

COMMUNITY CONNECTORS

- 2024 / 2025 -

*Impact and Lessons from an Age-Friendly Volunteer Navigator
Project Linking Older Adults to Local and State-Wide Resources*



*A Signature Initiative of the Governor's Cabinet on Aging
in collaboration with project partners*



GOVERNOR'S OFFICE OF
Policy Innovation
and the Future



AARP
Maine

CAPRA
CONSORTIUM FOR AGING POLICY RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS




Aroostook
Agency on Aging

Seniors
Plus


Southern Maine
AGENCY
On AGING
Creating Better Days


EASTERN AREA
AGENCY ON AGING

spectrum
generations

ABOUT THIS REPORT



We all have tools in our toolkit, but none of us have all the tools. (The Community Connector Pilot Project) identifies the tools we each have and equips the Area Agencies on Aging and age-friendly communities to leverage those tools and work for the best outcomes.

*~ Elizabeth Gattine,
Coordinator, Governor's Cabinet on Aging*

This report describes the "Community Connector" pilot project, a Governor's Cabinet on Aging signature initiative designed to increase the capacity of age-friendly communities to connect community members with resources that support healthy, secure, and engaged aging. The pilot project is one segment of the broader Community Connections project.

From September 2024 to August 2025, 12 communities working with 14 Community Connectors piloted the Community Connector project. This report highlights their combined impact and lessons learned.

The Community Connector pilot project partnered with the Consortium for Aging Policy Research and Analysis to explore the effectiveness, impact, and value of the Connector Pilot model. This document describes the findings from that evaluation, which included:

- Qualitative Data - Collected through semi-structured interviews with Connectors (at 3 and 12 months), pilot supervisors (at 3 months), and site check-ins (at 6 and 12 months) after pilot launch.
- Quantitative Data - Taken from monthly reports submitted by the Connectors.

Qualitative and quantitative data is included throughout this document, including direct quotes from Connectors and Site Supervisors.

Authors

- **Patricia Oh**, PhD, Asst. Dir., Community Engaged Research, UMaine Center on Aging, Co-Director, Consortium for Aging Policy Research and Analysis
- **Sarah Currie**, MTS, Policy Analyst, Aging and Disability, Cutler Institute
- **Catherine Taylor**, MPH-candidate, Graduate Assistant, Consortium for Aging Policy Research and Analysis

Research Partner

- **Lisa White**, MSW-cc, Consultant. Lisa conducted semi-structured interviews with the Community Connectors and pilot site supervisors to incorporate their learnings and perspectives into this report.

To learn more about the Community Connectors project, visit us at <https://www.lifelongmaine.org/resources/community-connections>

WITH DEEP GRATITUDE



Community Connections and the Community Connector pilot project brought together three key organizations with a shared mission for older Mainers to live healthy, engaged, and safe lives with access to resources that make the goal a reality. The Governor’s Cabinet on Aging was the lead organization. Maine’s five Area Agencies on Aging tailored outreach plans to raise awareness of their services. The UMaine Center on Aging and Lifelong Maine’s Age-Friendly Communities developed and implemented the 12 pilot sites. The project would not have been successful without this collaboration.

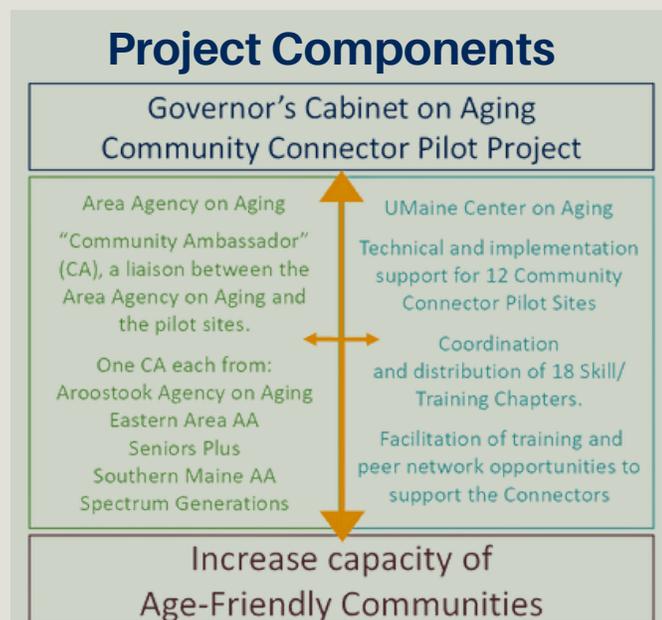
The Community Connections team:

- **Elizabeth Gattine**, Coordinator of the Governor’s Cabinet on Aging, visited age-friendly communities to identify the need and capacity for a local volunteer navigator project. She has been a thought partner and key connector to statewide resources throughout.
- **Anna Guest** supported the Community Connectors to launch their projects, recruit and train volunteers, design materials, and brainstorm solutions. Most importantly, she provided a calm, encouraging presence throughout.
- **Carly Williams** coordinated the Community Ambassadors:
 - Louise McCleery (Spectrum Generations)
 - Ginny Joles (Aroostook Agency on Aging)
 - Larissa Heanssler (Eastern Area Agency on Aging)
 - Debbie Bechard (Seniors Plus)
 - Mary Hadlock (Southern Maine Agency on Aging)

The Ambassadors served as liaisons between Area Agencies on Aging and Age-Friendly Communities. Each AAA developed their own strategy to link to AFCs and support the Connectors in their region. To learn more, [click here](#).

- **Fourteen Community Connectors courageously joined the pilot.** As thought partners throughout, they shaped our understanding of local implementation. Most importantly, they demonstrated the transformative power of neighbors helping neighbors—sharing resources, offering support, and creating meaningful change in their communities.

To learn more about the Community Connectors pilot sites visit us at <https://www.lifelongmaine.org/resources/community-connections>





OUR PROJECT PARTNERS

This project would not have been possible without state-wide collaboration.

Thought Leadership

- Governor's Cabinet on Aging
- Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation, and the Future
- Office of Aging and Disability Services

Liaisons connecting the services of Maine's Five Area Agencies on Aging to local communities

- Aroostook Agency on Aging
- Eastern Area Agency on Aging
- Seniors Plus
- Spectrum Generations
- Southern Maine Agency on Aging

Project Implementation and Technical Assistance

- UMaine Center on Aging
- University of New England/ Maine Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program
- AARP Maine
- Lifelong Maine's Age-Friendly Communities

Resource Partners

- American Red Cross
- Catholic Charities
- Consortium for Aging Policy Research and Analysis
- Consumers for Affordable Healthcare
- Elder Abuse Institute of Maine
- Legal Services for Maine Elders
- Maine CITE
- Maine Community Action Partnership
- Maine Governor's Energy Office
- Maine Housing
- Maine State Fire Marshall's Office
- National Digital Equity Center
- Office of Aging and Disability Services - Long Term Care
- Office Of Aging and Disability Services - Maine Access Navigator Tool
- Senior Community Service Employment Program
- US Department of Veteran's Affairs

Consultants

- Community Strategy Partners
- Mourning Ventures
- Rising Tide Volunteer Solutions
- Social Current
- Tom Meuser, Clinical Geropsychiatrist



TABLE OF CONTENTS



Community Connector Suzie Nutbrown with Healthy Peninsula Simmering Pot volunteers Sharon Swift, Mary, and Ray O'Brien

BACKGROUND	1
TRAINING WITH THE CONNECTORS	2
PILOT LAUNCH	4
FROM PLAN TO ACTION	5
MEET THE CONNECTORS	6
COMMUNITY OUTREACH	8

LOCAL PROJECTS	9
-----------------------	----------

ENGAGING PARTNERS	10
--------------------------	-----------

RESOURCE CONNECTIONS	12
-----------------------------	-----------

KEYS TO SUCCESS	14
------------------------	-----------

CONCLUSION AND CONTACT	16
-------------------------------	-----------

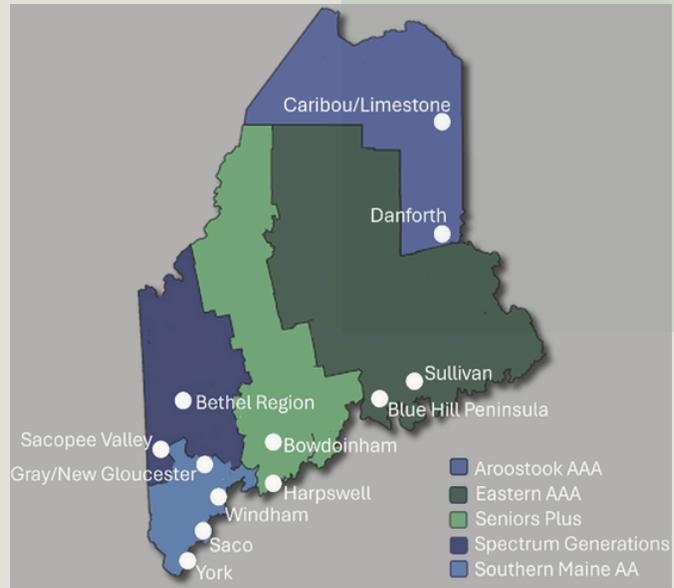


Community Connector Dee Saucier with Ardis Brown, Danforth Town Manager, and Tara Mozdziej and Mary McDonald, key members of the Age-Friendly team

BACKGROUND

Twelve age-friendly communities piloted the Community Connector (CC) project from 9/2024-8/2025.

Collectively, the Connectors linked 847 older community members to services related to food security, housing safety, digital equity, transportation, and social support. Community Connectors mobilized their communities by identifying and engaging over 400 community partners to address gaps in services.



Community Connector Pilots
by AAA Region

Age-Friendly Communities

Age-Friendly Communities (AFCs) are volunteer-led initiatives that work to make Maine's cities and towns age-inclusive. These community-driven groups identify local strengths and needs, then develop tailored projects, activities, and services that benefit residents of all ages. In the process, they develop trusted partnerships with their municipality, community members, and organization.

While older Mainers prefer to turn to local sources of information, and AFCs are trusted providers of local knowledge, the initiatives often lack awareness of regional and state-wide programs and have limited capacity to meet individually with residents seeking resources or social opportunities.

To address the gap, the Governor's Cabinet on Aging developed the Community Connectors project to equip local volunteer resource navigators with the tools to link community members to resources. The project was implemented by the UMaine Center on Aging, with support from Maine's AAAs.

Community Connector Support Structure

The model supports Community Connectors through infrastructure grants that provide essential tools, modest stipends, and a collaborative learning model that strengthens the capacity of connectors through a self-directed skill-building series, bi-weekly peer networking sessions for sharing ideas and problem-solving, and quarterly resource connection calls coordinated by the Governor's Cabinet on Aging to highlight statewide programs.

TRAINING - SKILL-BUILDING SERIES

The University of Maine Center on Aging surveyed Lifelong Maine's Age-Friendly Leaders to identify training needs. Four focus areas emerged: Age-Friendly Community development, capacity building, project implementation, and volunteer management.

Based on these findings, subject-matter experts developed 18 self-paced skill chapters to equip Community Connectors, age-friendly community leaders, and other volunteers with the tools needed to lead age-friendly initiatives, volunteer with age-inclusive organizations, and connect older residents to services that improve well-being and quality of life. The Skill series is free to use, ensuring broad community access.

UMaine Center on Aging made the series freely available to other organizations to use as part of their training. Sixteen volunteer transportation programs, two Area Agencies on Aging, UMaine's Senior Companion Program, the Center for the Advancement of Rural Living, and 12 other volunteer-driven organizations in four states have adopted chapters to use in their training.

Access

The series employs a flexible, self-directed learning approach with the following features:

- Chapters allow flexible engagement from brief sessions to hour-long
- Self-paced chapters with flexible scheduling and no deadlines
- Varied formats support adult learning styles and promote reflection and real-world application.

Recognition

To earn a certificate of Age-Friendly Community Development from the University of Maine, Community Connectors and other participants complete 10 chapters and submit online reflections about what they've learned.

Earning the certificate is optional—participants are welcome to complete as many chapters as they like or simply browse the material, focusing on what is most meaningful to their work.

The Skill Chapters open to us are fantastic! Some of them remind me of things from my prior work, but they push me to reflect (on the issue) from a different perspective.

*~Community Connector,
AF Coastal Communities*

The Skill Series increased my confidence to start a role that was different from my prior work. I turn back to the material when there is a new challenge to tackle--such as supporting someone through grief or working with someone with hoarding disorder.

*~Community Connector,
AF Sullivan*

Skill Topics & Chapters

Age-Friendly Community Development

- Communities without Limits - The Age-Friendly Playbook
- More than Numbers - Data and Stories to Show Impact
- Partnering and Keeping the Energy Flowing
- Resources in Action
- Talk, Listen, Connect - Conversations that Engage and Motivate

Capacity Building

- Advocacy - Proactive Action for Change
- Ageism Uncovered - A Guide to Awareness and Change
- Diversity and Creating a Sense of Belonging - Understanding our Unique Selves and What we Each Bring to the Table of Community
- Grant Writing
- Maine's Area Agencies on Aging

Age-Friendly Communities in Action

- Aging and Mental Health - Honoring Personal Narratives and Needs
- Dementia Inclusive Communities - What it Is, Why it Matters, How to Be It.
- Elder Abuse- Awareness, Response, Action
- Forging Community Support for Grief and Mourning
- Hoarding Disorder for Age-Friendly Communities

Volunteer Management

- Building Community Muscle - Engaging Volunteers
- Boundaries - Honoring Autonomy Between People
- Confidentiality - Respecting our Neighbors

Comments from Skill Chapter Participants

It was an easy overall learning experience. Good mix of presentation - reflection - concrete conceptualizing/"answer this" exercises.

The material was new to me. I liked the way it was broken up so that one section added to what was learned in the last, and provided clear steps and examples of how the topic can inform community-level work.

I like how the chapter itself was a huge foundation for me in general, then what I gained from checking out the optional resources at the end of the chapter catapulted me to another level. I wouldn't have gotten as much out of those added resources if I hadn't gone through the chapter first.

741

people visited one or more skill chapters for 20+ minutes.

256

people submitted reflections for one or more chapters

29

people completed 10+ chapters and have earned a Certificate of Age-Friendly Community Development

33

organizations and groups in **4 states** use the skill chapters to support their training efforts

4.85 out of 5.0

Median ranking of how useful participants found a chapter for their work with older community members.



Policymakers [make] policy [but] change really happens at the local level. You know, you can make all the policies you want in Augusta, but if you don't have boots on the ground and people interfacing with other people, it's all for naught. And I think [the Governor's Cabinet on Aging] nailed that by working with the age-friendly communities and developing these connector positions to connect people to the programs policy created.
 ~Community Connector, Saco

PILOT LAUNCH

Community Connector (CC) pilot site recruitment began in April 2024. Twelve age-friendly communities meeting the Governor's Cabinet on Aging criteria and approved by their AAA were accepted.

Each pilot site tailored its CC role description and budget to its community's unique needs. Budgets ranged from \$7,150 to \$19,800 (median: \$10,995) and were fully funded by the Community Connections project through UM-CoA.

The pilot sites recruited either one 20-hour or two 10-hour CCs chosen by the AFC team. To recognize the commitment of time dedicated to the project, CCs received stipends of \$20,000 (20-hour) or \$10,000 (10-hour) for their one-year commitment.

On September 5, the pilot project officially launched with a day of training, networking, and fun!

PILOT TIMELINE

June/July - UMaine/Lifelong Maine identifies pilot sites. Sites recruit local Community Connectors (CC)

August - UMaine distributes material/supply grants to pilots; Sets up stipends for CC

September - Lifelong Maine - Project launch and CC training. AgeWise Maine facilitates connection of AAAs and CC.

Ongoing - Training and technical support by UMaine

FROM PLAN TO ACTION

The first step in each pilot community was to develop a work plan that reflected the age-friendly team's goals and mission, identified local strengths, and addressed known resource gaps. The next step was to raise awareness and build trust.

Outreach methods were tailored to the community's existing communication channels—from spreading word at community events to posting flyers at the post office or placing ads in newsletters.

Pilot sites used the power of food to invite people to meet the connector and learn about resources. By introducing the program in familiar, welcoming settings, connectors built trust that the project was community-driven.

In the process, the Connectors became even more deeply aware of the challenges experienced by community members.



Misty Gleason, Sullivan Connector, engages people at community events.



Connectors Dot Sines and Marie St. Pierre, with Site Supervisor Bill Flagg, serve culturally appropriate meals and provide information to St. John Valley residents, including referrals to their Health Navigator project.

MOVING INTO ACTION - THE LOCAL PROCESS

- Identify and mobilize community assets
- Conduct community outreach
- Recruit volunteers
- Engage local and regional partners
- Connect people to resources
- Develop programs and activities to address gaps

I processed a request for our Home Repair team to assist a resident who needs their front door repaired and steps rebuilt. To qualify for this free help, applicants must meet financial guidelines; for a single person, the gross income limit is \$71,500. This resident has an annual income of only \$16,000 and has been living on it for five years. I can't imagine how they survive on such a miniscule income. The work we do humbles me and reminds me of how fortunate I am.

~ Community Connector, Harpswell

COMMUNITY CONNECTORS



Community Connector Joe Moreshead partnered with Saco Police, Fire, and Emergency Services to get the word out about disaster preparedness.

Community Connectors live in and understand the communities they serve. As trusted neighbors who are trained in resource navigation, CCs become an effective source of information and referrals for older residents, bringing together the state-wide, regional, and local resources each person needs.

While some Connectors have experience in social services, it's not required. The age-friendly community team selects them for their ability to forge local partnerships and engage residents—blending personal insight with respect for diverse experiences to build trust.

Each Connector worked with the age-friendly team to develop projects that built on community strengths to meet the unique needs in their community.

These are a few of the approaches adopted in each site



Bethel

Collaborated on many kinds of activities - from a walking group to an intergenerational hub - and partnered with Buck's Ledge to secure a grant to develop an accessible trail.



Bowdoinham

Launched Bowdoinham Community Connects, which matches residents through volunteer visits to reduce isolation and improve access to health resources.



Blue Hill Peninsula

Strengthened a volunteer project to support older people through advocacy and friendly visits. Part 1 - Designing a home safety assessment tool that volunteers use to link people to safety resources.



Aroostook County

Developed a health navigator project and provided social meals to link community members in the Greater Caribou area with resources and social opportunities.



Danforth

Built trust with community members to connect them to resources: financial, wellness, housing, medical, safety, transportation, food, and social activities.



Saco

Coordinated food pantry rides for New Mainers, conducted home safety assessments for older residents, and installed an age-friendly information kiosk at town hall.



Gray/New Gloucester

Worked with partners to develop social and educational programs. Signed 90+ residents up for MSP benefit, saving each person an average of \$7,400 that can be used for other expenses.



Sullivan

Developed Trades and Caregiver Guides to connect people with local resources and assisted community members with applications for winter heating oil and USDA-RD home repair grants.



Harpswell

Provided Harpswell's older residents with information and access to supportive resources and social opportunities.



Windham

Developed community programs, disaster preparedness initiatives, resource connections, and partnerships with local organizations.



Sacopee Valley

Promoted social and educational events offered in the area and connected older people to benefit programs. Successfully advocated for local AARP Tax Aid volunteers.



York

Addressed social isolation and improved the quality of life for volunteers and recipients through programming, services, resources, and case management.

Building relationships. I mean, that's it... having relationships helps you know that you've got a mission in life, or at least an interest in life.
~ Site Supervisor, Sullivan

OUTREACH

Community Connectors identify local assets—the hidden strengths in people, groups, institutions, culture, and shared stories. This outreach builds partnerships that engage residents, establish trust, and connect people to needed resources.

Connectors honor local culture in their work. In St. John Valley, they greet community meal attendees in both French and English. In Saco, a Connector used Google Translate for intake forms with New Mainers and learned culturally appropriate ways to provide support.

This approach deepened trust, allowing community members to feel comfortable sharing multiple needs to help them live healthy, safe, and engaged lives.



Erica Bell-Watkins, the Connector in Age-Friendly Windham, invites people to community meals - with a side of information resources.

13,447

Older Mainers engaged in at least one activity that was supported by a Community Connector



First contact with Age-Friendly

Community Connectors engaged people who had not previously benefited from age-friendly activities, services, or programs.



Participated in more than one activity

Connectors often shared additional programs or services beyond what community members initially sought.



Social Opportunity

While most people initially contacted the Connector for information, they later participated in social opportunities.

[We] have not yet had (a) client who just had socialization issues... What we see in [Healthy Peninsula] is just a slice of what we see among us - people on fixed income, not being able to access resources.

*~ Community Connector,
Age-Friendly Coastal Communities*



“Retired Older Men Eating Out” attracts 50-75 Harpswell men each month for a shared meal and conversation, launched by Community Connector Tom Mahoney.

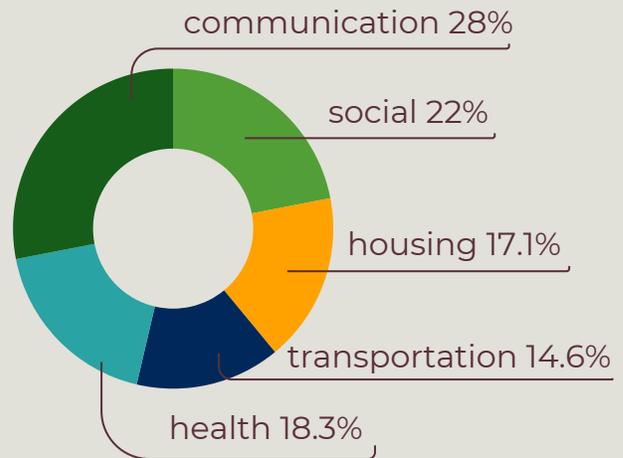
PROJECTS

Community Connectors across Maine partnered with local groups and regional organizations to develop projects tailored to local needs. In the Sacoppee Valley, the Connector developed a calendar that helps residents across five towns stay informed about local activities. Transportation barriers were addressed in Danforth through a volunteer driver program, while Bowdoinham started a friendly visitor program. The Bethel area Connector hosts intergenerational and dementia-inclusive social opportunities, while Harpswell, York, and Windham offer social and educational programs.

In Saco, the Connector linked New Mainers to critical resources. The Blue Hill Peninsula tackled home safety, providing education and fall-prevention resources for their Bridging Neighbors clients. Each project reflects the unique character and priorities of its community while working with partners toward the common goal of helping neighbors connect and thrive.

82

New Projects that were built on community strengths to address social, housing, transportation, health, and communication needs.



My first project was to get a collaboration between the Saco Food Pantry and the Catholic Charities of Maine...[E]very Tuesday I get the AFS shuttle and pick up upwards of 10 shoppers and bring them to the pantry. It's necessitated us having get all of our forms translated into Portuguese, Haitian, Creole, Lingala, French, and Spanish.

~Community Connector, Saco

PARTNERS

Connectors engaged key individuals and organizations in the community, region, and state. A first step was finding volunteers to support connector projects and outreach.

Volunteers were essential local partners who helped connectors extend their reach, serve more people, and address complex needs. They also facilitated connections with non-traditional partners, including businesses, informal groups, restaurants, service organizations, and tradespeople.

Bi-weekly peer networking calls and quarterly "Resource Connect Calls" provided essential links to regional and statewide resource partners.

Connectors coordinated local, regional, and statewide partners to address residents' varied service needs. Acting as the "glue" that brought together necessary resources, connectors and their partners created meaningful changes in residents' lives that would not have been possible otherwise.



Community Connector Sally Cluchey started Bowdoinham Community Connections

Bowdoinham Community Connections:

- brought neighbors together to lend a hand, helping navigate health, housing, transportation, and everyday challenges
- had 11 volunteers maintaining supportive relationships with 12 community members
- worked with partners to provide one-time assistance to many more

383

**Volunteers
Recruited**

And what we were kind of finding is that there were a lot of people who maybe were working towards in-home aging, but now we're finding we're kind of like the glue that's kind of pulling everybody together.

~ Community Connector, Gray/New Gloucester

445 Partners from Multiple Sectors



16%

Regional and State-Wide Services



35%

Municipal Departments



28%

Local Organizations



21%

Businesses

Partnership in Action - Developing Social Opportunities

Background - Melinda partnered with the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program, used what she learned in the Dementia Inclusion Skill Chapter, and worked with the Bryant Pond Library to offer a social afternoon.



The 'Games On' weekly sessions at the Bryant Pond Library are providing much-needed support. Language and memory issues are accepted, and hurdles are overcome as a team. Several participants have mobility limitations and/or are experiencing cognitive changes. Games On has become a supportive environment where participants can discuss the challenges of aging.

Numbers are increasing each week! We recently provided lunch, which was very well received. I am visiting more families and individuals with medical and cognitive challenges, responding to requests for in-home support and offering grief support. There is such need, it is wonderful to have the tools and support to help.

~Community Connector, Bethel Age-Friendly Community Initiative

Partnership in Action - Coordinating Services

Since November, I've been helping an older couple (78 and 84) whose furnace repeatedly fails, sometimes leaving their home at just 37°F, which endangers them and the multiple animals they fear will perish.

Using our Trades Guide contacts, we secured emergency assistance from tradespeople who kept costs minimal, while HEAP helped fill their fuel tank. When their fuel supply ran low again, we reapplied for HEAP, adding a request for furnace repair or replacement.

Based on recommendations from the Maine Access Navigator tool, we also applied for USDA Home Repair funding to address additional issues, such as holes where rats can come and go, poor insulation, and ceiling damage from previous leaks.

This week, both agencies contacted the homeowner for signatures, which are now complete. After two months of advocacy—including delivering paperwork directly to Downeast Community Partners and arranging free pest control services—help is finally within reach.

Most encouragingly, the homeowner, who struggles with hoarding, is now motivated to declutter and make the home accessible for future healthcare providers.

Progress at last!

~Community Connector, Age-Friendly Sullivan

[O]ne of the first things I did...was [create] a trades guide, because one of the main reasons people call is, 'I need a plumber. I need a carpenter...I need ...' so I put together a...list of everything, from snow plowers to whatever I thought a single woman living alone might [need] to call. In the process, I made connections with tradespeople who are willing and qualified to help their neighbors.

~Community Connector,
Sullivan

RESOURCE CONNECTIONS

Community Connectors helped **847** older Mainers access a variety of resources during the first year. While people often came with just one question, conversations usually uncovered additional resource needs. Using tools like the Maine Resource Navigator, Connectors made referrals to the Area Agency on Aging and CAP agency for essential services. Over half of all referrals connected people to local age-friendly programs—from home safety help and transportation to food security, free ECHO Dots, and social activities that brought neighbors together.

Resources do more than meet critical needs, they give community members a sense of belonging and purpose, better able to live safe, healthy, engaged lives



The Community Connectors in Gray/New Gloucester linked 90+ people with the Medicare Savings Program, hosted social events and invited partners to share resources, and partnered with Maine Health to train four volunteers to offer Matter of Balance locally.

The Community Connector role makes a difference for volunteers and people seeking help.

I recruited a volunteer who is blind due to diabetes. He helps distribute sand buckets and works with the local food pantry. He feels needed and has regained his sense of purpose, which has energized and improved his mood.

Another client has benefited from our program by finding lower-cost services that have eased her financial burden.

It is rewarding to see how providing information can truly make a difference in people's lives.

~Community Connector, Danforth

\$540,000

back to older Mainers as a direct result of resource connections.



Statewide or Federal Resources

Medicare Savings Program, Veteran's Benefits, USDA Rural Development grants, SNAP, Senior Farm Share, Medicare-Long-Term Care

Local Resources

Property tax, local fuel assist., trades donated time

Regional Resources

CAP Agency - fuel and replacement programs

Resources in Action - Saco Takes ECHO Dots Statewide

Background - Building on the successful program that Age-Friendly Saco developed to link community members to virtual home assistants, the Community Connectors project partnered with the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program to purchase equipment for Connectors and other Age-Friendly volunteers to install the devices in 250 homes.



I received the most heartwarming voicemail from my first participant in our Echo Dot program. For the first time, she was able to get to bed with the lights on and simply say, "Alexa, turn off the lights and music," instead of walking through her dark house, fumbling for the handrail and doorknobs. Since losing her husband this winter, she has been alone, so it was incredibly uplifting to see during my second visit that she had started using the Echo Dot for her grocery list and was playing music from it. She is now spreading the word about our Echo Dot program.

~ Community Connector, York

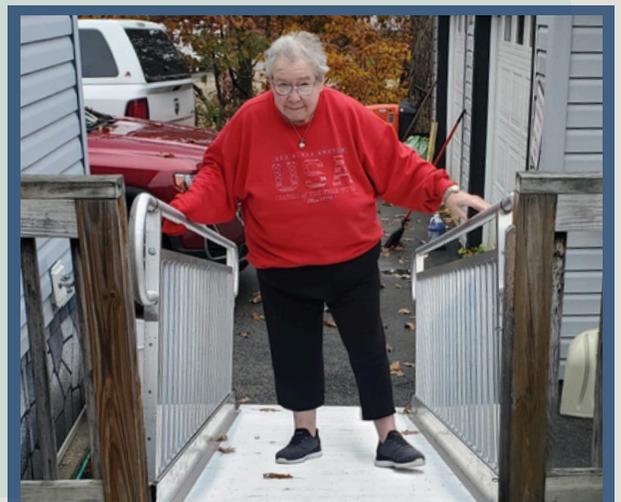
Resources in Action - Health Navigators

(The Center for the Advancement of Rural Living and their two Community Connectors in northern Aroostook County) ... sponsor our 'Community Table' which brings older community members to our local VFW Hall for a free lunch, music and information. Nearly 200 have attended ... since we established it three months ago. At this event we are able to promote our different programs and provide information on various resources.

A second goal of our program is to help older adults access services through our 'Navigator' program. Our Connectors have recruited retired healthcare professionals, nurses, nurse practitioners, and social workers who (help) older adults through advocacy and supporting them through the maze of our complex healthcare system. They make phone calls, attend doctor's appointments, meet with family, and will not let the individual feel like they are alone in seeking needed services. We have partnered with our local hospital and family medicine program to encourage referrals and our volunteer navigators are very busy.

This is part of our effort to collaborate with multiple organizations to identify additional resources we can bring to our work. We believe it is only with such collaboration that we can address the significant needs of older adults in our large service area here in Aroostook County. Our long term goal is to help those that we serve to 'age in place' and fill in gaps related to home safety, food insecurity, isolation, transportation, and health maintenance. We have found the need to be very great.

*~Site Supervisor, Age-Friendly
Caribou/Limestone*



The Grateful Undead in the Sacoppee Valley installed portable ramps for people with mobility limitations.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

► Find Someone with Deep Knowledge of the Community

CCs should understand the challenges and joys of aging in the community, have local knowledge of assets, and be viewed as trusted information sources. Some built on existing age-friendly volunteer work—"I do so much volunteering anyway...we can hit the ground running because I already understood our goals"—while others leveraged their reputations as community connectors: "I've been a member of this community a long time. Folks know me... so they trust me."

► Invest in Skill Training

CC training included a September 2024 all-day orientation and 18 asynchronous skill chapters discussed during check-ins. While some content reinforced prior experience, feedback was overwhelmingly positive, giving CCs confidence in their roles. One CC called the materials "fantastic" and appreciated that the format allowed CCs to explore resources at their own pace. Another found the training "very helpful and thought-provoking," particularly content on finding resources, collaboration, volunteers, boundaries, and ageism.

► Provide Connections to Resources

The connector training includes quarterly "Resource Connect calls" coordinated with the Governor's Cabinet on Aging. Sessions covered resources such as the Medicare Savings Program and Maine Access Navigator tool. These calls helped CC learn about programs that immediately benefit residents. One connector explains, "... So, this is stuff that's not my world. I've learned so much about different things that are out there. Applying to the programs is a game-changer for our residents and saves them money."

► Encourage Peer Sharing

The project leverages connectors' diverse skills and backgrounds during bi-weekly peer check-in calls, which CCs find invaluable. As one noted, "It's great to hear what others are doing in their communities and what's working for them, what's not." Another emphasized the practical support: when searching for a Medicare application, she contacted a peer who'd recently shared helpful tips, adding that without these meetings, "I would be here sort of in a vacuum doing my little thing."

► Turn Community Assets into Partners

Turning community strengths into partnerships is essential to AFCs and the CC role. Connectors identified and recruited partners from their community's unique "assets"—individuals, institutions, associations, spaces, culture, and economic exchanges—to support older people. Some contacted over 200 partners, including non-traditional ones, such as trades and schools. One CC noted, "Nobody has said, 'No,' or 'That's a bad idea.'" Partners now include librarians, Parks and Rec, businesses, service organizations, and emergency services. Another site supervisor said, "the community connector role was the spark that forged much stronger relationships."

KEYS TO SUCCESS

► Build in Time to Establish Credibility & Build Trust

Introducing the Connector role to community members, partners, and the municipality was initially challenging. CCs needed to establish themselves “gently” while educating the community about their unique role. However, after people understood that Connectors had training and expertise in resource connection, they were impressed and began actively referring community members for help. One CC noted, "It took a while for the town office staff to trust me but now I am their first call when someone needs help." The reach of the AFC even extended beyond the original communities, with a site supervisor observing, "Some of the hardest requests came from a neighboring town but (CC) was confident and able to help."

► Pair Two Connectors in a Community

Having two Community Connectors allowed each to develop their own specialty within the role while providing built-in peer support. All but two of the Community Connectors were retired, and splitting the role into two 10-hour positions gave them more freedom to pursue personal interests. One Community Connector shared: "I was planning to quit, but [site supervisor] suggested that [D-CC] and I split the role. We make a great team, and I have more freedom now."

► Protect from Burnout

Many of the CC experienced the death of a community member. Another recurring challenge was long wait lists and nonexistent services. CCs expressed frustration that "no one is vetting what's actually available so I waste a lot of time researching something that's actually not available." The solution has been three-fold: (1) the strong network formed by CCs who contact each other regularly for information and referrals, even outside meetings, (2) Resource Connect Calls that explain program benefits while describing wait lists and other barriers to access, and (3) contracting with a social worker with expertise in grief to support CC mental health and self-care.

► Celebrate Innovation and Capacity Building

The Community Connectors create innovative solutions tailored to their communities. Harpswell developed a program addressing social isolation among men. Sullivan drew on personal experience to champion fraud prevention awareness. Bethel created meaningful opportunities for people living with cognitive changes. All three initiatives garnered local news coverage, recognizing their impact.

Community Connectors reported that their projects strengthened local partnerships, engaged new volunteers, and expanded the Age-Friendly Community initiative to new residents and broader geographic areas. The Saco connector exemplified this reach: "My first project was to get a collaboration between the Saco Food Pantry and the Catholic Charities of Maine...every Tuesday I get the AFS shuttle and pick up upwards of 10 shoppers...It's necessitated us having get all of our forms translated into Portuguese, Haitian, Creole, Lingala, French, and Spanish."

Conclusion

The Community Connections achieved remarkable success tapping into local resources, strengthening partnerships, recruiting volunteers, and linking older Mainers with critical resources and social opportunities.

This success reflects a fundamental insight at the heart of the Community Connectors project: rural communities have distinct strengths and ways of creating change. Rather than imposing new structures, the Community Connectors built on what already works in each pilot site—local businesses, tradespeople, recreation departments, shared values, dedicated volunteers, and informal networks. Their success is firmly rooted in the communities they serve.

Strengths of the pilot project included:

- **Strong Partnership Framework** The project has fostered effective collaboration among the Governor's Cabinet on Aging, UM-CoA, AAAs, and AFCs. By integrating local knowledge with statewide resources, the initiative responds directly to the needs of older Mainers while cultivating a robust peer support network among Community Connectors.
- **Training and Support** The comprehensive skill chapter curriculum has been well-received, with participants offering positive feedback on both content and structure. The bi-weekly facilitated peer exchanges have proven particularly effective in supporting ongoing learning and connection.
- **Community Impact** Pilot sites have successfully connected older adults to resources, recruited dedicated volunteers, and developed effective community partnerships. These efforts have bridged the gap between statewide services and local needs while building organizational capacity.

We're excited to have partnered with AARP Maine, University of New England's Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program, AmeriCorps Seniors, Maine Community Foundation, and private funders to continue supporting our pilot sites. The Governor's Cabinet on Aging remains a valued thought partner and resource connector. We look forward to expanding the project to additional communities.

For More Information

For more information, to partner with the Community Connector project in Maine, or to replicate the Connector Pilot in your area, please contact Patricia Oh at Patricia.Oh@Maine.edu