

Wakefield for All

Age-Friendly Action Plan 2021





TOWN OF WAKEFIELD

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I am pleased to submit the Town of Wakefield's Age-Friendly Action Plan, the result of thoughtful development by our Age-Friendly Wakefield Committee. Our plan represents diverse perspectives, from municipal government to nonprofits to the business community, and most importantly our residents.

Spearheaded by our exceptional Council on Aging, the plan expands upon our membership in the AARP's Network of Age-Friendly Communities, a designation we have proudly held since 2017. The plan considers:

- Outdoor spaces and buildings;
- Housing;
- Social participation;
- Respect and social inclusion;
- Civic participation and employment;
- Multi-generational activities;
- Communication and information; and
- Community support and health services.

The Town of Wakefield's senior population is a vital resource to our community. Its members provide valuable insight and local knowledge, participate in civic endeavors, volunteer, and are active members of local nonprofit, social, business, and recreational groups. We fully commit to supporting these residents and those who will join this demographic in the years to come. The end result will be a greater Wakefield for all.

We look forward to creating more opportunities for residents of all ages to thrive in the places where they live, work, and volunteer.

Respectfully submitted,


Stephen P. Maio
Town Administrator



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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who helped formulate the Town of Wakefield plan. Many thanks to the Age-Friendly committee members for their time and commitment to the project as well as the residents and community members who gave much insight by completing surveys and attending the listening sessions. As the community and the world population grows older the information you provided has helped us take a closer look at how Wakefield communicates and how we can better meet the needs of all our residents. We will continue to review and amend our plan as needs and times change. We feel you have given us a great starting point. Each time the plan is reassessed we look to strengthen our commitment to keep Wakefield an *Age-Friendly* community. Again, thank you all for your support now and in the future as we continue to improve.

Committee Members-

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Background

In October 2017, the Town of Wakefield applied for admission to *AARP Age-Friendly Cities and Communities /World Health Organization* with a commitment to make Wakefield welcoming to all. As the demographics of the town change, we recognized the importance of age-friendly planning for today and the future.

The Town of Wakefield's Council on Aging has led this endeavor by working with a broad base of community members including the Town Administrator, local government leaders, municipal employees, the business community and local non- profits.

The Age-Friendly Cities framework was created by the *World Health Organization* in 2005 to address the changing population trends. *AARP* is the partnering organization in the United States. Working with *AARP* provides support, resources and a better understanding of the economic and social benefit of a more livable community.

Age-Friendly communities focus their work on eight domains

- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Housing
- Transportation
- Social participation
- Respect and social inclusion
- Civic participation and employment
- Communication and information
- Community support and health services

Communities that provide access to these elements can thrive. Wakefield has accepted the challenge and looks forward to improving these domains that work toward helping all residents remain engaged community members.

The Age-Friendly Wakefield committee is comprised of 15 community members. It includes all seven of the current appointed members of the Council on Aging, a community volunteer, Council on Aging Director, Town Administrator, Town Planner, Recreation Director, Board of Health / Mass in Motion Coordinator, Communications Director and Library Director.

Developing Our Plan

Our goal is to continuously improve upon the age-friendliness of Wakefield. We want to provide services and programs to all ages and abilities and provide access to buildings or structures without barriers. We want to offer a community accessible and inclusive for all.

Conducting a needs assessment was the first step in finding out the “age-friendliness” of Wakefield. The committee met to work out the details of a needs assessment survey and prepared to conduct listening sessions. Over a 9 - month period we compiled information from the surveys and group meetings. Approximately 400 people participated in the survey and / or listening sessions.

Participants and survey respondents offered significant feedback on where improvement is needed and where Wakefield hits the mark, as well as ideas and suggestions related to the highlighted domains. We received feedback on subjects ranging from improving street and sidewalk conditions to lack of affordable housing to the convenience of Wakefield’s proximity to major highways and transportation services. The input we gathered from our research came from residents, community leaders, businesses, and town officials and helped formulate this plan.

In early 2019, we presented an update to the Wakefield Town Council on our findings and set 2020 as a target for completing our action plan. We missed that but over this year, we have been working on its completion, meeting with committee members, as well as convening extra discussions with local residents to collect additional feedback.

Our plan lays the groundwork to build a community that considers the needs of all citizens. Community support should be strong and available to all. It is a flexible plan and can be amended and reformed to meet shifting needs. As we have learned in the last year, things can change in an instant and we need to be prepared, able to adapt and accommodate changes quickly. We are fortunate to have in Wakefield a team committed to those actions.

Housing

There are approximately 26,000 people living in Wakefield and 8,700 housing properties. The homes consist of single-family, multi-family, condominiums, townhouses and apartment buildings. The Wakefield Housing Authority oversees approximately 300 public units for the elderly and disabled. There is also a private assisted living facility and three nursing homes. From young families looking for more space to seniors looking to downsize, housing in Wakefield is in high demand by people of all ages.



Vision

Housing in Wakefield should be affordable, accessible and safe. Residents need to be able to live comfortably, safely and, if they choose to age independently, with access to services as needed.

What we learned

In reviewing participant responses, we learned that those who want to remain in their home often find increasing taxes and the maintenance of the home a financial hardship. People who are looking to downsize or move to public housing find affordability and housing stock limited. Wait time for public housing placement is years-long and new construction and rental costs are high. Seniors want more options for downsizing, such as condos and or affordable rentals. The current construction of new apartment and condominium developments in town may aid some of that need; however, many would like to remain in their home, yet know renovations are needed and realize the high expense for such work. Budgeting for preventive maintenance or a sudden major repair can present a hardship when also budgeting for other needs such as medications or car maintenance. HP accessible options, access to home improvement / repair programs and low-cost financial aid programs are needed. Other residents feel that the current housing stock does not meet their needs to downsize and that the only option is to look to other cities or towns outside of Wakefield.

Recommendation: Promote financial housing education from first home to aging in place

Action: Current and Continuous

- Work with local banks, financial institutions and government agencies to promote informational programs on all home loan programs, including mortgages, reverse mortgages, home equity loans etc.
- Work with Wakefield Housing Authority on presenting informational programs on how the public housing system works. Application procedure through acceptance.
- Pursue options to help those of low-and moderate-incomes to access tax reductions on real estate taxes.

Recommendation: Develop aging in place informational programming

Action: 2021 - 2023

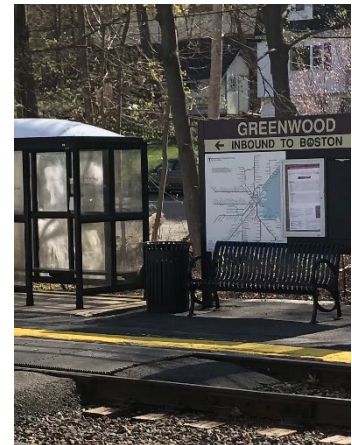
- Engage representatives on all levels of the need for more *affordable* housing.
- Continue offering programs on downsizing and selling your home.
- Post and update current new construction of condo and apartment building projects in town. Note the application procedures for any subsidized and /or affordable units.
- Develop volunteer small home repair program and/or a local contractors list for home modifications.
- Promote the availability of all business, including both for-profit and non-profit, that help with aging issues from healthcare to shopping.
- Work with high school on developing student volunteer program for leaf raking and snow shoveling programs as part of community service.

Prospective Partners

Wakefield Housing Authority - Town Planner - Wakefield High School - MA
legislative members - Mystic Valley Elder Services - AARP - Banking institutions -
Local realtors

Transportation

Wakefield's proximity to Boston, easy access to major highway systems and having access to bus and rail systems make the town a desirable location for all ages. Getting around town is possible by automobile, MBTA bus and train service, Council on Aging van service, bike, and foot. Wakefield is currently engaged in *Envision*, a revitalization project that seeks to upgrade the downtown area with more parking, safer walking spaces and improved travel through the area.



Vision

Residents should be able to travel around Wakefield and surrounding areas safely and have access to well-maintained streets, sidewalks, and area transportation systems.

What we learned

Residents want transportation services to be safe, accessible and affordable. People see the access to MBTA service (train and bus) and major highways in our area as a plus; however, the lack of route options for the bus service is an issue. The limited routes leave some sections of town out of range to access bus service. Moreover, the lack of a local cab service is a downside for many not familiar or ready to embrace ride sharing services. People want to be educated more about services like UBER and Lyft, but want to be sure if they use them, they can feel safe. The Council on Aging vans are a good option for seniors who no longer drive and need to get around locally. The MBTA Ride also provides assistance to those in need.

Community members also told us that in order to promote walkability and more biking in town, the sidewalks and ramps need to be maintained. Walking is a safe option in the

downtown area; however, some felt crossing Main Street and other areas of town were dangerous. Respondents agreed that there is a need to slow down the traffic passing thru the square and on other major streets. Road and sidewalk conditions were the most discussed and commented on topic of our entire assessment. The overwhelming majority felt sidewalks and streets are in need of repair and should be a maintenance priority.

Recommendation: Work on increasing transportation services

Action: 2021 - 2023

- Continue to promote and improve The Council on Aging senior van services- investigate additional hours and destinations.
- Identify partnerships with local health provider agencies to help with additional costs.
- Reach out to faith communities and work with them on any support programming they may have.
- Offer informational presentations on MBTA - The Ride and other transportation service programs, such as Uber, Lyft, Zip Car, taxi etc.
- Engage state legislative branch about the possibility of expanding MBTA bus routes in town.

Recommendation: Work on improving travel on public roads and walkways

Action: 2021 - 2023

- Work with DPW on the Sidewalk/Road Issue Reporting program.
- Ensure shelters and benches are available in all areas of town.
- Continue to install electronic crosswalk signal pads in all areas of town.
- Offer AAA course as a review for drivers.
- The current downtown complete streets project, *Envision*, will present some traffic calming measures for walking and transportation enhancements to the downtown area. Continue to follow their progress and future work. Promote *Envision* and the importance of having input from all members of the community.

Prospective Partners

MBTA – AARP – MA legislative membership – New England AAA - Melrose Wakefield
Healthcare – Lahey Health

Outdoor Spaces & Buildings

Many people enjoy Wakefield because of Lake Quannapowitt and the beautiful commons surrounding it. The lake area provides a popular walking route used by many in the North Shore area. Hundreds of people walk, stroll, canoe, paddleboard and people-watch around it daily. It is also a favorite pick for numerous fundraising walks because of the availability of open space. Wakefield maintains twenty parks/playground areas, as well as the lake for recreational and passive use. Field schedules are organized through the Wakefield Recreation Department, which also oversees the activities run at The Americal Civic Center. Adult and youth basketball, cheerleading groups, pickleball, exercise programs, as well as informational presentations and community meetings are all offered in the Civic Center. The Senior Center, Library, Public Safety Building, Town Hall and Schools all provide usable community space as well.



Vision

People need places to gather, inside and out. We need to create more opportunities for all to access parks, open spaces and public buildings.

What we learned

Survey participants and respondents told us they would think about venturing to the parks more often if there were some organized activities, noting community gardens, a splash pool, exercise classes or music. Participants noted structural elements that would be a significant benefit in spurring outdoor activity, including adding permanent restrooms around the lake / Vets Field / Common, and benches to areas of the town that are currently lacking. Some participants shared an interest in having more accessible bike and/or walking routes, and indicated their eagerness for the Rail to Trail bike/walking path to be completed. As noted in previous sections, respondents also indicated the need to keep up maintenance, improvements and use the most visible signage designating handicapped access in all park areas.

Respondents who walk in the downtown area felt there were some issues with snow removal in winter, cars going too fast, as well as parking problems. There were numerous comments about the lighting in the downtown area needing improvement, suggesting that it needs to be more uniform and illuminate the area for the safety of those walking, as well as driving.

Recommendation: Ensure needs of older adults and disabled individuals are considered in park design and programs

Action: 2021-2023

- Follow the Town betterment project, *Envision*, which is currently addressing some of the issues in the downtown area.
- Work with Recreation Department on developing and expanding outdoor space for recreational, passive and other use. Develop new programming for all ages. Recreation is a lifelong activity.
- Work with Disability Commission on any issues or projects to provide more accessible structures. Encourage the installation of exercise and playground equipment fit for all.
- Council on Aging/Senior Center to incorporate outdoor space in its programming.
- Promote health advantages of Mass in Motion (BOH), which has lists of walkable routes in town and surrounding communities.
 - Rail to Trail bike/walking path is moving along. Monitor its progress.
 - Inquire about and research grant opportunities for the installation of HP equipment in parks to make more accessible.
- Pursue grant opportunities to make park improvements.
- Promote openings on committees and boards that seek senior and disabled resident input.

Recommendation: Work with DPW on safety issues

Action: 2021-2022

- Work with DPW on maintenance issues inside and outdoors.
- Work on improvements to lighting in the downtown area.
- Work with Town on possibility of permanent restrooms around lake / commons.

Prospective Partners

Recreation Department - Disability Commission - Arts Council – Town Planner - MA legislative members - AARP

Social Participation

Before March 2020, we understood social isolation and its impact on seniors. Now, months later, Covid-19 is still with us and we see isolation's effects in those we serve. People want to connect with others no matter how brief. Whether it is family, a neighbor, the postal worker or a clerk at the grocery store, people need that connection. Pre-pandemic respondents thought there were many different opportunities available to participate in activities in Wakefield if one chooses—from joining local organizations and eating out, to participating in local government or just quietly enjoying the view from a bench in the downtown. As the health crisis persisted, we heard from many people looking for any connection even if it was a socially distanced visit for some normalcy.



Vision

We want people to know Wakefield offers something for everyone. Whether you want to volunteer, attend town-sponsored events, eat out or shop, there should be a wide range of recreational, educational, volunteer and cultural opportunities in which all can participate.

Activities that include all ages help dispel ageism. Together we can work on breaking down age barriers and create an ageless community.

What we learned

Social connections are key to avoiding isolation. Participants in the survey and listening sessions felt there were plenty of ways to join activities and that the town provided numerous opportunities to be involved.

Some found connections through community service projects and others by enjoying events provided by the town or private groups. Community service was a choice of many because it connects folks from different backgrounds, neighborhoods and age groups. Most respondents felt the town offered many social functions with only a few respondents unaware of opportunities to participate or where to find upcoming events. We also found many people are content on their own.

Recommendation: Continue to reach out to older citizens through all means of communication to encourage connection

Action: Continuous

- Increase awareness of social opportunities in town.
- Work towards engaging senior members of the community to become more involved.
- Reach out to all private, public and civic groups in town encouraging intergenerational interactions.
- Highlight and/or host a community engagement event and encourage the benefits of all resident participation.
- Urge technology learning and support for senior residents.
- Develop a plan for internet access for all community members in need.
- Work with youth groups in town to promote cross connections, exposing all members of the community to different groups to understand their goals.
- Outreach. Use the basics, including phone calls, direct mail, and visits.
- Promote to all members of the community the resources available to help combat loneliness.

Prospective Partners

Local civic organizations – Wakefield High and Middle School – Mystic Valley Elder Services-AARP

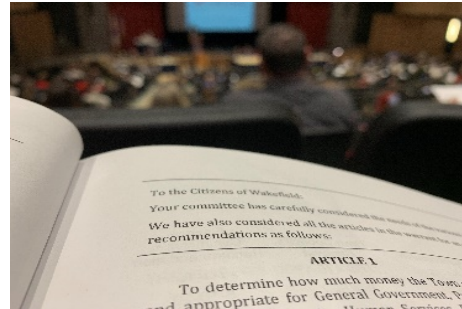
Civic Participation and Employment

The more people are engaged and involved, the better and more diverse a community can be. Those participating through volunteering, serving on boards / committees or working feel a sense of purpose, that they're needed and valued.



Vision

We aim to encourage residents of all ages to be active participants in Wakefield. The importance of civic participation; having your voice heard, helping others and the ability to better one's own financial standing can make for a successful environment.



What we learned

People are aware of the numerous opportunities provided by committees and civic groups in town. Some respondents told us they may follow but do not always participate in the inner workings of the town. However, if there is a hot button issue happening- i.e. new construction projects or new tax proposal, then more people tend to participate to protect their vision of Wakefield--the community they see as home.

We heard from residents continuing to work after reaching retirement age. For some, it is to remain active and avoid boredom, and for others, it is a need to keep up with the rising cost of living.

Older workers are often overlooked for employment. Employers need to be reminded to look at the whole person when hiring and not make decisions based on age.

Older employees in the workforce contribute to success by bringing experience and knowledge.

Others enjoy volunteering. The ability to help using their skill set or the opportunity to try something totally different with the benefit of helping the community.

Recommendation: Support older resident participation in community organizations and work force

Action: 2021 - 2023

- Promote volunteer opportunities in the community.
- Offer job interview, resume review programs and resources for those 55 and over seeking employment support.
- Develop a plan to work with local businesses to inform and educate them as to the untapped potential in hiring older workers.
- Post all town board and committee openings and community meetings in the senior newsletter and online sites.
- See the value in hearing from everyone.



Prospective Partners-

AARP – Mystic Valley Elder Services –Chamber of Commerce –Local business

Communication and Information

Communicating news and material is critical to any city or town efforts to maintain an informed and engaged community of residents.



Vision

To make Wakefield a town that reaches all members of the community and uses numerous forms of media to relay information about news, current events, community happenings and emergencies.

What we learned

Survey respondents indicated that they are not always sure of how to access information about general government and services. Many people acknowledged calling the town hall for information and were connected or directed to the appropriate resource. Despite knowing the town has a website, and the different forms of media available (e.g., newspaper, town mailings, Council on Aging newsletter, DPW newsletter, Light Department newsletter, Reverse 911), some residents told us they do not always feel informed. More of the older respondents liked the direct mailing of newsletters. The Covid-19 shutdown of public buildings highlighted the lack of availability of access to internet service. Though it was only temporary, closing buildings kept numerous residents from accessing technology that was needed for grocery delivery as well as access to health care providers.

Recommendation: Continue to expand and improve on existing communication outlets

Action: 2021 - 2022

-Create an *Age-Friendly Wakefield Website* that clearly and simply breaks down information into easy to access categories including, but not limited to transportation, housing, current events, volunteer opportunities.

-Maintain our hands-on *Age-Friendly Informational Resource Center* at the library, providing the information available on the town website, but in paper form: housing applications, bus schedules, insurance information, fuel applications, events etc.



-Continue to use direct mailings, local cable and print media to reach older residents.

- Offer in-person presentations by various town departments providing information on the latest news and happenings in the community.

-Introduce Age-Friendly to the community highlighting that aging includes everyone.

-Increase technology availability for all residents. Look into providing internet Wi-Fi hot spots around town.

-Improve dissemination of Town of Wakefield news and announcements using other community organizations and groups.

Prospective Partners

Town Departments – Wakefield Cable TV - local print and media outlets – AARP- Civic Groups – Faith community

Community Support and Health Services

Health and supportive services are important to everyone. Offering support not only helps the residents but those working to help keep them safe.



Vision

That Wakefield help provide and support residents access to daily needs. Services in health, food sources, public safety and housing are vital to a healthy community.

What we learned

Access to health services was at the top of the list for many senior residents. Most felt living in our area provides access to good local medical care. The number of transportation resources available to local area hospitals was also noted as a benefit. Services like the food pantry, Meals on Wheels and programming through the senior center and health department were known to many.

Others responding were unaware of all the types of assistance that could be accessed through local municipal offices. Access to aid programs such as fuel assistance, food benefits (SNAP), Veteran benefits, mental health referrals and real estate tax help could be found within the confines of Town Hall departments. More needs to be done to highlight the services available and educate town employees and residents about the availability of aid for residents.

Community offerings like annual flu clinics and blood pressure and wellness checks were given high points by community members. Not having to travel back and forth to a medical facility for a simple blood pressure reading or speak in-person with a nurse is appreciated by residents taking advantage of the Health Department and Council on Aging health programs.

We learned that our efforts in working together as one, with other Town departments works to create a sense of community among residents. People are appreciative of information presented by other departments whether it be DPW explaining new water rates, Police on safety issues or the Health Department conducting wellness clinics.



Recommendation: Improve communication of community supports

Action: 2021 - 2023

- Develop a plan to better promote the community/health service programs available.
- Organize outreach events to promote local services.
- Look into expanding health / wellness programming at the senior center and other public buildings. Reach out to local medical centers for additional services.
- Educate people to take charge of their health by engaging in healthy activities, including eating better, staying active etc.
- Continue Community Outreach programs with local hospitals and health centers.

Prospective Partners

Wakefield Health Department - Melrose / Wakefield Health Care – Lahey Health – AARP
– Local home Health Care agencies - Local Pharmacies

Respect & Social Inclusion

Often the needs of older residents and those with disabilities are overlooked and ignored. It is important that communities provide a variety of opportunities to include everyone. We need to look closer and expand what we offer, work on involving more of the community in existing programs and integrate our aging residents into those activities in a positive way.



Vision: We envision that Wakefield be a welcoming community where everyone is treated with respect no matter age or ability. We want to connect those individuals to the community and engage them in ways that use their knowledge, experience, and talents.



What we learned: Through our assessment surveys we found most Wakefield residents felt included. Some felt educational and faith programs meet their needs and others felt more fun and social events met what they were looking for. People feel they are treated respectfully but they felt their opinion can sometimes be disregarded because of age. Ageism is encountered daily and exists everywhere and in all age groups. Older adults are often overlooked and isolation can be devastating. Negative perceptions of aging continue to perpetuate the stereotype that they are frail and needy. “Elderly”, “senior citizen” are descriptions that bring negative visions to many. Most people 60 and over don’t see themselves in such a light. We need to work on putting a positive face to those words and change the perception.

Recommendation: Value the knowledge and experience of age and work on including both older and younger members of the community to participate.

Action: 2021-2022

- Develop a directory of age-friendly activities and programs in the area. A local where-to for art or exercise classes, or volunteer activities where one can contribute to the community.
- Become a partner to and work with the Wakefield Human Rights Commission on diversity and inclusion to help change the perception and remove barriers of age.
- Work with the Wakefield Disability Commission
- Continue to work with the students in the community through volunteering.
- Value the knowledge, ideas and experiences of all members of the community.

Prospective Partners

Everyone



Moving Forward

Upon completion of this plan and acceptance into the Age-Friendly Community network, the Wakefield Council on Aging is the department to spearhead the initiative. They will be responsible for its implementation and an ongoing cycle of checks, balance and improvement goals. The team will be led by the Council Director and members of the Council on Aging Board.

- Meetings will be held regularly to monitor progress
- The group will arrange meetings with all the potential partners listed herein to identify the degree of partnership and collaboration with the Age Friendly effort.
- A monthly Age Friendly review/update will be presented at each Council on Aging Board meeting by the director.
- Continue to meet with groups of residents to get feedback, recommendations and address issues that arise.
- Begin work on the Age Friendly Wakefield website.
- Report regularly to municipal leaders with progress.
- Take advantage of any grant opportunities through the AARP network as well as other local and state financial prospects available to fund projects.

In launching Age-Friendly Wakefield, we want to achieve an increase in social participation and increase awareness of the challenges of an aging population. To do this, both physical and social improvements are needed. We believe we have laid the groundwork with our plan to guide our actions going forward and ensure that Wakefield is a community for all.