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PROMISING **LITTLE** THINGS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTIONS



CENTER FOR SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON AGING



PROMISING **LITTLE** THINGS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Caitlin Coyle, PhD & Setarreh Massihzadegan, MS

Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to the several community organizations and resident advocates of Massachusetts that gave of their time and energy to share the stories of their communities upon which the contents of this report are based. We would like to acknowledge AARP MA for their support and participation in the efforts that made this report possible. Rebecca Mailman and Rose Coveney of the University of Massachusetts Boston were influential in the development of this document, and we thank them for their time and effort. Without question, we must thank each of the members of the **Massachusetts Task Force to End Loneliness & Build Community** for their generosity, passion, and creativity. The mission of this Task Force is to ensure that every older adult in Massachusetts feels connected to the community and enjoys strong social well-being. This report is one of several initiatives prompted by the Task Force to help end loneliness and build community connections for older residents of the Commonwealth



Recommended citation:

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INTRODUCTION

At the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Massachusetts Task Force to End Loneliness & Build Community engaged communities statewide to identify innovative and creative ways to connect older residents with social connections. To bridge the divide between the dire need for interventions that promote connection and the few such evidence-based examples, we sought the input of community stakeholders to identify practices and programs that are rooted in the cities and towns of Massachusetts. The results of that work are detailed in the [It's the Little Things: A community resource for strengthening social connections](#). The purpose of that effort was to get ideas—big and small—into the hands of community leaders and resident advocates to jumpstart their efforts in addressing the public health problems of isolation among older people.

In the year that followed, it became clear that a closer look at evidence of community impact and likelihood of replicability needed to be taken. Community resources are stretched and availability of evidence about effectiveness of common programs is not readily available. Thus, the Task Force wanted to develop another iteration of the prior year's report with an eye towards promise of being effective at ending loneliness and building social connections.

Aging service providers statewide have responded quickly and creatively to the evolving needs of their communities. The following program list is not exhaustive of all promising practices, but we hope this document can inspire program replication, new ideas, and connections between program leaders in Massachusetts and beyond.

Unlike “best practices”, promising practices only require the successful implementation of a program or activity and some level of information that suggests a positive outcome for participants. One key advantage of using promising practices is that they can be adapted and there is flexibility in implementation styles and environments. As well, starting with a promising practice can help solve community problems, and save the trouble of reinventing the wheel. If someone has already found an effective way to resolve an issue or advance the cause, it makes sense to use it. The intention of this document is to alert those working in the field of aging services or social services in Massachusetts of strategies and practices that demonstrate positive impact on the residents involved.

With guidance from the academic partners at the [Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging](#) at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB) [Gerontology Institute](#), members of the 30-person task force worked together to develop a definition

of “promising practices” as they related to the mission of the group. Subsequently, communities that participated in the 2020 Summit to Spark Action, the network of Councils on Aging (COAs), and members of the Task Force were consulted with to identify possible promising practices. An initial review identified approximately 43 programs and activities. Members of the UMB research team further investigated and interviewed administrators of these initiatives to

gather and document additional details and make the determination of whether the practice was truly promising.

The final set of 12 programs are detailed in this report to outline for other cities and towns how they might replicate promising ideas in their own communities and proliferate the mission of the Task Force to End Loneliness & Build Community for older residents of the Commonwealth.

Selection Criteria:

- I. Is this activity relevant to the goals of the Taskforce (ending loneliness or building social connections)?
- II. Definition of “building social connections” --- must include elements of reciprocity/exchange.
- III. Is it currently under-way in Massachusetts?
- IV. Can it be adapted to meet public health recommendations regarding the Covid-19 pandemic?

If Yes To All 4, Then Does It Have The Following Characteristics:¹

- Activity was well-executed and met its goals
- Reached the appropriate target audience and/or was accessible to include older adults
- Reached a good quantity of the desired target audience, as appropriate for the activity
- Activity has the potential to be implemented and sustained over time and the ability to be adapted for both in-person and remote participation
- Activity has the potential to be replicable/generalizable to other places
- Had evaluation data, in the form of formative or outcome data

1. Adapted from: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). [Promising Practices for “Learn the Signs. Act Early.”](https://blogs.cdc.gov/actearlypromisingpractices/what-are-promising-practices/) Criteria. <https://blogs.cdc.gov/actearlypromisingpractices/what-are-promising-practices/>



When a Wellfleet resident is transported to the hospital and released, the Wellfleet Council on Aging (COA) supplies a voucher for a taxi from the hospital to the resident's home.

INSPIRATION The COA realized that many older residents were refusing to be transported to the hospital to be checked out, especially after a fall, because they had no way to get home from the hospital after they were discharged. They may not have family nearby to provide transportation and they hesitate to ask a friend or neighbor. The Friends of the Truro COA had just started paying for taxi rides home for their residents and Wellfleet's COA decided that they could use that as a template.

Format:

In-person

Location:

Wellfleet, MA





Tips: It has been well received by the rescue personnel. The medics know that a reluctant patient may not have the best outcomes and the safest thing is to be checked out at the hospital and know they can get home without personal expense or bothering a friend. A close relationship with rescue personnel at the Wellfleet Fire Department is essential; They not only carry the cards, but also make the value judgment of who should be getting one. Finding a taxi company that is willing to enter into an agreement to honor the vouchers is key.

Funding:

- The program is funded by an annual donation from a local church

“It has been very successful in getting elders to agree to go to the hospital...Our hospital is 45 minutes away, which makes transportation cumbersome for some, especially at night.”

*-Assistant Director,
Wellfleet COA*

Success Metrics:

- Over the past two years, Wellfleet’s COA has distributed about \$3,000 worth of rides at \$110 per ride.

Program Contact:

Sally Largey, Wellfleet COA
508.349.2800



Twice per month program to teach resilience and mindfulness skills, led by licensed psychologist and professor of Clinical Psychology at UMass Amherst and her graduate students. The program grew out of a one-day, well-being workshop and evolved into an ongoing group that is both educational and an intergenerational exchange between the students and older adults. The program curriculum is rooted in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy practices.

INSPIRATION The program grew from successful MCOA grant-funded workshop as an opportunity to unpack the myths around mental health and build resilience.

Format:

Remote
In-Person

Location:

Amherst, MA

“Folks who participate found it extremely useful. There's a lot to take away; there's the content— it's really focused on skills building around resilience and mindfulness— and the intergenerational aspect... There's kinship there. It's not always grad students leading; it's a bilateral exchange [the older adults] also feel like they are giving back.”

-Mary Beth Ogulewicz



Tip: With a gifted therapist could be replicated even without university partnership and students. Technology has been a barrier for many in the transition to virtual, but others have found it easier to participate in this medium. The initial in-person workshop made it possible to recruit a larger group of people through other wellness programming.

Budget and Funding: A contract with UMASS psychology services was paid for out of the COA friends account following a first-year grant from MCOA.

Success Metrics:

- Typically up to 9 participants and 1-3 graduate students via Zoom and up to 30 participants and 4-5 graduate students in person.
- Feedback from evaluations showed the value participants derived from the student involvement as well as the instructional material.

Program Contact:

Bruna Martins

bmartins@umass.edu

Helen MacMellon, Temporary Director

macmellonh@amherstma.gov

413.259.3060



Senior-2-Senior Day

Intergenerational

Senior-2-Senior Day is an intergenerational event bringing together high school seniors and older adults for an annual field day. Held for two consecutive years before Covid-19, the day featured a series of events including chair volleyball, pickleball, board games, drum circle, arts & crafts, a barbeque, and discussion groups. At the event's conclusion, people of all ages reflected on the day and the meaning they derived from it. A spinoff program, an annual intergenerational book discussion, has continued and another Senior-2-Senior Day was scheduled for this September.

Format:

In-person
and virtual

Location:

Norwell, MA

Time in Practice:

1.5 years

INSPIRATION The idea grew out of a longstanding relationship between the COA and the local school system. Having succeeded in prior intergenerational programming, Norwell's COA saw an opportunity to meld the high school's annual field day for incoming freshmen and Norwell Cares Day, a day of service for the other classes, into an opportunity to connect older adults with high school seniors.





Tip: Cultivating relationships with the school system was key. The only cost was the BBQ, all other costs and materials were supported through the high school boosters, the Friends of the Norwell Council on Aging (NCOA), business donations, and the high school facilities. The COA promoted the event in its newsletter, on Facebook and cable TV, and made personal calls to people who they thought would benefit from attending

Budget and Funding: BBQ cost (\$1,800) covered by donations from Norwell Boosters and Friends of NCOA; partnership with school system to share materials and staffing

"You are our future and from what I've see here today, we are in good hands!"

- Senior-2-Senior Participant

Success Metrics:

- ~ 135 students, 20 school and COA staff, and 80 older adults in year one.
- Many adults who attended the first year came back the second year, for a total of 185 students, 20 school and COA staff, and 90 older adults.

Program Contact:

Susan Curtain, Director

scurtain@townofnorwell.net



Started as a local program, this is now replicated nationally. Sages & Seekers strives to combat social isolation and dissolve age-related segregation within communities while meeting the universal and compelling need of both young adults and elders to make sense of their lives. This is achieved by the simple art of conversation. The program pairs up high school student “seekers” with older adults “sages” in a ‘speed dating’ style of an initial discussion, after which the facilitator matches one student with one older adult who over an 8-week session talk and get to better understand one another.

INSPIRATION A local resident brought the idea to the Natick Council on Aging (COA) looking for help with piloting the program—including the recruitment of local older adults and overall program promotion.

Format:

In-person

Time in action

12 years in Mass

3 years at Natick

Location:

Natick, MA





Tips: Partnering up with a school system that is flexible and thinks “outside of the box” is very helpful. Some schools the COA has worked with have run the program as a classroom activity; others have run it as an after-school activity. If students will be in leadership roles to run the program, it is vital for the school to have a commitment from students in the spring for the fall school year so that there is enough time for recruitment. Having enough time is the most difficult concept to get across, yet it is the most important factor to be successful.

Budget:

- The only cost is for one rose per sage, presented by their seeker.

“Each week builds on the week before, engaging both generations in dialogue that leads to authentic conversation. This opportunity to communicate one-to-one with an interested partner begins to break down stereotypes and judgements, leading to the development of much needed social-emotional skills.”

Success Metrics:

- 13-15 pairings established each year.

Program Contacts:

Council on Aging:

Karen Edwards,
kedwards@natickma.org
Lorraine McNally,
lmcnally@natickma.org

Natick High School:

Rob Guastella,
rguastella@natickps.org



The result of a partnership between the Council on Aging (COA) and the elementary school, every other month elementary school teachers pick out books and assign older adults to different rooms where they read to the students. The children and seniors eat breakfast prior to reading.

INSPIRATION This program was inspired by the success of connecting the older adults and children for a prior pen pal program. The seniors and students loved working together and the COA needed to think of another intergenerational project that would be fun. Several of the seniors were retired teachers or teacher aids and missed teaching. This program filled a void for many.

Format:
In-Person

Locations:
Pepperell, MA





Tip: Virtual format did not work when attempted to shift during Covid-19.

Budget: Partnership with elementary school. Costs for breakfast were absorbed by the students' parents.

Success Metrics:

- About 20 participants

Program Contact:

Susan McCarthy,

coa@town.pepperell.ma.us

978.433.0326



Neighbor Brigade is a “neighbors helping neighbors” model mobilizing residents to provide free, temporary, non-medical support to those who are experiencing an unexpected acute crisis while strengthening the fabric of a community. Neighbor Brigade services are immediate, free, and available to all through a volunteer management software managed by Better Impact. Recipients submit requests online or by telephone. Volunteers offer home-baked meals, rides to medical appointments, dog walking, delivery of groceries or food pantry supplies, pharmacy pick-ups, and occasional transportation for children to activities. During Covid-19 focus was on partnering with any local food distributors such as school districts and food pantries continued with pharmacy pick-ups and grocery and essential supply shopping, and some chapters did phone check-ins with older residents. When vaccines were made available, the Brigade assisted in appointment registration and rides.

Format:

Hybrid

Time in practice:

11 years

Location:

30 Communities in
Massachusetts





Tips: Brigade chapters can open in any new community that has 1-2 volunteer chapter leaders. Anyone interested can refer to the volunteer handbook to learn more: https://neighborbrigade.org/Neighbor_Brigade_Volunteer_Handbook.pdf

Success Metrics 2020:

- 676 residents served
- 599 new volunteers
- > 22,000 volunteer hours
- 1,281 food pantry deliveries
- 100 pharmacy and grocery deliveries.
- Volunteers provided rides, delivered clothing and gift cards, and walked dogs.

Program Contact:
Program Director Rose Cornet
rose@neighborbrigade.org

“My family and I are forever grateful to the volunteers for offering me rides daily and supporting and encouraging me to look forward for a beautiful future.”
- Client

INSPIRATION After suffering her first bout with cancer in 2002, founder Pam Manikas Washek decided to turn her pain into purpose by helping others experiencing similar crises. She and fellow cancer survivor Jean Seiden, first established the Wayland Angels to "pay forward" the acts of kindness they received from their own neighbors during their cancer treatments. In 2010, Pam transitioned Wayland Angels into the formally incorporated nonprofit Neighbor Brigade. Pam lost her battle with cancer in 2012, but her legacy lives on in Neighbor Brigade.



The three town Public, Educational, Government (PEG) Access Centers collaborated with one another and their Councils on Aging (COAs) through Covid-19 to offer expanded cable programming to the older adults in their communities and create a sense of cohesion among the towns. Programming included fitness and cooking shows, informational and current events, and other government educational segments.

“Seniors are strong and resilient. By collaborating with tri-town PEG, COAs were able to continue making community connections and keeping the seniors (and so many others) mentally and physically engaged. We look forward to a new round of filming with the seniors for a Tri-Town Cable Access 2.0

- Emily Williams, Director, Bridgewater COA

Format:

Remote

Locations:

Bridgewater,
East Bridgewater, and
West Bridgewater, MA

INSPIRATION The program came from a desire to connect with the older adult community during the global pandemic, as they were isolated and unable to attend events in person.



Tip: Communities should stay active with their PEG Access Centers and seek other helpful partnerships with local non-profit organizations, educational facilities, and local businesses. All three Bridgewater towns partnered with their senior centers, school districts, municipalities, and university. Additionally, for the PEG TV Centers, investing in remote technology prior to Covid-19 was helpful, as was integrating new technology, such as Zoom and GoToMeeting teleconferencing with various Media Exchange systems for various video file formats.

Success Metrics:

- Approximately 24 hours of weekly television programming.
- Consistently positive Anecdotal feedback from members of all three communities.

Budget: The PEG Centers received no funding, but the COAs pulled together sources including CARES Act funding (from the local Aging Service Access Point) for instructors who were filmed for programming, a local private grant to pay for a cooking show chef (provided to Bridgewater), and in-kind donations from senior fitness instructors for exercise programming.

Program Contacts:

Jeff Fowler jlfw@aol.com

Nancy Hill nhill@eastbridgewaterma.gov

Russ Hannagan russ@eb-cam.org

Emily Williams

ewilliams@bridgewaterma.org



With the help of simple signage, an existing bench is transformed into a low-cost “chat bench” and a community can publicly demonstrate its dedication to ending loneliness by designating public spaces as a place to converse.

INSPIRATION Bridgewater is a college town with a lot of pedestrian traffic. The Council on Aging (COA) director was motivated to consider ways of building connections between older residents of the community and younger students. In addition to programming provided through the COA, this bench provides a public reminder that social connection can be fleeting and still meaningful.

Format:
In-person

Location:
Bridgewater, MA





Tip: Engage residents in the dedication process through plantings, painting, and event planning. Be sure to aim for maximum publicity to get the word out to the community about this concept.

“The chat bench removes that invisible social barrier that prevents people from saying ‘hello.’”
- Founder of the Chat Bench program in London

Program Contact:

Bridgewater Council on Aging
508.894.1262



Front Steps Program

Community Cohesion

A Needham, MA photographer captured images of families during Covid-19 on their front steps with the families in turn making a monetary donation to their local community council. The program went viral and resulted in photographers worldwide taking on similar projects in their communities.

INSPIRATION Front Steps Project began as an idea between two friends, one a local photographer and the other a marketing and public relations specialist. They wanted to document the historical moment and provide an opportunity for community members to give back as the pandemic abruptly confined them to their homes.

Format:

In-person

Location:

Needham, MA



Adina Lerner Photography

<https://www.adinalernerphotography.com/>



Front Steps Program

Community Cohesion

Tip: Stay organized and begin keeping track of data early. Be brave and think outside the box. Involve the younger generation. The organizers built a playbook to share with photographers worldwide, enabling the concept to expand quickly. The concept of providing a photo for a donation is repeatable.

Success Metrics:

- In Needham, photographers captured more than 800 families, and raised \$45K.
- Worldwide, more than 500 photographers participated, raising more than \$4 million.

Program Contact:

<https://www.thefrontstepsproject.com/>

“It became this cool thing to do in town and it really made people feel like they were helping”

*-Cara Soulia,
Photographer and Co-Founder
Front Steps Project*

Budget: Several thousand dollars were spent to hire a trademark lawyer and other professionals to incorporate their idea. All proceeds went to charity.



Kelly O'Hara Photography <https://kellyohara.nz/>



Arlington and Beyond: LGBTQ+ Seniors & Friends

*Reaching the
Hard(er) to Reach*

Monthly in-person meetings and weekly virtual meetings three times per month connect LGBTQ+ older adults and allies. They share news and thoughts, and discuss topics chosen the previous week. The group came together during Covid-19 and has not missed a week since March 2020. Meetings have expanded to welcome members from nearby towns, and activities have included poetry sharing, virtual museum and national park tours, and a Pride party. This fall begins a partnership with Lexington Pride.

INSPIRATION The group's organizer attended an LGBT aging conference 10 years ago and was inspired to create her own programming as an opportunity to keep people connected and care for as many as possible, particularly during Covid-19.

Format:

In-person
and Hybrid

Location:

Arlington, MA

Time in Practice:

5 years





Arlington and Beyond: LGBTQ+ Seniors & Friends

*Reaching the
Hard(er) to Reach*

Tip: Keep at it, even if attendance is low in the beginning.

Budget and Funding: No cost until sponsored partnership with Lexington, which will include an art component and is grant-funded. Partnerships include local LGBTQ+ organizations in Belmont, Lexington, and Rally!, a local 55+ LBT women's group. Time from a COA social worker's schedule and a Zoom subscription.

Success Metrics:

- Up to 20 participants per meeting, consecutive meetings weekly for 1.5 years

"I got a lot of feedback [from participants] that this was the most important group during the week"

-Marci Shapiro-Ide

Program Contact:
Marci Shapiro-Ide
Mshapiro-ide@town.Arlington.ma.us
[617.682.0985](tel:617.682.0985)



Fresh muffins available Monday mornings, attracting a large group of mostly men to gather weekly. During Covid-19, the Council on Aging (COA) shifted Muffin Mondays to delivery-based, in which staff and peers nominated people to get “muffined” each week. Volunteers and staff would deliver the muffins to nominees, providing a reason to knock on the door and have a porch chat. Post-Covid-19, they have returned to in-person Muffin Mondays but also occasionally “muffin” those who are homebound.

Format:
In-person

Location:
Sterling, MA

Time in practice:
5 years

INSPIRATION The pre-bake muffins were particularly popular and created a reason to gather. During Covid-19, the COA sought opportunities to reach out to those who were homebound.



Muffin Mondays

Reaching the Hard(er) to Reach

Tip: The socialization created through the program also benefited volunteers, some of whom were also “muffined”.

Success Metrics:

- On average 10-15 participants gather each week in person, with a handful of peer volunteers, providing an important activity for participants and volunteers alike. More than 105 people were “muffined” at home.

Budget and Funding: Funded through operating budget. Muffin costs, otherwise, mostly staff- and volunteer-driven

“I think that one of the best parts of this program during the height of the pandemic was its ability to provide socialization for both the giver/volunteer and the recipient.”

*- Veronica Buckley, Director,
Sterling Senior Center*

Program Contact:
Veronica Buckley,
vbuckley@sterling-ma.gov



Led by the Chelsea Police Department, the Hub includes 20 organizations that meet weekly to address high-risk clients' problems, develop coordinated responses, and connect people to services. With the goal of preventing rather than responding to emergencies, the team identifies high probability cases with strong intensity of harm, spending approximately four minutes on each case and reducing the burden on the criminal justice system, the health system, and families within the city.

Format:

Monthly round table meetings, in-person and virtual

Time in Practice:

1.5 years

INSPIRATION Siloed responses to problems are often inadequate to address the interwoven issues associated with crime, poverty, and poor housing conditions. Many individuals require the services of more than one agency. The Hub program addresses crime through a multiagency approach, engaging a variety of government and community workers to provide assistance to high-risk individuals and families.



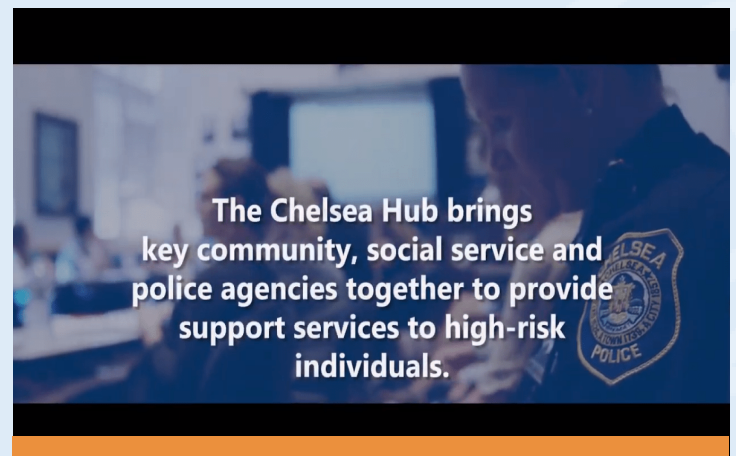
Tip: Shared commitment from human service and public safety organizations to prevent, or stop, crisis situations affecting individuals and families—a motivation for working together is really the key ingredient. Resources allocated for the coordination of this group are the primary costs of the program.

Success Metrics:

- 13% of cases processed through the Hub included a primary person experiencing risk was age 60+.
- Over the past 15 months, 65% of cases processed through the Hub ended in connecting the residents with services and overall lowering risk of a crisis.

“Police officers in the community encounter high-risk situations constantly. If we know something bad is going to happen to that person or that family...why wait for a 911 call?”

Program Contact:
Dan Cortez, Community
Engagement Specialist
dcortez@chelseama.gov





A Sandwich Public Librarian chooses the books for each homebound senior after discussing their reading preferences with them by phone. Prior to the pandemic, two Council on Aging (COA) volunteers worked together delivering books once a month to homebound seniors who requested books. While delivering new selections, these volunteers pick up books from the last delivery and return them to the library.

INSPIRATION The Sandwich Public Library and the Sandwich Council on Aging partnered together on this program when the library called seeking volunteers to assist in their home delivery program.

Format:
Hybrid

Location:
Sandwich, MA





Tips: This collaboration between the library and COA engaged volunteers in rewarding work.

Success Metrics:

- 16 hours a month of meaningful volunteer work.
- 12 deliveries each month.

“It brought the feeling of community to homebound seniors as well as socialization.”

Budget:

- No associated costs

Program Contact:
Sandwich COA
508.888.4737

To learn more contact:

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