
Wellesley Council on Aging: Planning for the Future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Town of Wellesley
Council on Aging



Produced by the
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Research on Aging**
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INTRODUCTION

This report describes research undertaken by the Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging (CSDRA) within the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, on behalf of the Town of Wellesley. The goals of this project were to investigate the needs, interests, preferences, and opinions of Wellesley's residents aged 60 or older by engaging the community regarding their experiences and needs relevant to aging well in Wellesley. These findings are meant to inform the Town of Wellesley and the Wellesley Council on Aging (COA) in planning for the future to ensure that programs and services offered by the Council on Aging are aligned with the needs and preferences of Wellesley residents.

The Wellesley Council on Aging is at a crossroads where impactful programs and services have grown in support of Wellesley's

older population, and new goals are being prioritized. As leadership of the Tolles Parsons Center is transitioning and the population of older adults continues to grow and diversify, the role of the Wellesley Council on Aging and the Tolles Parsons Center has never been more important.

A broad range of findings are reported in this document, highlighting the many positive features of Wellesley as well as concerns expressed by older residents. While many of our findings, and the recommendations that follow, intersect with the scope of responsibility of the Wellesley Council on Aging, it is understood that responding to many needs and concerns expressed in the community will require the involvement of other municipal offices or community stakeholders, and some will require substantial collaborative effort.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment used mixed methods to capture both quantitative demographic trends and qualitative insights into aging experiences in Wellesley.

- ❖ **Community Survey and Analysis:** 1,428 residents responded (29% response rate)
- ❖ **Demographic Data:** from U.S. Census Bureau—decennial censuses and American Community Survey (2023)—and population projections from UMass Donahue Institute.
- ❖ **Key Informant Interviews:** 7 interviews with municipal employees, officials, and community leaders
- ❖ **Focus Groups:** 2 groups with 20 total participants including community stakeholder leaders and older residents

MAJOR FINDINGS

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS



The population of Wellesley residents aged 60 and older is sizeable and is expected to continue growing.

- Currently, 23% of Wellesley's 29,906 residents are aged 60 and older, and this population is expected to grow to 26% by the year 2030.
- 11% of Wellesley's population aged 65 years and older identify as a person of color.
- 14% of survey respondents have lived in Wellesley for fewer than 15 years.

HOUSING AND SUPPORT FOR AGING IN PLACE



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

- **Home ownership:** 91% of older adults in Wellesley own their homes.
- **Home maintenance challenges:** 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 housing types by respondents aged 80 and older.
- **Lack of suitable housing:** The unavailability of affordable downsizing options is a common concern regarding staying in Wellesley

- **Limited support programs:** More support in maintaining daily life, including referrals and transportation, are top needs. For example, 23% of respondents want more medical transportation to be available.
- **Driving cessation:** About 7% of all respondents do not drive, and 15% drive with some limitations. The proportion of residents who limit or cease driving increases with age.

"Almost all new housing costs more than the price we will get for selling our homes. This lack of affordable housing options is hurting the economic diversity of the town."

ADVOCACY, REPRESENTATION, AND GOVERNANCE



Enhancing representation, voice, and leadership will ensure that the Wellesley Council on Aging remains responsive and empowered.

- **Feeling excluded:** Overall, 19% of survey respondents reported feeling excluded in Wellesley in recent years. Among them, age (37%), income (33%), and political views (24%) were the most commonly reported reasons.
- **Lack of connections:** 16% of survey respondents reported that they do not know someone living nearby on whom they could rely for help if needed.
- **Consideration from policymakers:** Nearly one in four respondents who had lived in Wellesley for more than 35 years, and about one in five who had lived in Wellesley for 15-24 years, do not agree that local town officials consider the interests and concerns of older residents. About 40% of all survey respondents, regardless of length of time living in Wellesley, did not have an opinion on this question.

"The [Wellesley Council on Aging] is a building manager for the few hundred people who use the senior center; for the thousands of other seniors, they feel worthless."

- **Address the needs of all older adults:** The Wellesley Council on Aging is charged with addressing the needs of all older residents of Wellesley, not just those who participate at the Center. Some survey respondents felt that this level of advocacy was lacking.

ENHANCE THE TOLLES PARSONS CENTER AS A WELCOMING AND VIBRANT HUB



The Tolles Parsons Center serves as a central space for connection, learning, and support. Sustaining its vibrancy will require continued innovation and flexibility.

- **Participation at the Center:** 24% of respondents in their 60s reported participating at the Tolles Parsons Center, compared to 43% of those in their 70s and 65% of those aged 80 or older. Of those who do participate, almost half (47%) participate just a few times a year, typically for special events.
- **Awareness deficit:** 27% of survey respondents who have never used the Center said they would be more likely to come if they had more knowledge about the programs and services that are offered.
- **Expanded hours:** Among users of the Center, 28% said they would be more likely to attend if programs were offered on weekends, and 19% said they would be more likely to participate if programs and services were offered in evenings.
- **Program fit:** 27% of users said they would be more likely to participate if programs were better suited to their needs and interests.
- **Support engagement, wellness, and lifelong learning:** Residents expressed strong interest in staying active, learning new skills, and contributing to the community.
- **Future program needs:** Both users (61%) and non-users (52%) prioritized lectures and cultural events. Educational opportunities were preferred by 37% of users and 35% of non-users. Indoor exercise was preferred by 37% of users and 35% of non-users.
- **Volunteering preferences:** One-time volunteer opportunities and direct contact with residents were among the most preferred types of volunteering.

"Wish there were more lectures provided around lunchtime, and more activities for men."

WELLNESS, CAREGIVING, AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICES



Wellesley has the opportunity to model best practices in supporting families and individuals living with cognitive change.

- **Disability prevalence:** Although 13% of all respondents reported having an impairment that limits their ability to participate in community activity, the likelihood of impairment increases with age.
- **Disability and living situation:** Respondents who live alone reported higher rates of disability: about 22% of respondents who live alone reported a limiting condition, compared to only 9% of those who were living with others.
- **Substance misuse:** 20% of respondents have been affected, in some way, by substance misuse.
- **Caregiving:** About 35% of survey respondents have recently provided or are providing care for a person who is frail or disabled. That share is highest among respondents in their 60s (42%).
- **Care recipients:** One-third of caregivers provide care to someone with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia, and 26% are caring for someone with undiagnosed forgetfulness or confusion.
- **Caregiver burden:** 35% of caregivers reported that their social life has deteriorated, and 32% reported that their mental health has deteriorated.
- **Support system:** Wellesley caregivers reported that formal in-home caregiving or support would be most useful to them (47%), followed by informal support from family and friends (36%) and on-call support from health professionals (24%).

COMMUNICATION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION



Strengthen community information sharing and rebrand the Tolles Parsons Center as an active community center for adults.

- **Communication** was a key theme in this assessment.
- **Access to information on services:** About two-thirds (69%) of adults aged 60–69 reported knowing whom to contact if they or a family member needed assistance with services such as food access, housing, transportation, or mental health supports. This share drops modestly among those ages 70–79 (61%) and 80 and older (57%).
- **Information format preferences:** The printed Wellesley Council on Aging Newsletter is the most preferred source of information among older adults, especially those aged 80 and over. Younger respondents (ages 60-79) have more varied preferences, with higher use of email or text messages, the Council on Aging website, and the Town of Wellesley website.
- **Desire for practical support:** Participants want more practical, daily life support—particularly with transportation, home maintenance referrals, and affordable meal options such as a Meals on Wheels program.
- **Modernized branding:** Many participants called for a refreshed public image. Some community members associate the “Senior Center” with aging stereotypes that don’t reflect the energy and engagement of today’s older adults.
- **Representation and relevance:** Participants also expressed a desire for programming that better reflects the needs of working, active, and culturally diverse older adults.

“I would like to see some programs geared toward minority ethnic groups within the town—currently all programs and food are geared toward the majority.”

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Wellesley is encouraged **to actively expand its community efforts** to address the needs of the town's aging population. Key recommendations include:

- **Develop a strategic plan** to address capacity, program accessibility, staffing, and community engagement, positioning the COA as an inclusive, forward-looking resource for residents across all ages and stages of aging.
- **Integrate dementia-friendly practices** into community planning.
- **Integrate Reframing Aging Best Practices** into Town communications.
- **Implement civic engagement programs** connecting residents with local government.
- **Increase community presence** to signal inclusivity of the Tolles Parsons Center.
- **Continuously review** to ensure that the Council on Aging Board reflects the diversity of Wellesley's older residents—across age, gender, tenure, and life experience.
- **Strengthen access to in-home support services** that help older adults maintain independence, including home maintenance, repair, and property maintenance.
- **Expand Tolles Parsons Center programming** with evening and weekend hours for working adults and caregivers.
- **Expand arts programming** and creative expression opportunities.
- **Strengthen connections to preventative health services and programs** to enable residents to remain active and engaged.
- **Broaden offerings** in exercise, nutrition, mindfulness and mental health.
- **Continue supporting the Wellesley Weston Lifetime Learning program** to expand its offerings and frequency of gathering.
- **Strengthen information access** by ensuring that information is clearly communicated through multiple platforms including print, digital, and telephone.

CONCLUSION

As the number of older residents grows, so too will the need for resources, programs, and services that allow them to remain engaged, independent, and supported in Wellesley. These insights point toward both the **assets Wellesley can build upon** and the **critical areas of investment and dialogue** needed to strengthen the community for its older residents.