Age Friendly South Portland Annual Report (2020)

As we end an eventful 2020, the year 2021 marks the second anniversary of the Ad Hoc Senior Implementation Steering Committee, now known as Age Friendly South Portland (AFSP), which was originally formed by an order of the South Portland City Council on January 22, 2019. Our committee, an AARP-designated age-friendly community since October 2019, consists of four functioning subcommittees designed to tackle and achieve objectives aligning with the eight domains of livability and as set forth in our initial Report of Findings and Recommendations (December 2018). Those subcommittees include: (1) Communications, (2) Housing, (3) Transportation, and (4) Health & Community.

Over the course of the past year, our committee met on a monthly basis via in-person (pre-pandemic) and Zoom (post-pandemic), and our subcommittees met on an ad hoc basis as needed. Agenda and minutes for our meetings can be found online on our City webpage.

The following sections of this report summarize the key activities taken by our committee, by subcommittee focus areas.

Communications

With the pandemic leaving many residents stuck indoors and isolated from friends and family, one of our first objectives was to identify solutions for getting our and others’ (e.g., the Southern Maine Agency on Aging, the South Portland Community Center, etc.) messages to our residents in ways that they could easily consume and in a timely manner. In addition to our standing column in the Sentry newspaper and routine posts to our Facebook page, we also partnered closely with the South Portland Community Television (SPC-TV) team of Maurice Amaral and Cynthia Czubryt to share key updates.

For example, after the City published its COVID-19 resource webpage, our committee developed a PowerPoint slide deck that summarized and narrated the information, with permission and authorization from the City. This presentation aired regularly on SPC-TV through the early months of the pandemic and was well received by our residents. This initial partnership set us up for success as our Health and Community subcommittee continued to work with SPC-TV to air additional programs that we developed over the year.

In its entirety, our communication strategy seeks to get our materials into the hands of individuals who have access to varying mediums of information – print, television, and online. For age-friendly communities, this is one of the greatest challenges to overcome; though, we look forward to continuing to make critical partnerships to enable greater access in the upcoming year.

Housing

At the start of 2020, our Sand Buckets for Seniors Program, designed to provide individual residences with personal 5-gallon buckets filled with sand to use on slippery walkways around their homes, was becoming a big success. When the program phased out in early March as the winter season ended, our committee knew that it wanted to build on those snow removal efforts with additional programs to support residents in need. The Housing subcommittee, led by Committee Co-Chair, Chad MacLeod, began work in the early summer months to begin planning the following initiatives that are all now operational:
• **Sand Buckets for Seniors:** In collaboration with the Public Works Department, this program launched its second season after more than 250 sand buckets were delivered to residents last season. Denise Michaud from the Public Works Department receives incoming requests and coordinates the buckets’ delivery via a bench of volunteers consisting of local community members, including Richard Matthews, Co-Chair of the Board of Education, coaches and players from the South Portland Football Program, and individuals from Bath Savings Bank. Already, with only a few storms experienced this season, the program has delivered more than 100 buckets. Ongoing sustainability of the program has been made possible from support by the Home Depot Foundation, which provided our committee with $3,000 worth of buckets and related accessories earlier in the year.

• **Community Sand Barrels:** Over the course of the last winter season, a common theme heard from residents via Facebook and email was that walking throughout the City was difficult due to slippery sidewalks along high-traffic routes. So our committee again collaborated with the Public Works Department, working directly with Doug Howard, to procure 10 recycling bins that could be used as community sand barrels. In partnership with the Boy Scouts Troop 23 and Cub Scouts Pack 22, our committee and the scouts hand-crafted 10 wooden supports that could prop the sand barrels at an angle that enable easy access to the sand. The Public Works Department then helped in strategically placing the sand barrels throughout the Knightville and Thornton Heights neighborhoods in areas where residents had previously expressed an interest in having access to sand to carry with them en route. If successful, we will plan to expand the program into additional neighborhoods next season.

• **Golden Shovel Program:** The purpose of this program is to incite lively competition among businesses routinely patronized to ensure that snowy and slippery storefront sidewalks are safe and secure as residents run their errands. For the program’s pilot season, businesses that reside on Ocean Street between the rotary and the Thomas Knight Park are encouraged to clear, sand, and ensure safe access to the walkways and pathways along their storefronts during winter weather for individuals of all ages and/or with mobility issues. As residents visit these businesses over the course of the winter, our committee seeks to collect their feedback on these storefronts’ walkability and accessibility – which businesses’ sidewalks are clear and easy to navigate, handicap accessible, and conscientious of shoveling/sanding through the day. At the end of the winter season, we will compile all received feedback, share comments with participating businesses for improvement during the next winter season, and award the most-praised business with a golden (painted) shovel!

• **Snow Shoveling for Eligible Seniors:** Our committee partnered with the Social Services Department to advertise to and receive information on residents who are in need of snow-shoveling services on their private properties this winter season. At the same time, we developed a volunteer repository consisting of individuals willing to provide snow-shoveling services to those residents. Privacy and confidentiality consent is received by the Social Services Department, led by Kathleen Babeu and Laura Siciliano, for recipients and basic background checks are processed and validated by the City’s Human Resources Department, led by Stephanie Weaver and Karla Giglio, for volunteers before any recipient and volunteer are paired. Carol Ann Kilroy, AFSP committee member and retired 211 Maine Call Specialist, serves as the
program’s volunteer coordinator, pairing recipients and volunteers and acting as the primary point of contact for mobilizing volunteers when storms arrive and answering miscellaneous questions about the program. At this time, the program has volunteer capacity to serve nearly 30 recipients this winter.

**Transportation**

Early into the pandemic, our committee became aware of residents experiencing difficulty in achieving transportation to critical meetings, appointments, and errands. At that same time, we received a $500 donation from an anonymous source, which we in turn gifted to the Social Services Department to fund needed rides as necessary.

In general, our subcommittee worked in a role of advocacy over the past year in regard to transportation activities. Two subcommittee members serve on the City’s Bike-Pedestrian Committee. When the committee’s Chair, Rosemarie DeAngelis, raised the issue of the City’s busses being unable to access the South Portland Food Cupboard, Councilor Sue Henderson, our committee’s Secretary, initiated a Council Workshop to spearhead the topic.

Our committee had experience working with the Greater Portland Council on Governments (GPCOG) in a prior pilot grant, Shoppers Link, which actually involved providing greater transportation to the Food Cupboard. Based on this history, South Portland Director of Transportation, Donna Tippett, was able to collaborate with the GPCOG Grant Director to develop a program to again engender greater access to the critical resource.

Additionally, Tony Grande, committee member and Transportation Subcommittee Chair, is working with the State’s Department of Transportation on a program designed to increase awareness and safety for vulnerable pedestrians, including older adults. These statewide efforts will be translated specifically to target South Portland residents, with imagery and information pertaining to our city. As Subcommittee Chair and member of the Bike-Pedestrian Committee, Tony Grande, continues to be a strong advocate for our committee in transportation policy and programming, including networking with the Public Works Department, Police Department, Maine Bicycle Coalition, and AARP among others to inform our decision-making and efforts to improve transportation options and safety for our community.

**Health & Community**

The important work of our Health & Community Subcommittee can be grouped into two primary categories: (1) falls prevention and community support and (2) social isolation and engagement.

We started the year excited about the possibilities offered through our partnership with the Southern Maine Agency on Aging (SMAA) to expand our fall prevention courses, Tai Chi and A Matter of Balance, at the South Portland Public Library. Toward the end of 2019 and early into 2020, we saw great attendance of both courses. At the same time, building on the success of our SMAA partnership, we began offering regularly occurring, walk-in and appointment-only sessions with Community Resource Specialists who were available to help residents answer a myriad of questions related to finance, health care, transportation needs, food insecurity, and more. Lisa Joyce, Outreach Librarian and AFSP committee member, led these efforts, helping to organize and identify the necessary funds to support them. When the pandemic arrived, both programs were unfortunately paused indefinitely.
After regrouping to assess our priorities, our subcommittee began meeting virtually and reprioritized its efforts to target social isolation and engagement issues. An idea of Chair Maxine Beecher, we quickly organized “Did You Know? Age-Friendly Chats,” 20-30 minute recorded conversations between Councilor Sue Henderson and a member of the community offering a program or expertise in an area that would likely be of interest to our residents. To date, we have published programs with 211-Maine, the City’s COVID Response Team, and SMAA, and have several additional programs in the queue to be developed. In fact, one program near completion will virtualize a Tai Chi course and have an interview with a certified facilitator in an effort to continue our falls prevention efforts and advocacy. The program has become a wonderful way for our committee to connect with various niches of the community – and to then share that information with our residents. The videos are not only published on our YouTube channel and Facebook page, but are also regularly aired on SPC-TV.

Additionally, members of our subcommittee have strong ties with the Maine Council on Aging, AARP Maine, the Tri-State Learning Collaborative, SMAA, South Portland Community Center, and the South Portland School Department, which has offered us with access to many online informational and educational programs as well as increased knowledge of issues to inform our ongoing work.

Closing Remarks

Our committee is a small but resourceful and energetic group sincerely interested in making improvements in the lives of our residents of all ages. In addition to the operational work performed by our subcommittees, members of our core committee, including Chair Maxine Beecher, Co-Chair Chad MacLeod, and Secretary Sue Henderson, also serve on a broader initiative led by the Maine Council on Aging designed to help municipalities address the needs of older adults with various data sets.

The idea is simple: When the needs of residents are not adequately met, often the burden falls on the municipality to provide social services and emergency services to compensate. And the full cost-effectiveness of appropriate, proactive City action is not likely to be fully shown in a budget document.

Over the course of a year-long planning project, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Maine Council on Aging helped our committee, with the City Manager and in collaboration with several stakeholders serving in our community – from healthcare providers and health insurance agencies, to food resources and transportation services – to build a “data dashboard” to assess how South Portland compares to city/town peers and county and state benchmarks on areas concerning housing needs, food insecurity, falls prevention, etc. At the end of the project, the taskforce chose one domain, falls prevention, as a focus area to quickly begin devising intervention and prevention programs that the City could support in an effort to realize not only impacts to the budget but measure impacts to the satisfaction and health of its residents. Issues to be considered include identifying factors related to falls, identification of contributing factors such as unmet health needs, including lack of food or medication reactions, and issues in the environment that need remediation.

Additionally, our committee continues to identify funding opportunities to help advance our many programs and activities. Of note is the effort of Councilor April Caricchio, who helped our committee receive a $15,000 grant from the Jonah and Elizabeth Dyer Charitable Corporation to advance our mission of building a city in which all ages can thrive. This funding will be put to good use as we address challenges for some of our older residents in the coming months.
One of the most subtle, perhaps directly unmeasurable, though most valuable aspects of our work may be the formation of human and information networks that can allow collaborative problem-solving across departments, agencies, and borders. We have talented, skillful, dedicated, and compassionate committee members and volunteers working together to help our older adults age safely in place – even during a pandemic. We thank the City Council for providing us with the opportunity to continue our work, and believe our impact continues to grow, evolve, and demonstrate itself as we make these ever-critical partnerships.

Sincerely,

Age Friendly South Portland
(Formerly, the Ad Hoc Senior Implementation Steering Committee)

Maxine Beecher, Chair
Chad MacLeod, Co-Chair; Housing Chair; Health & Community Chair
Sue Henderson, Secretary; City Councilor
Alan Cardinal, Treasurer
Kathleen Babeu, Communications Chair; Social Services Director
Tony Grande, Transportation Chair
April Caricchio, City Councilor
Carol Ann Kilroy
Lisa Joyce
Bernadette Kroon
Jana Grant