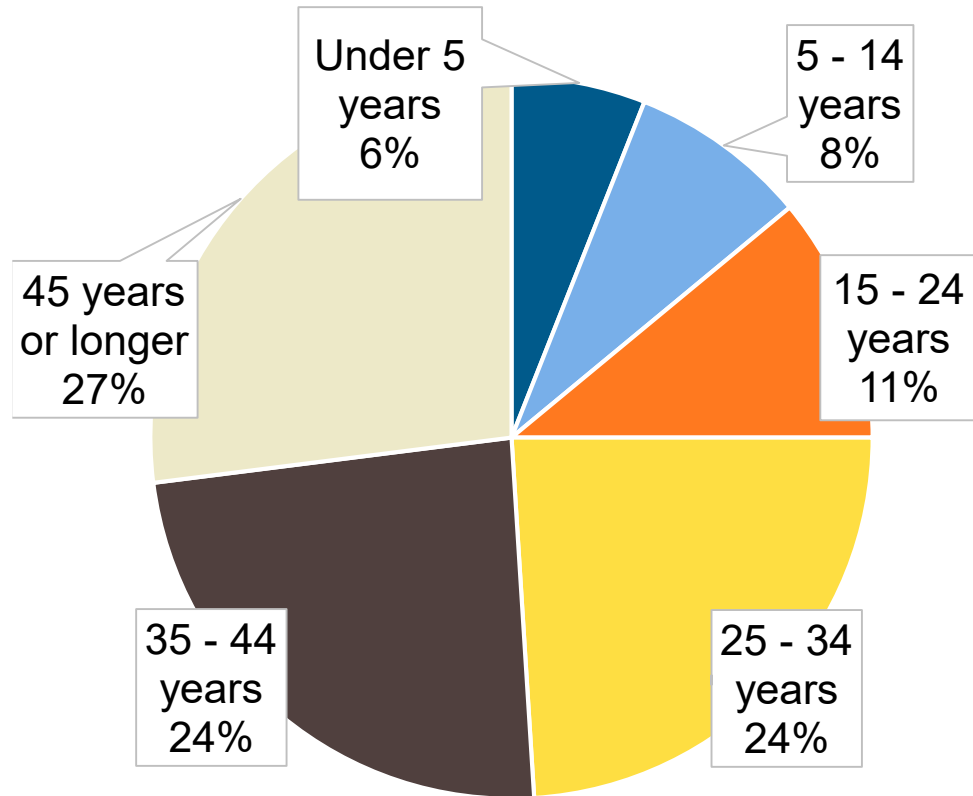
Source: Town of Wellesley census file current as of March 2025.



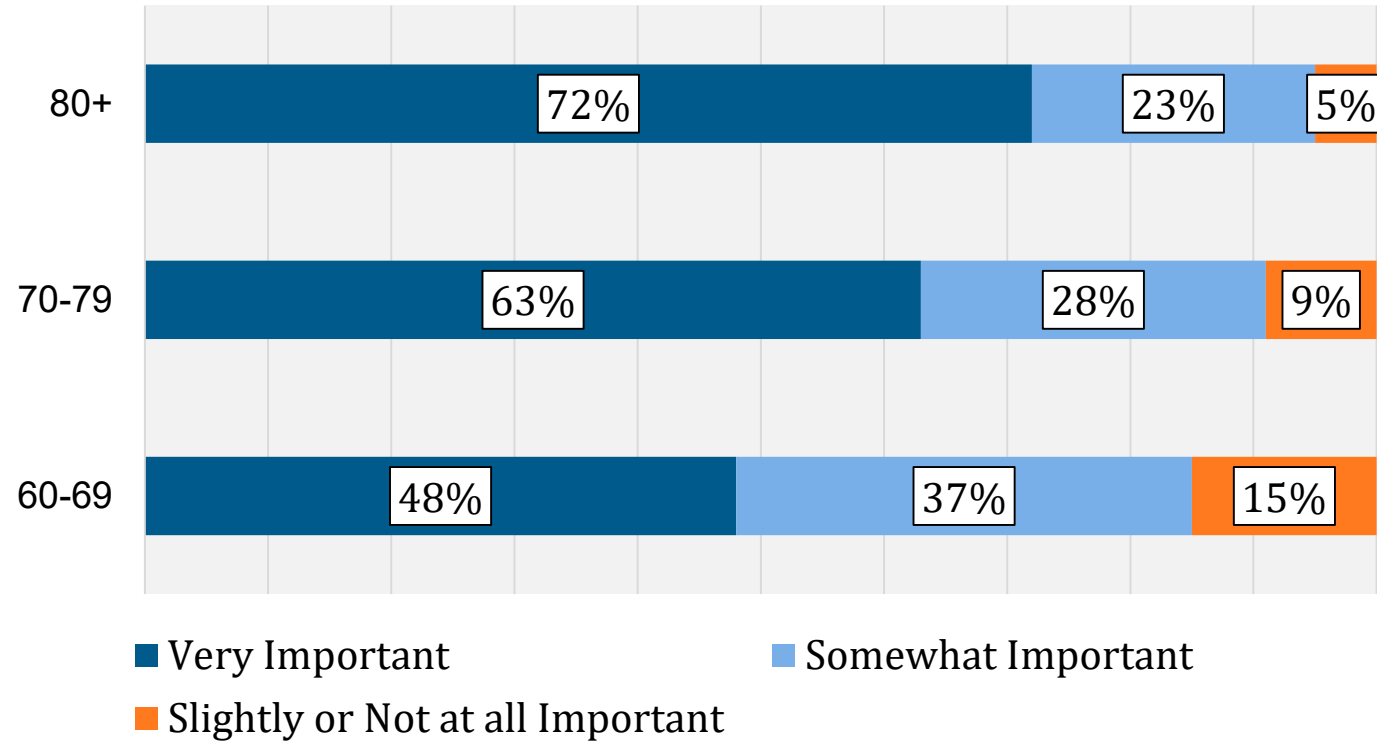
Key Findings

A large share of survey respondents have lived in Wellesley for more than 15 years—and most feel it is very important to stay in Wellesley as they age.

How long have you lived in Wellesley?



How Important is it to you to remain living in Wellesley as you get older?



Focus groups, interviews, and survey write-ins demonstrated that residents value their community...

Residents value...

- The local culture and sense of community
- Proximity to Boston and access to amenities
- Walkability and greenspace

"Safety. Access to Boston and Major highways. Access to healthcare, shopping and services. Programs for seniors, sidewalks for walking around town"

"The parks and trails, many generations in development, are a major benefit"

"The people in the community; all of the resources or services available in the downtown..."

"Living on Morse pond, natural beauty + nature, my neighbors are the best! The beauty of the town and the trails and shops. - excellent quality of life here!!!"

"Unique squares - Wellesley Church, Linden Squares; Morse's Pond. Low crime - people with same values, quiet neighborhoods."

"Beauty of town, conservation land, number of trees, less development than other towns"

"Social connection and ease of getting around – walking and driving, convenient to shopping, close to out house of worship, close to medical care"

...but many residents are concerned about their ability to age in Wellesley

Common concerns...

- Property taxes and the overall cost of living
- Difficulty maintaining homes and limited alternative housing options
- Challenges to maintaining independence—including transportation

“Real estate taxes. there is no relief for older citizens who live on incomes that are not rising due to inflation and not being in the work force where raises are available and routine”

“If mobility/ walking/climbing stairs or driving is a challenge as I age, this could complicate independent living in my home, or access to food and healthcare

“I am afraid we won't be able to afford staying here. Costs are rising and the real estate taxes are out of sight.”

“As we get older, the large yard is getting harder for my husband to maintain and of course our RE taxes keep increasing. We don't really need all the space that we have with our children grown and gone, but with the prices the way they are, we may pay more for a smaller house and the convenience of living where we do is hard to replicate.”

“Our house is too big for two people and it is difficult to maintain, it also has a lot of stairs”

“Transportation; the ability to be able to go where I want, when I want, when I can no longer drive”



Housing & Financial Insecurity

Cost of living, home maintenance, and limited options for rightsizing are concerns for older Wellesley residents

Home ownership

- 91% of older adults in Wellesley own their homes.

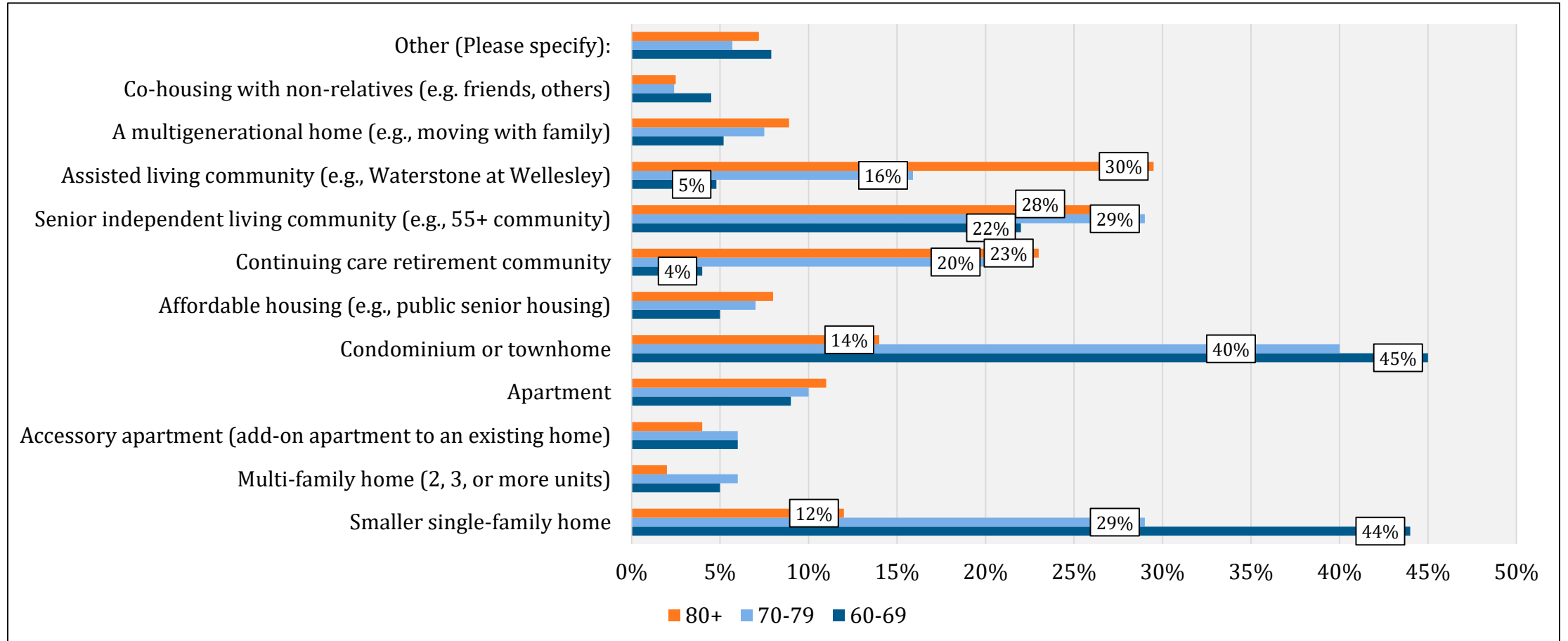
Home maintenance

- 40% of respondents said that their home needs repairs. Among them, 24% are not able to afford these repairs.

Housing preferences:

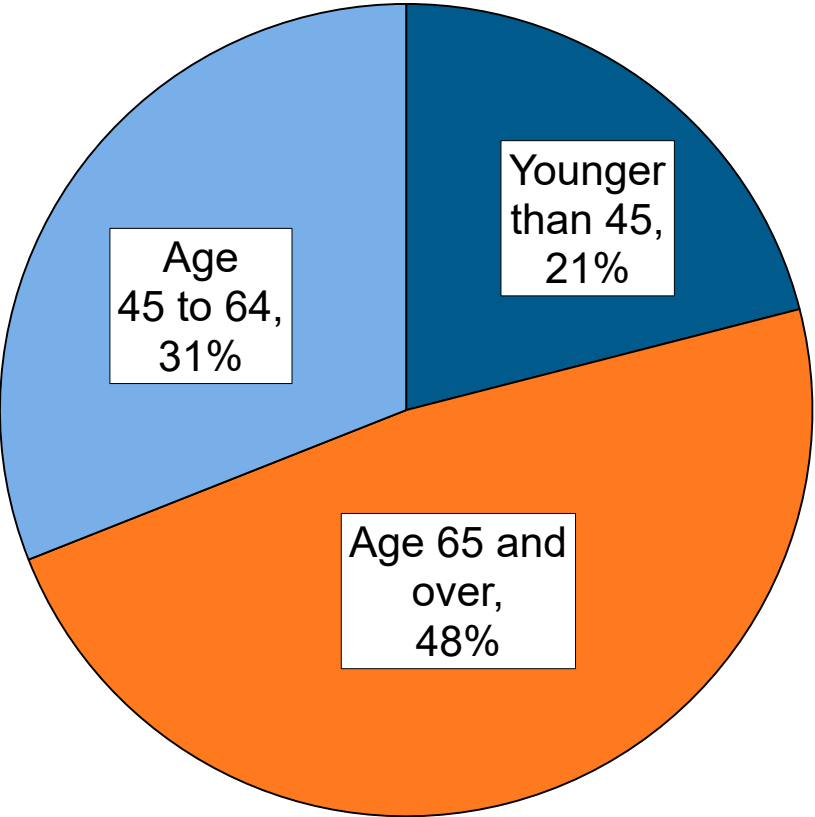
- Condos and townhouses are the most preferred types of future housing among residents in their 60s and 70s. Assisted living and senior independent living communities are the most preferred option by respondents aged 80 and older.
- Lack of suitable and affordable housing is a common concern related to staying in Wellesley

In the next 5 years, if you needed to move from your current residence, what kind of housing would you prefer?

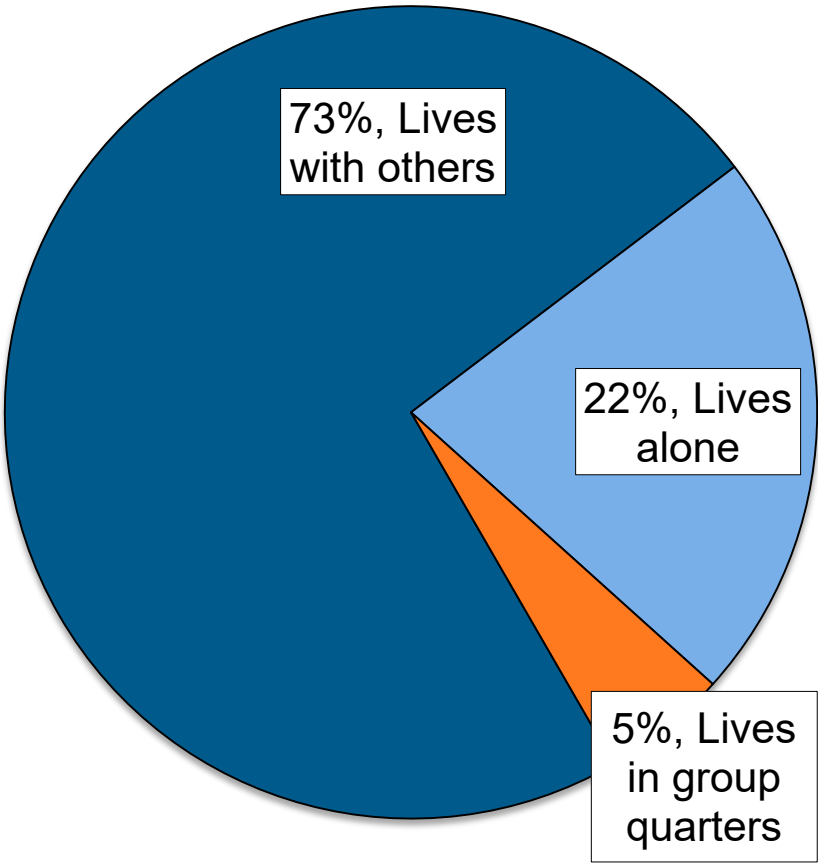


Nearly half of Wellesley homeowners are 65+, and 22% live alone

Age structure of Wellesley householders

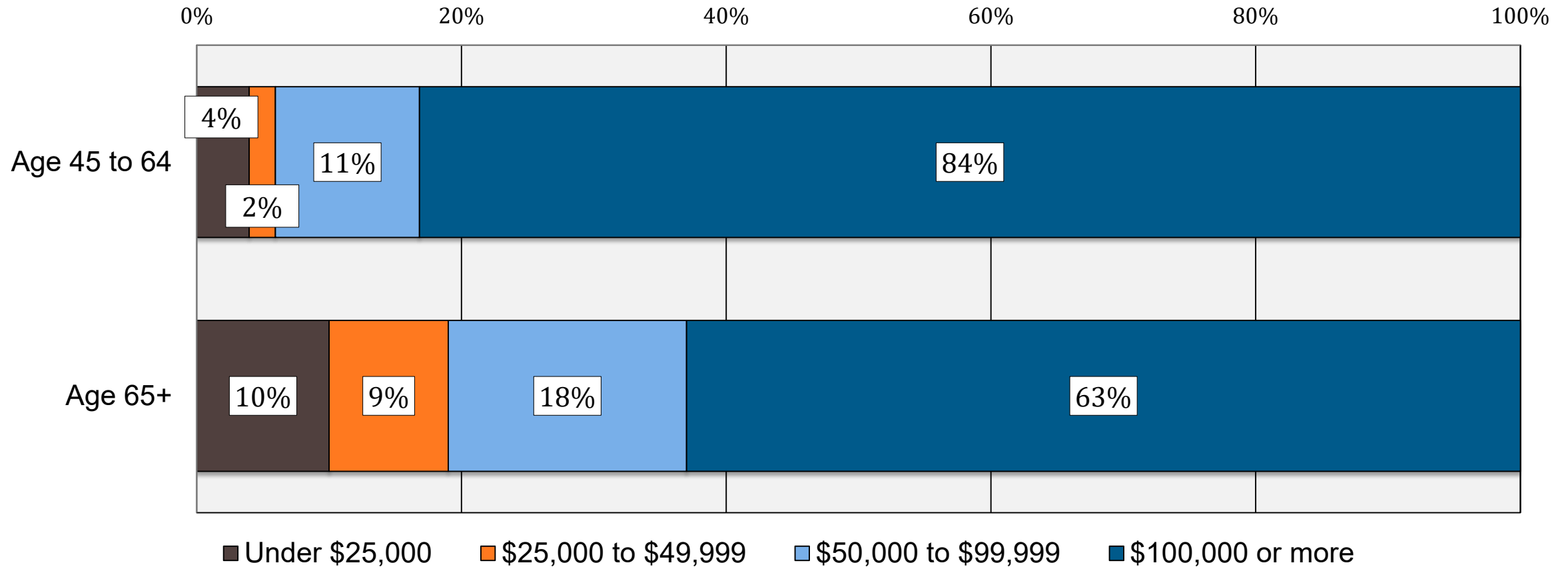


Living arrangements, Wellesley residents, age 65+



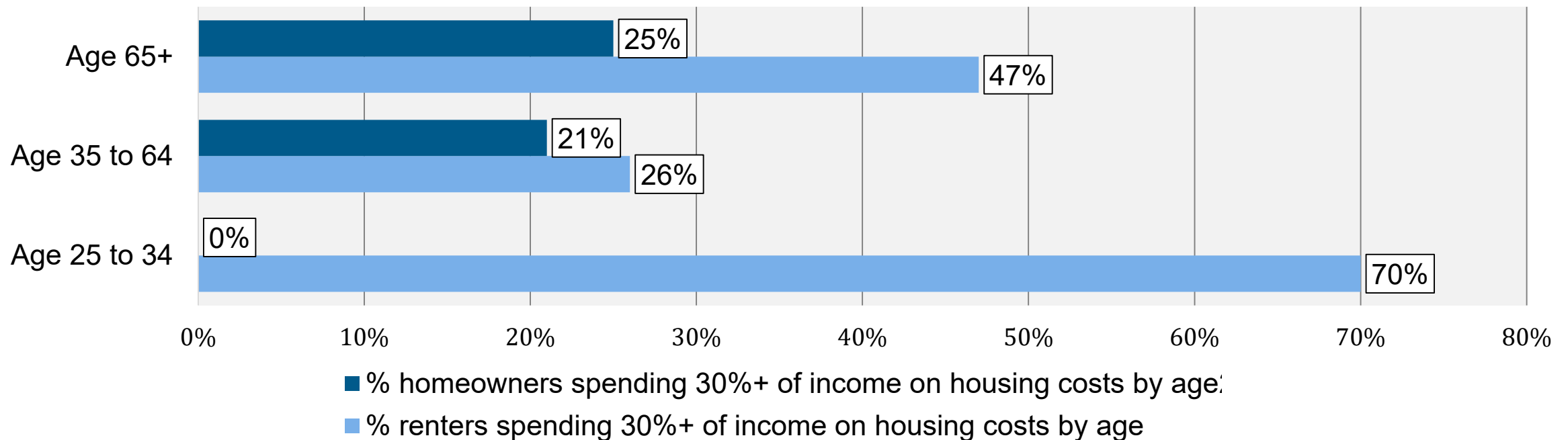
19% of Wellesley residents age 65+ have household incomes under \$50,000

Household income distribution in Wellesley by age of householder
(in 2023 inflation-adjusted dollars)



The risk of experiencing financial burden due to housing costs is greater for renters compared to homeowners, but older residents of Wellesley are at risk no matter their housing tenure

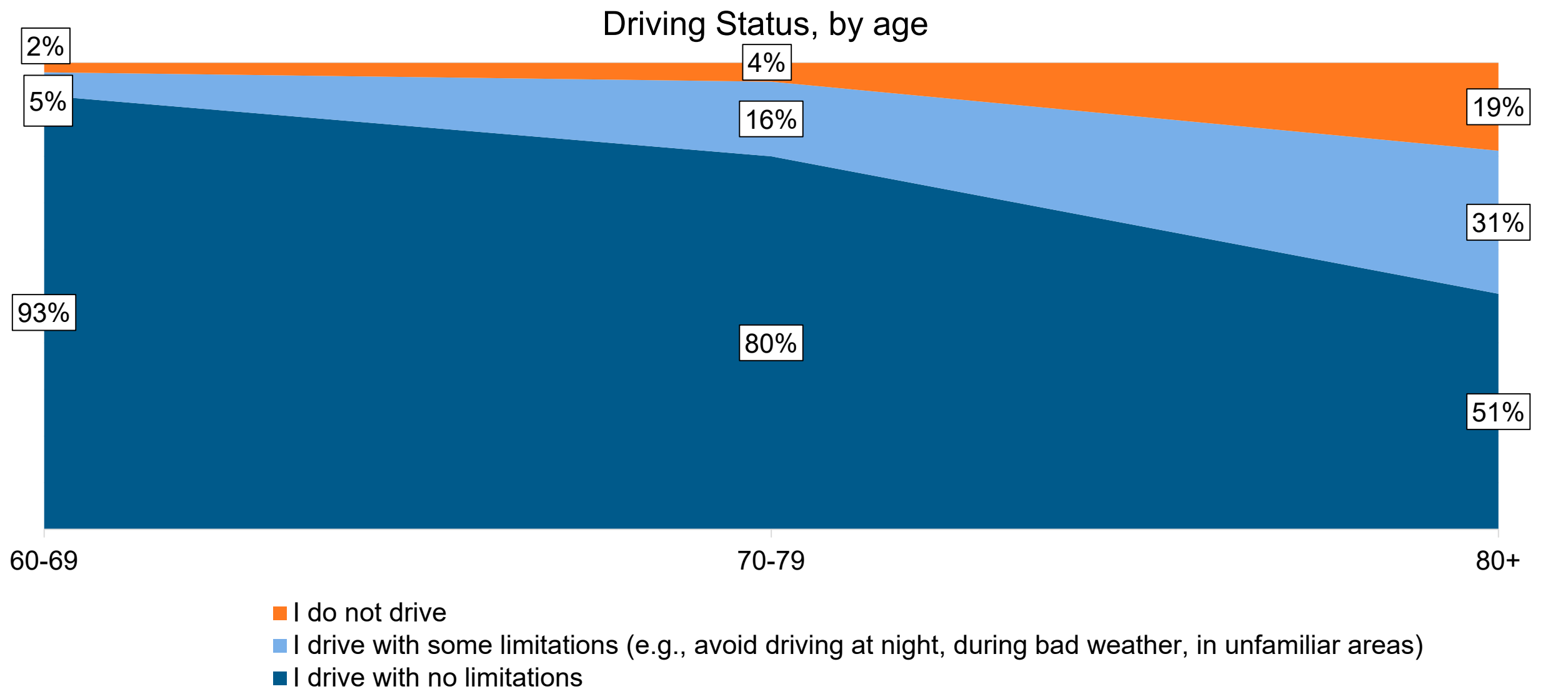
Share of householders spending 30% or more of their monthly income on housing costs, by age and housing tenure





Walkability & Transportation

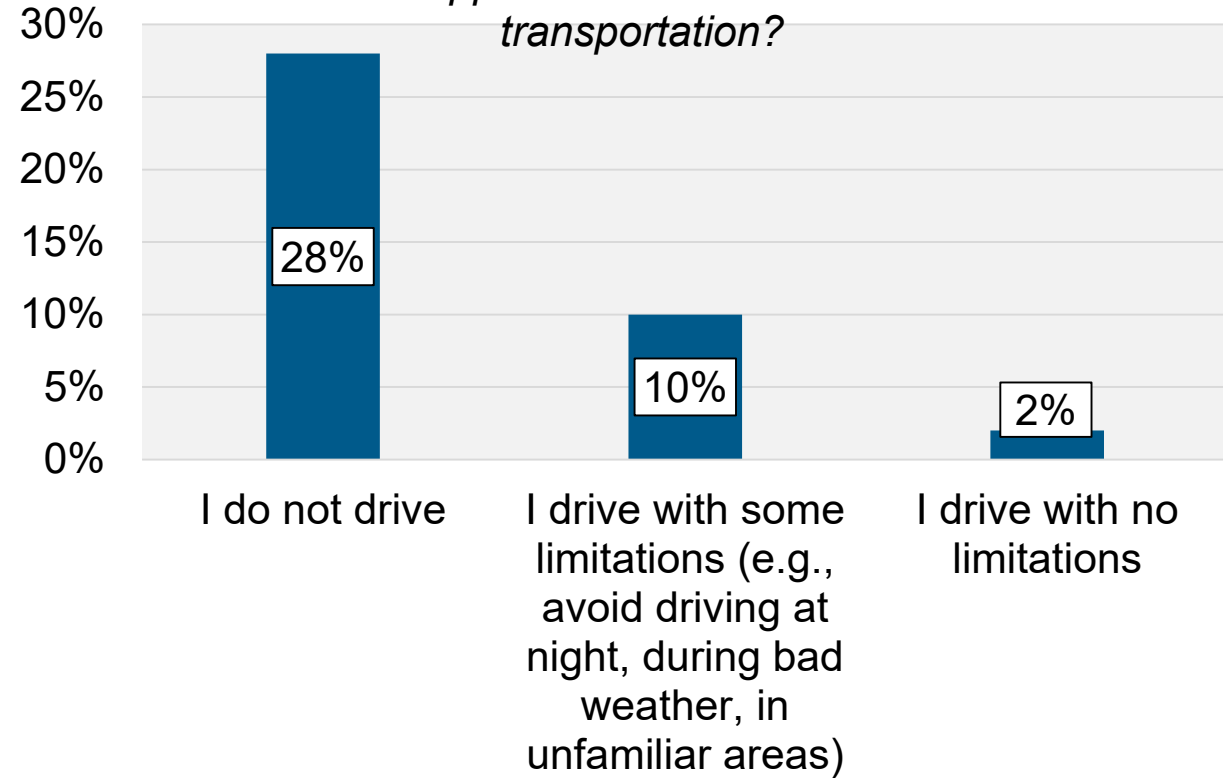
Many Wellesley residents drive themselves...with changes in driving habits increasing with age



Top barriers encountered by survey respondents:

- Public transportation around Wellesley is unavailable or inconvenient
- For those who limit their driving, not having information about what is available.
- **For non-drivers:** Physical limitations or other impairments make accessing transportation options difficult **AND** Lack of evening or weekend options

Percentage responding “yes” to *within the past 12 months, did you have to miss, cancel, or reschedule a medical appointment because of a lack of transportation?*



23% of survey respondents want more medical transportation options.



Health & Caregiving

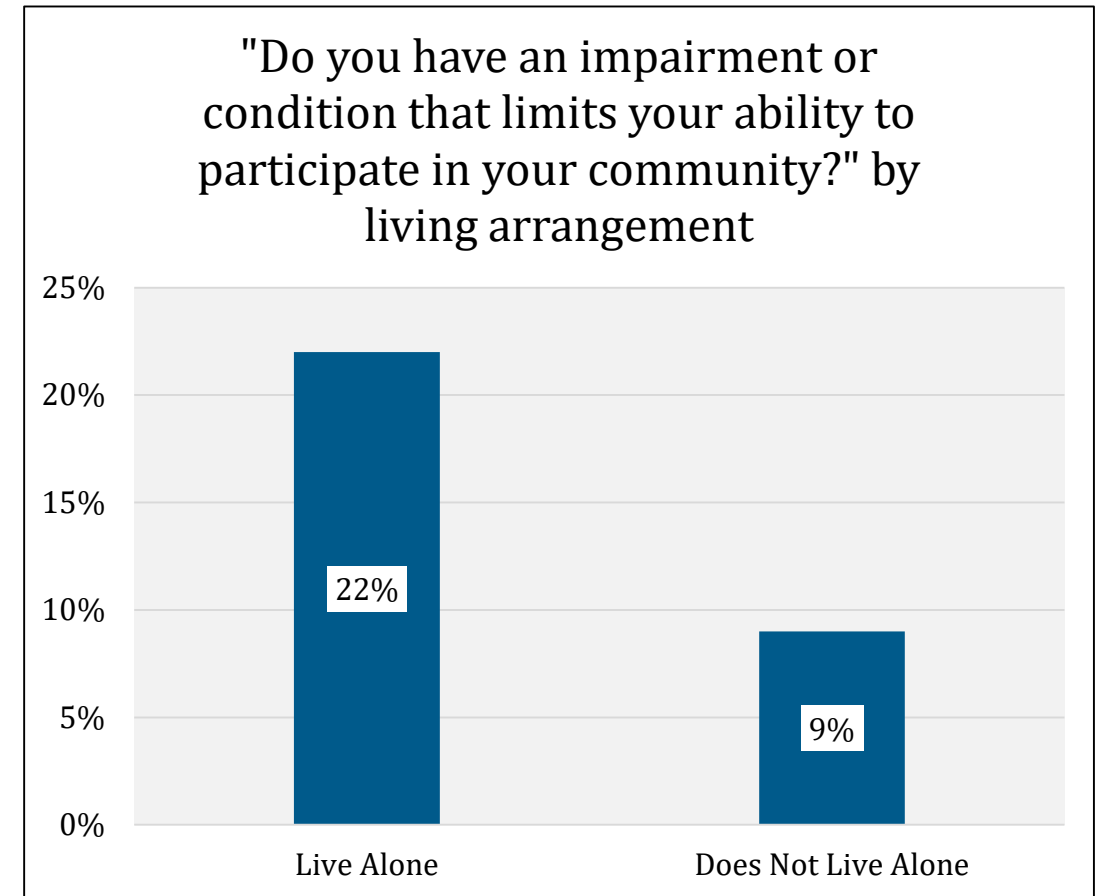
One in 4 Wellesley residents age 65+ have at least one disability:

The likelihood of acquiring disability increases with age. The top cited types of disability among Wellesley residents age 65 and older are:

- ambulatory difficulties (11%)
- independent living limitations (11%)
- hearing problems (11%)

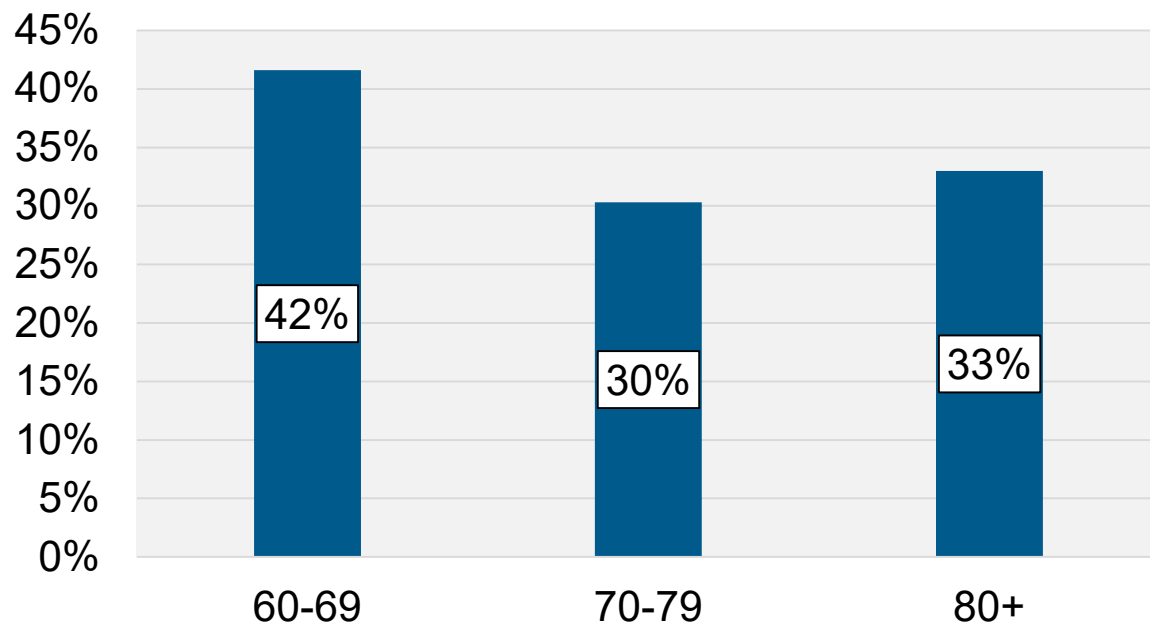
According to the MA Healthy Aging Collaborative profile of Wellesley residents over age 65:

- 56% have 4 or more chronic conditions
- 14% have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or a related form of dementia



35% of respondents are dedicated to caregiving

Do you now or have you in the past 5 years provided care or assistance to a person who is disabled or frail (e.g., a spouse, parent, relative, or friend)?

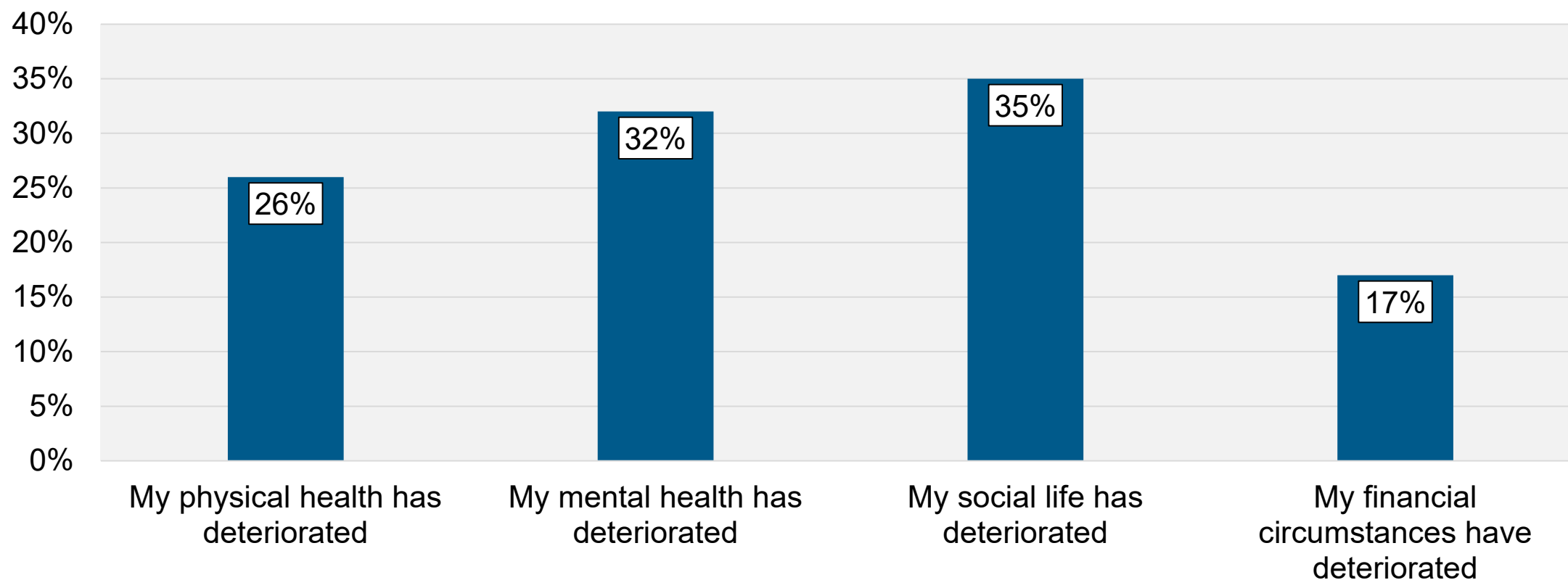


The most frequently reported conditions requiring care include:

- Frailty or mobility impairment (such as difficulty walking or climbing stairs) at 65%
- Alzheimer's or related dementias at 33%
- Chronic diseases like cancer diabetes, asthma, at 30%
- Undiagnosed forgetfulness or confusion 26%

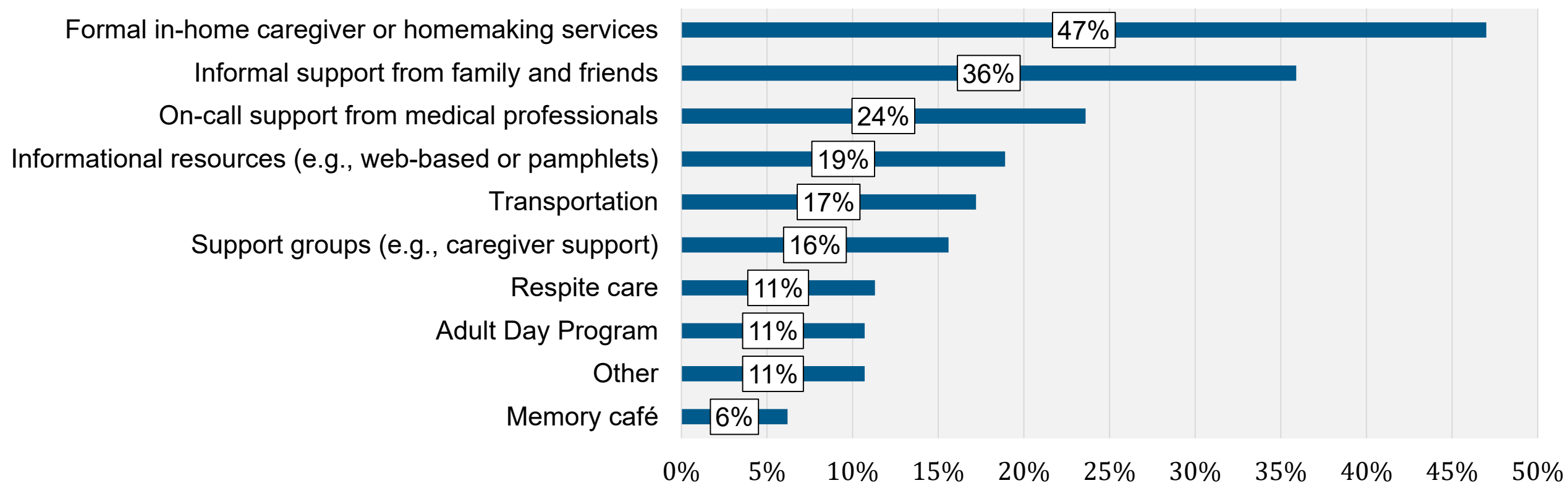
Caregivers experience significant challenges related to their own health and wellbeing

In your role as a caregiver, have you experienced any of the following?



Caregivers need informal and formal help, as well guidance in accessing supports

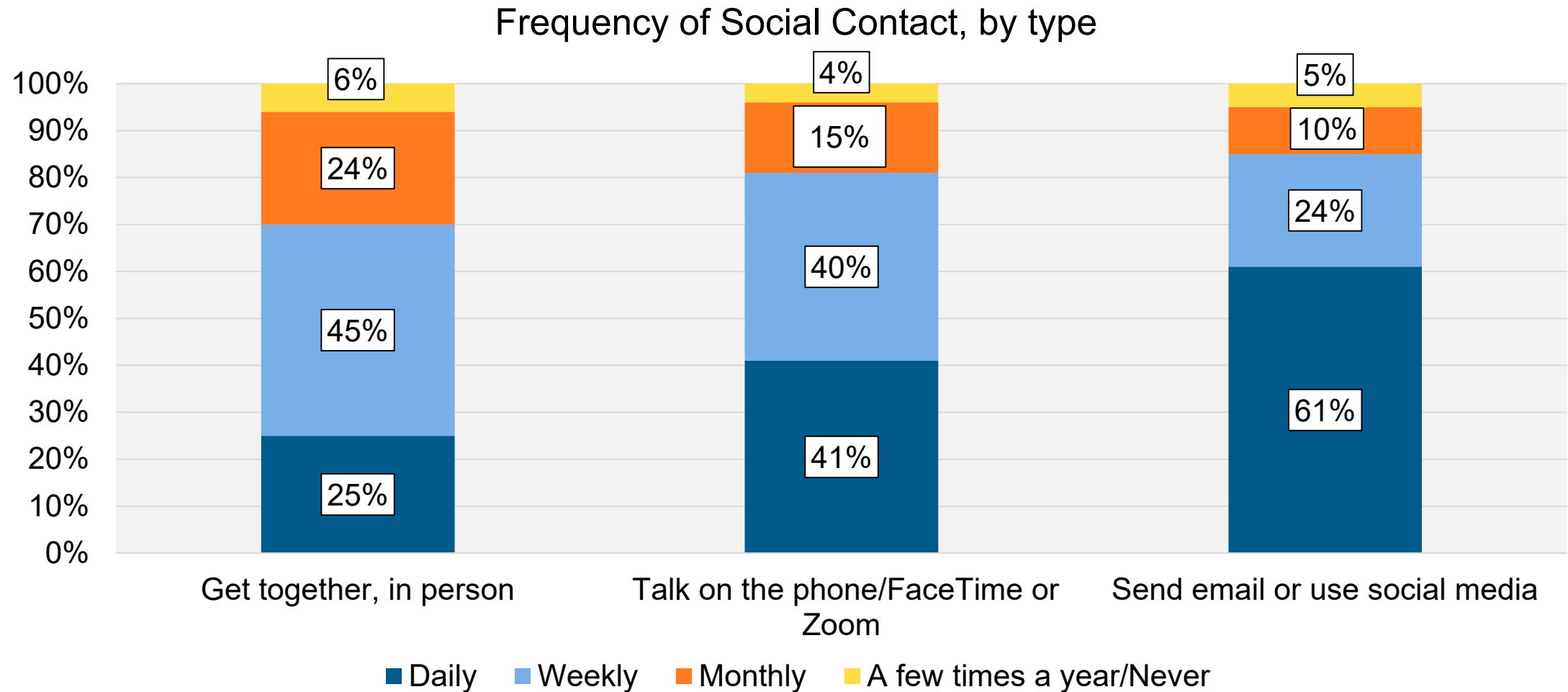
What supports were, or would have been, most valuable to you during your time providing care or assistance?





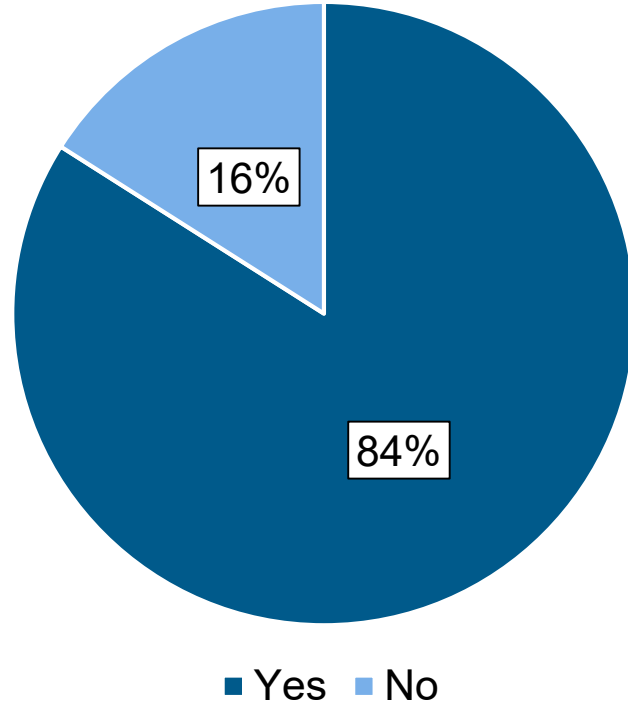
Advocacy and Inclusion

A portion of older residents are at risk for social isolation

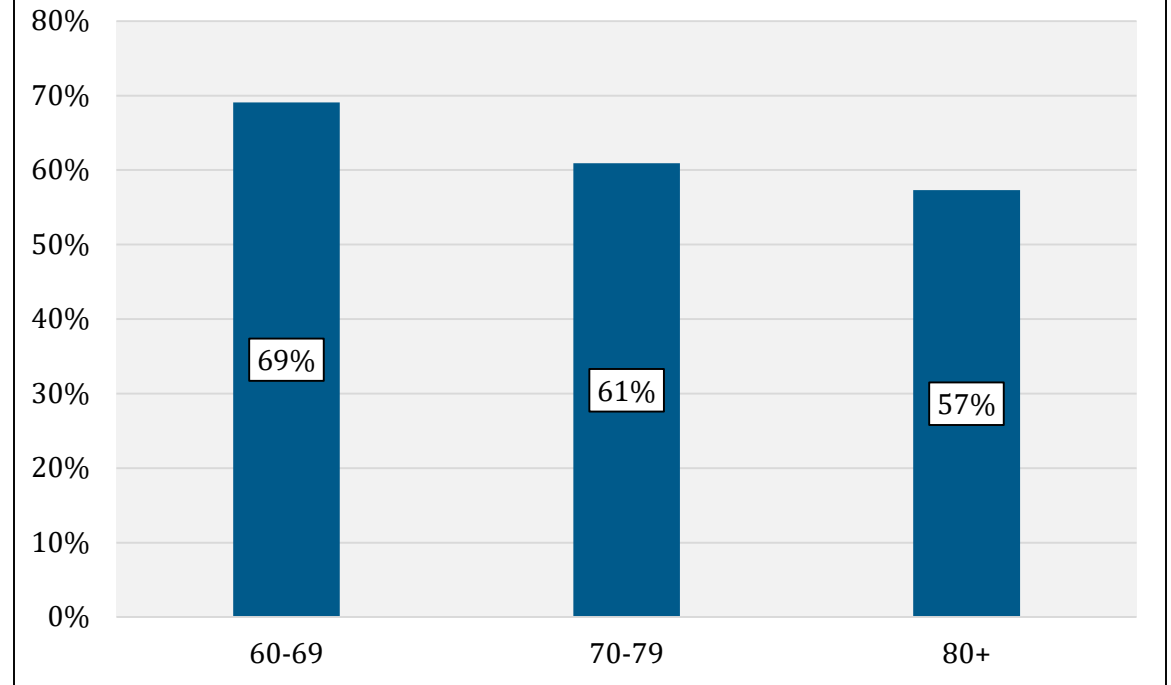


Segments of the older population are not well connected to information and supports

Do you know someone living close by on whom you can rely for help when you need it?

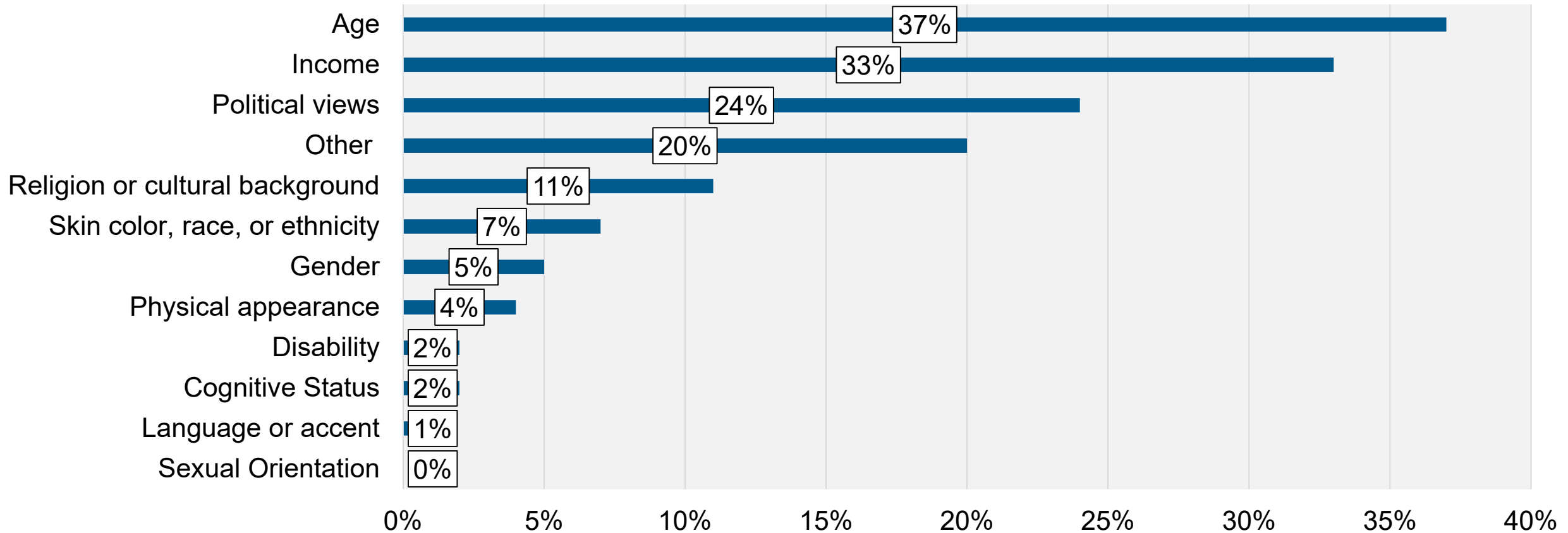


Percentage responding "no", to
Would you know whom to contact in Wellesley should you
or someone in your family need help accessing social
services (e.g., access to food, subsidies for transportation or
housing, in-home supports, or access to m



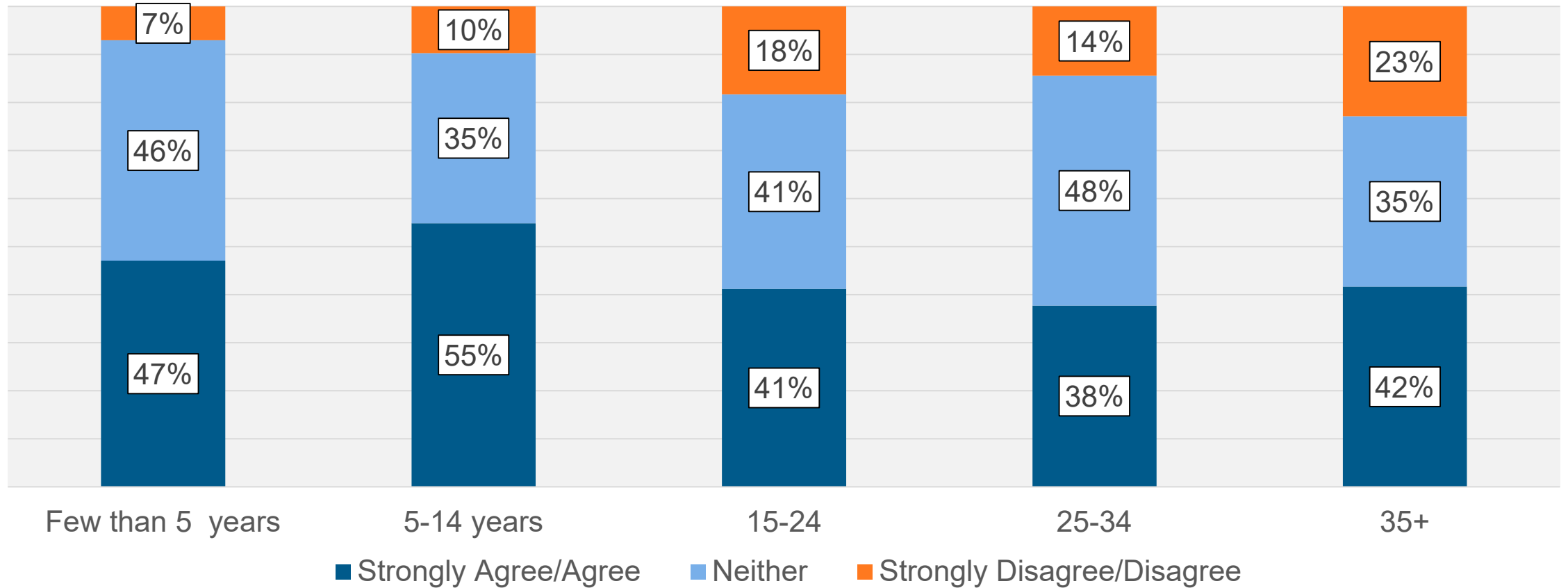
19% of older residents reported feeling excluded in Wellesley over the past 5 years

In the past 5 years, have you ever felt excluded in Wellesley because of any of the following?



There is a need to strengthen meaningful engagement channels between local policymakers and older residents

Level of agreement with statement, "Local policymakers consider the interests and concerns of older residents" by length of residency



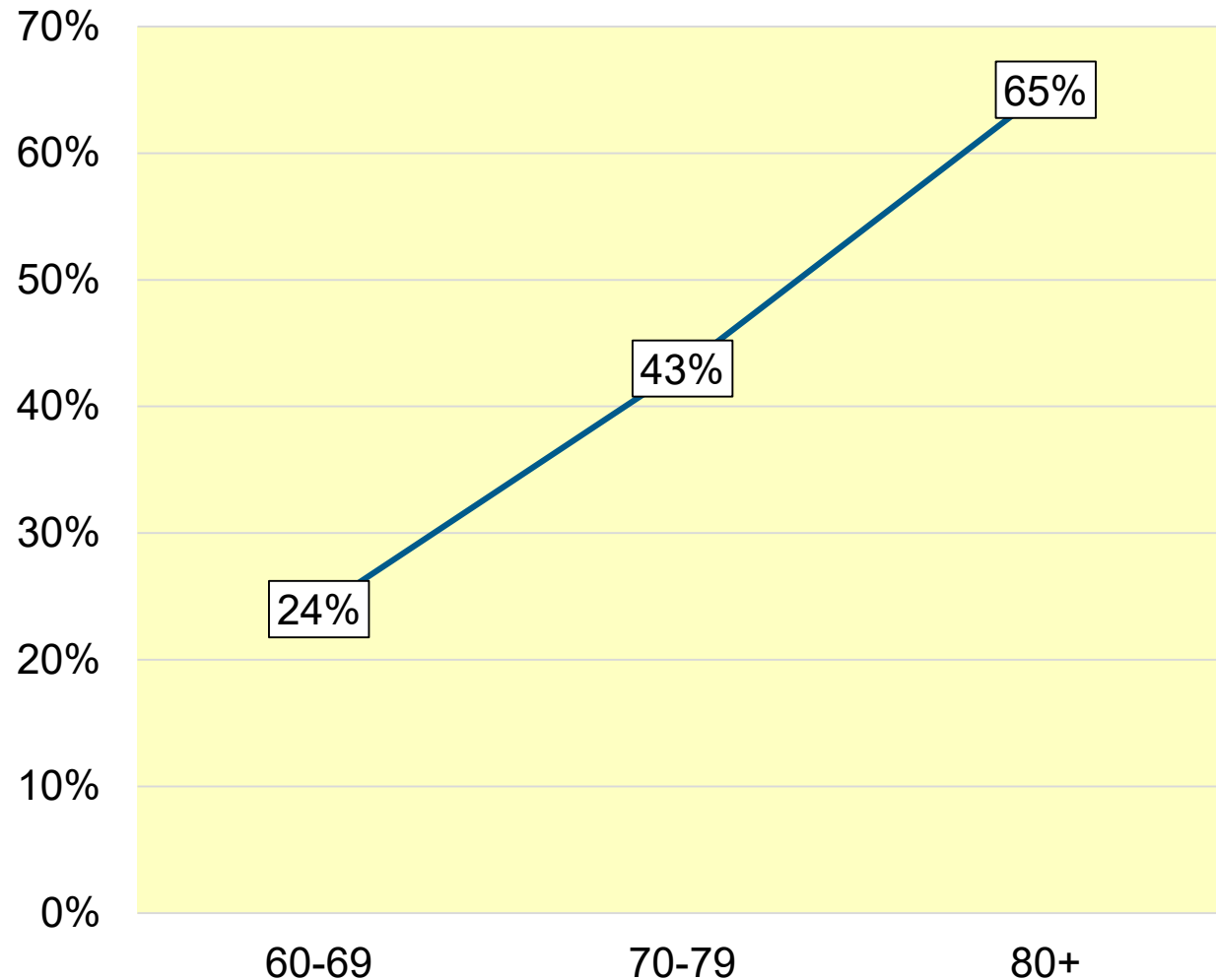
A stylized graphic on the left side of the slide features a light blue lighthouse with a small flag on top, set against a background of yellow and white diagonal stripes radiating from behind it. Below the lighthouse are blue wavy lines representing water.

Wellesley Council on Aging and the Tolles Parsons Center

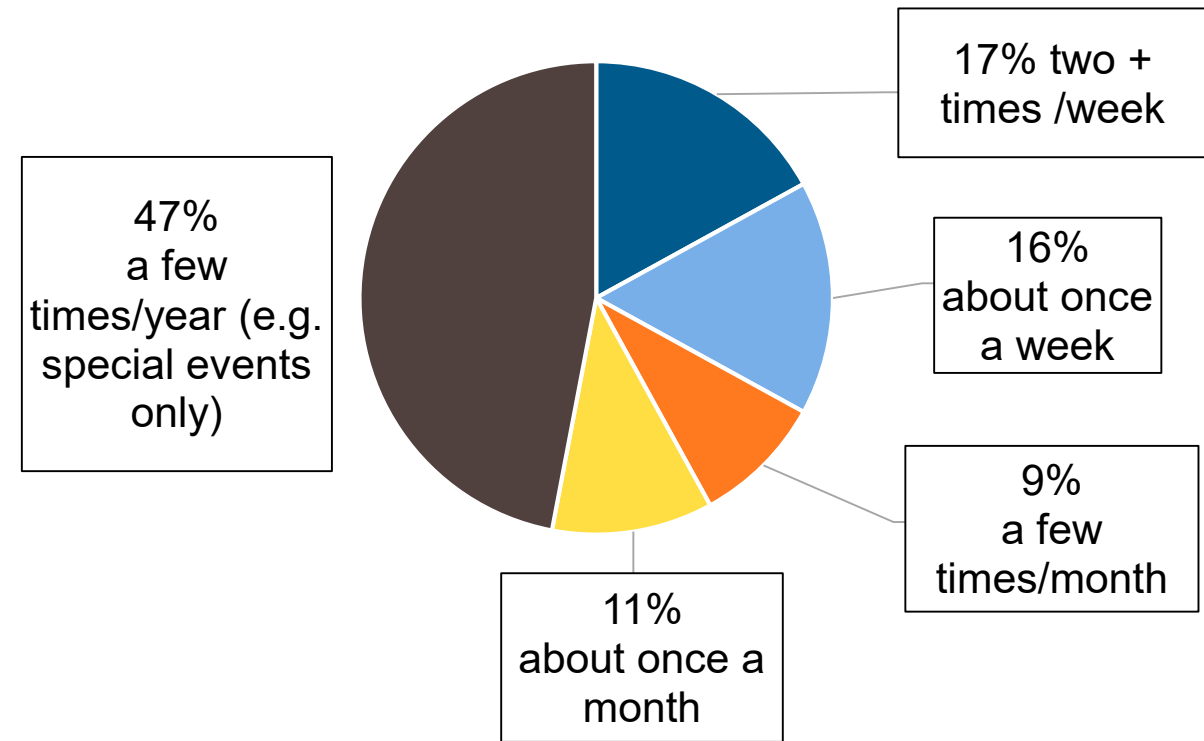
Participation, Programs, and Services

Participation at the COA increases steadily with age.
Among users, 47% visit only a few times a year.

Participation at the, by age



How frequently do you use programs or services offered by the Wellesley COA?



Lack of “need”, awareness, and interest, as well as being too busy are top barriers to participation at the Tolles Parsons Center

Most selected responses to the prompt: “Which of the following factors limit how often you attend programs or services provided by the Tolles Parsons Senior Center?”	User	Non-user
I do not need the services offered (e.g., tax counseling, fuel assistance)	26%	31%
I am still working	12%	31%
I am not interested in programs offered	11%	24%
I do not know what is offered	4%	20%
Other (Please specify):	23%	13%

Many would use the Center more if certain things were slightly changed: *“Wish there were more lectures provided around lunchtime, and more activities for men”*

Respondents would be more likely to participate if they had more knowledge, and if programs better matched their needs, interests, and schedule

Most selected responses to the prompt: “I would be more likely to use Tolles Parsons Senior Center programs and services if...”	User	Non-user
Programs and services were offered on weekends	28%	12%
Programs and services were better suited to my needs and interests	27%	19%
There were more people like myself at Tolles Parsons	22%	12%
Programs and services were offered at nights	19%	13%
I had more knowledge about the programs and services that are available	9%	27%
Other (Please specify):	14%	15%

Write-in explanations for “Other” included

- No need or interest, but expect to in future
- No time, too busy
- Desire for more/different programs

Top 5 expansion priorities for programming

1. Lectures, guest speakers, or cultural events (52%)
2. Educational courses (foreign languages, bird watching) (39%)
3. Indoor exercise (e.g., strength training, exercise equipment, yoga, aerobics) (35%)
4. Technology skills (learning computer programs or smartphone) (35%)
5. Evening or weekend activities (32%)

Top 5 expansion priorities for services

1. Information/referral about local resources (35%)

2. Transportation to medical appointments (29%)

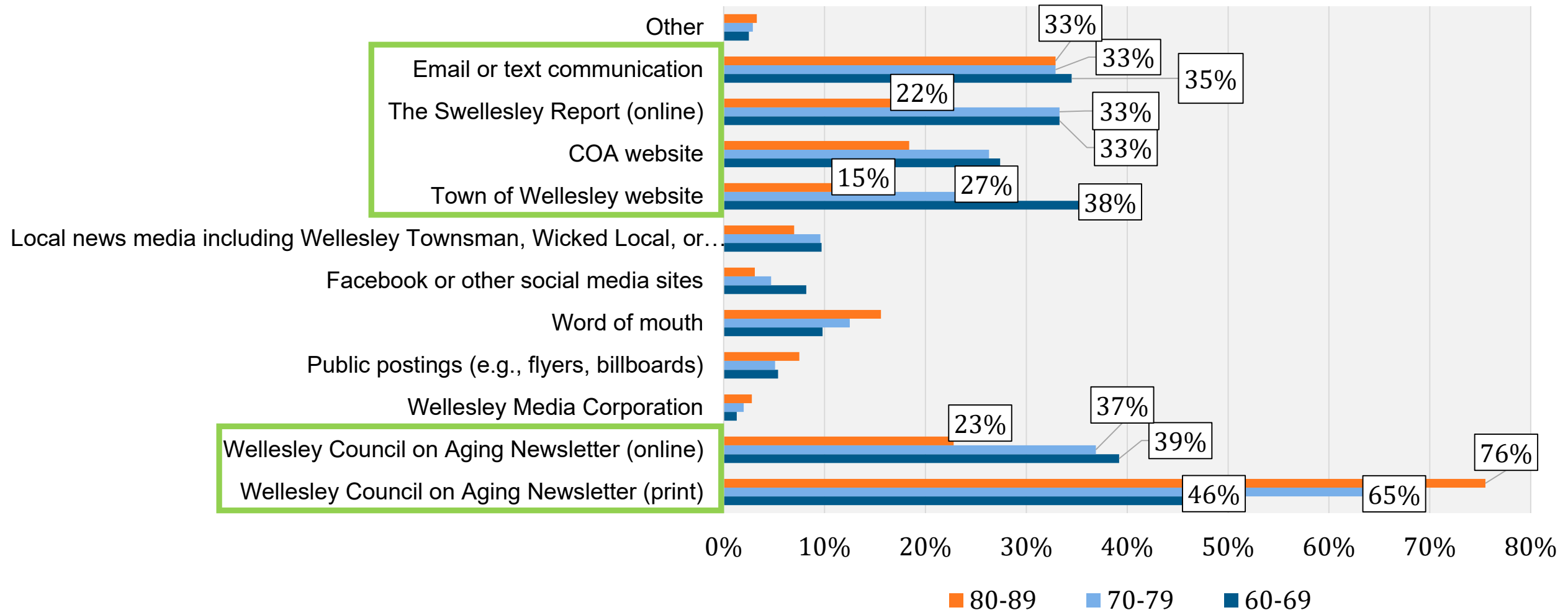
3. Professional Services (tax preparations, legal services) (25%)

4. In-home programs (e.g., friendly visiting or help with minor chores/errands) (22%)

5. Non-medical transportation (e.g., grocery shopping, errands)(21%)

Preferred ways to find information about the COA vary by age

Where do you prefer to find information about the activities and services offered by the Wellesley Council on Aging?



The Wellesley COA and Tolles Parsons Center are beloved assets; but capacity limitations and declining perceptions of flexibility pose risks to future success

I'm still working four full days a week. I'd be interested in evening or weekend classes like tai chi or yoga.

Now that the programs are well established, I wish the COA would make its priority helping seniors simply get through their daily lives—referrals for handymen, help after hospital stays, people to run errands.

I found it cumbersome and difficult to sign up for exercise classes—they fill up fast. The rules for the fitness center are not user friendly, and it closes too early.

My impression is that the COA has 'its people' who use it all the time, but I don't feel comfortable or that it would be welcoming for me.

Common concerns...

- Additional supports for daily living are needed
- Some participants do not feel heard, or find the environment to be welcoming.
- Schedules and programs need align with working, active, and culturally diverse residents.

Older residents need transportation—it's a very big problem. The COA should have an Uber or Lyft account for rides to shops, pharmacy, and COA.

Lunch is expensive and needs to be preordered. Meals on Wheels would be great, especially with food costs and during winter months.

The leadership are not listening to members very well—after watching meetings, it seems short-term and out of touch. There needs to be more transparency and new voices.

Change the name. Be a community resource center for all citizens. I'm 70 and will never go to a Council on 'Aging' event!

A stylized graphic on the left side of the slide features a light blue lighthouse with a small flag on top, set against a background of yellow and white diagonal stripes radiating from behind it. Below the lighthouse are blue wavy lines representing water.

Key Recommendations

*Planning for Wellesley's Growing and
Diverse Older Population*

The Council on Aging – a Champion for Healthy Aging

Develop a Strategic Plan to position the COA as an inclusive, forward-looking resource for residents across all ages and stages of aging,

Consider ways to reorganize the COA Board and clarify its responsibilities to strengthen leadership, improve transparency, and make achievement of this major goal more feasible.

Ensure that the COA Board reflects the diversity of Wellesley's older residents—across age, gender, tenure, and life experience.

Revisit COA bylaws and committee structures to clarify the Council's dual mission as both a service provider and an advocate for older residents. Ensure that the COA Board has clearly defined responsibilities, adequate capacity, and the organizational structure needed to support strategic planning, policy advocacy, and effective oversight of programs serving Wellesley's growing older adult population

Review community use policies to prioritize flexibility and community access. Explore options for expanded weekend and evening hours to reach working adults and caregivers.

Implement a consistent system for collecting and responding to participant input on programs, facilities, and communication.

The Council on Aging - a Foundation of Supportive Health Programs & Services

Strengthen connections to preventative health services and health promotion programs that enable residents to remain active and engaged. Encourage staff to make “wellness referrals” to clients who can benefit from the programs offered by the Town, including the Tolles Parsons Center.

Broaden offerings in exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, and mental health to promote holistic well-being. Expand the hours of the fitness center and restaurant partnerships to offer more “grab and go” food options for residents to take home.

Integrate Dementia Friendly practices in community planning. Create a Town-wide age- and dementia-friendly plan that unifies initiatives across departments, boards, and community organizations to address the needs of residents outside of the four walls of the Tolles Parsons Center.

- Ensure that all resident-facing staff have been trained as “dementia friends”.
- Implement social supports for persons living with dementia and their care partners. Host a monthly memory café or pilot-test an in-home supportive day program

Consider ways to support caregivers and people affected by substance misuse with access to behavioral health education, support groups, and resources.

Host a caregiver resource fair for families to learn more about available resources and create plans for the future

Empowering Older Adults in Local Governance and Fostering Inclusion

Implement civic engagement programs. Support the development of a structured “Senior Civic Academy” to engage older residents in town decision-making processes and civic participation, while reinforcing the Town’s commitment to transparency and civic engagement across generations.

Address ageism through the adoption of “reframing aging” practices across municipal communications and decision-making processes. Host age-positive events to raise the visibility of the COA. For example, host intergenerational meals or a positive aging photo campaign to capture older residents’ contributions and vibrancy.

Strengthen Community Information Sharing. Invest in technology training to ensure that all residents can access information, participate in virtual programming, and engage with town services. See Needham COA’s “Digital Drop-In” lab as an example.

Increase community presence to signal inclusivity of the Tolles Parsons Center: Expand language access and culturally responsive outreach to engage residents from diverse backgrounds and ensure equitable participation in programs and services.

Consider ways to strengthen the current volunteer offerings for older adults, and ensure that proper supports are in place to make those opportunities are meaningful and sustainable.

The COA, a Conduit for Housing, Financial Security, and Transportation Resources

Leverage the COA as a conduit of information to residents about zoning and development opportunities that increase the availability of smaller housing types such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and assisted living options.

Strengthen access to in-home support services that help older adults maintain independence, including home maintenance, repairs, and property maintenance.

Address the rising costs of living and their differential impact on older residents by building awareness and access to supportive programs:

- Property Tax Relief
- Local discount programs

Clearly communicate that participation in COA programs is affordable and that cost should never be a barrier to engagement.

Explore ways to increase utilization of medical and non-medical transportation in Wellesley. Consider collaboration with local healthcare providers to offer a shuttle.

Enhancing the Tolles Parsons Center as a Welcoming and Vibrant Hub

Rebrand the TPC as a hub for active aging, community engagement, arts programming, and lifelong learning (Wellesley, Weston Lifetime Learning Program), using updated language and visuals that convey vitality, inclusion, and relevance for adults at every stage of later life.

Commit the COA Board to being “ambassadors” of the programming at the Council on Aging.

Celebrate the opening of the kitchen as an opportunity to expand social opportunities, cooking classes, and weekend community events that foster belonging and intergenerational connection.

Encourage intergenerational engagement through a “grand friend” program, pairing older residents with children to build friendships, or facilitate events between older residents and high school seniors to share entertainment and stories across generations,

Host regular “welcome” events such as a Bring-a-Friend Breakfast or an Orientation for First-Time Visitors to introduce new participants to the TPC and its programs. Provide small incentives for members who refer new attendees to encourage peer outreach and word-of-mouth engagement.

Explore partnerships or satellite program sites in other town locations to increase accessibility and visibility of what the Tolles Parsons Center has to offer residents and families.

Develop a coordinated town-wide communication plan to ensure consistent, accessible sharing of COA and TPC news through print, email, digital, social media, Wellesley Media, and town platforms.

Pilot and evaluate new programs that respond to resident feedback and emerging interests. Consider the formation of a program subcommittee charged with pilot-testing programs throughout the year and reporting those experiences to the Board for future consideration.

Thank you!

Caitlin Coyle, PhD, Director, Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging

Beth Rouleau, MS

Gerontology Institute

University of Massachusetts Boston

Caitlin.coyle@umb.edu

