

March 28, 2019

### **Senior Centers Keep Older Vermonters Healthy – Let's Find Ways to Support Them**

As National Nutrition Month winds to an end this March, I feel well nourished, having had the privilege of visiting five Vermont communities to sample a taste of Vermont's senior centers. In these five towns – Barton, Bennington, Northfield, White River Junction, and Winooski – as in dozens of towns across Vermont, senior centers are offering older Vermonters nutritious meals and a breadth of opportunities for health, wellness and life-long learning. In addition to trying out some new delicacies (like a salmon quinoa bake and a Nepali chickpea soup), I witnessed the arts in action (singing, poetry writing, knitting and iris paper folding), attempted to follow the graceful movements of a Tai Chi class, tried not to delay a seriously competitive bingo game, and clapped in celebration of a staff member's 30 years of service. There is something for everyone regardless of interest or ability. The best part of my visits were the people who awed me with their dedication and drive. Senior center staff and volunteers are diligently working hard every day to build genuine community and to create gathering places where people from age 50 to 100 feel welcomed and included. I was struck by everyone's humility in their efforts, as if this was no big deal, because this is what Vermonters do to look out for each other.

At the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, our mission is to make Vermont the best place to grow old or live with a disability – with dignity, respect and independence. We are acutely aware of Vermont's changing demographics, growing needs, workforce challenges and funding limitations. We talk about gaps. We discuss policy solutions. We develop plans. We look at the growing body of research, telling us that social isolation is on the rise and has the equivalent health impact of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and we know this is a crisis in the making. The challenges are complex, and as a state we have created a system of services to address them. But as I reflect on my recent visits to Vermont's senior centers, I am struck by the fact that there are also simple but powerful solutions in action right now. Senior centers are on the front lines, combatting social isolation every day, and they are succeeding. These are places where older Vermonters want and choose to go for socializing, eating, learning, volunteering and staying active, where participation is increasing, and where older Vermonters declare that 'the senior center is home.'

How can this be? Across the country and even here in Vermont, the rumor is that no one wants to go to a senior center, and centers are in decline. Most of the senior centers I have visited are quietly proving these rumors false, finding creative ways to strengthen their programs and services. This is no easy task. There is currently no dedicated federal or state funding for senior centers outside of limited meal reimbursements, so most centers have no sustainable funding for operations unless they are built into a municipal structure. Those that are thriving have a few important things in common: high quality staff, active boards and volunteers, good food, diverse activities and community investment. When Vermont towns, businesses and organizations decide that supporting older Vermonters is a priority and provide dedicated funding and infrastructure support to their local senior center, that senior center is much more likely to thrive and attract people of all ages. Without community support like this, centers tend to struggle, and there are some that wonder how they will keep their doors open. Burlington is one community currently exploring these issues. The City Council created a study committee to look at the sustainability of its two senior centers, one an independent non-profit and one run by the city, to consider how to maximize resources in the coming years through city infrastructure. After exploring opportunities for strengthened collaboration and support, the study committee will make

recommendations back to the mayor and council. At DAIL we appreciate this local effort to plan ahead and proactively ensure the vibrancy of senior centers for the future, and we encourage other communities to engage in similar conversations. In just a decade, one in three Vermonters will be age 60 or over, seeking to live long and healthy lives, so now is the time for our towns and our state to support the community efforts that help keep us all active and engaged as we age. The solutions are not elusive. They are right in front of us.

Angela Smith-Dieng  
Director, State Unit on Aging  
Adult Services Division / Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living  
Waterbury, VT  
802-989-0454 (cell)  
[Angela.smith-dieng@vermont.gov](mailto:Angela.smith-dieng@vermont.gov)