

Living Long and Living Well: How philanthropy can help Vermonters do both

THE TAKEAWAY

Philanthropy can help older Vermonters maximize the potential to be happy, healthy, and independent. Charitable individuals can assist by supporting programs that:

- Build and preserve independence
- Create social connections vital to health and happiness
- Reduce bias on the basis of age



IT WAS A DIRT ROAD OFF A DIRT ROAD situation in southeastern Vermont as Mark Boutwell, executive director of Senior Solutions, did a ride along recently with a Meals on Wheels volunteer driver, herself in her 80s. They bumped over one steep hill after another to find the recipient's home, where they delivered a tasty meal and an equally welcome portion of conversation.

Running a nonprofit dedicated to helping older people is a desk job. But Boutwell finds that occasionally going on the road with volunteers helps him understand the landscape of need, literally.

"It really brings home how rural Vermont is and how inaccessible services are," Boutwell said. "Social isolation is a very real thing."

Staying connected is one of the challenges facing older Vermonters, who are the state's fastest growing demographic. About 20 percent of Vermont residents are 65 or older and Vermont ranks among the five "oldest" states in the country based on median age, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Vermont's low birth rate drives this ranking, but we're not the only state surfing the "gray wave." The trend is being felt across the country as the Baby Boom population bulge moves through life followed by smaller generations.

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In Vermont the population shift means the workforce is contracting as the number of people retiring increases. At the same time, demand is growing for workers who can provide care and services needed by an increasing number of older people. Vermont's 23,000 open jobs include many vacancies in caregiving fields. The result? "We have huge, systemic needs in aging services right now," said Ruby Baker, executive director of the Montpelier-based nonprofit Community of Vermont Elders (COVE).

Recognizing the importance of building an age-friendly state, the Vermont Community Foundation has identified support for older people as part of a broader strategy to improve health and wellbeing. While aging brings challenges, it also brings opportunities, including the potential for older adults to make new and different contributions to the economy as they seek “retirement jobs” or engage in volunteer work that helps people of all age groups, including their own.

“In the next 20 years, Vermont will be home to many more older adults — who will be living longer and healthier lives. That’s a good thing! When we help older Vermonters thrive, we embrace their talents and experience and make our communities more inclusive and accessible for everyone,” said Andy Barker, a program officer at the Vermont Community Foundation who is focusing on this work.

Charitable individuals can help by supporting programs that:

Preserve independence

The homeownership rate among Vermont residents 65 and over is 81 percent, almost ten points higher than the average for all adults in the state. This statistic underscores the fact that many older adults place a high value on staying in their own homes and “aging in place.” Family memories and familiar rooms are not the only anchor. Neighbors, friends, and local traditions matter, too. “It’s not just about staying in their homes, it’s about being able to continue to be a part of a community that they may have helped to build,” said Erica Marks, director of volunteer services at nonprofit Age Well, which serves people in Northwest Vermont.

Government funding supports [five area agencies](#) on aging in Vermont, including Age Well and Senior Solutions, but it covers only part of the cost of the services they provide, many of which are designed to support aging in place, whether that’s in a single family home, an apartment, or a mobile home community.

“A lot of volunteers are paying it forward.”

This assistance is especially important for the 29 percent of Vermonters over 64 who have disabilities, and the 26 percent who live alone. Charitable individuals can help by supporting Vermont’s area agencies on aging and jumping in as volunteers themselves. Age Well has over 1,000 volunteers and relies on charitable support to help pay for the management and recruitment of people to deliver meals, help older Vermonters get to the doctor, do

minor home repairs, and provide companionship along the way. Many volunteers are older adults themselves. “We all know that at some point, we may find ourselves in the situation where we need someone to help us,” Marks said. “A lot of the volunteers are volunteering because they want to pay it forward.”

Philanthropic giving nurtures this volunteer workforce. It allows Age Well, for example, to put on thank you luncheons that also help volunteers connect. In Brattleboro, donations support Memory Café lunches where caregivers and people with memory loss can come together with others in the same situation. Additional contributions would help Senior Solutions, which has received support from the Vermont Community Foundation, expand that program and others including a veteran to veteran visiting program. “There’s such a brotherhood and sisterhood,” Boutwell said.



Create social connections

It isn’t news that loneliness saps joy and makes life harder. Still, it might surprise some people to read a recent U.S. Surgeon General’s report that details just how corrosive isolation can be. Loneliness can increase the risk of heart disease, dementia, and premature death. Why does it matter so much for people to be around other people? Human beings are hardwired for social connection in a way that dates back to our earliest days, when it was difficult to survive outside a group. This instinct persists despite dramatic changes in how we live.

The highest rates of social isolation occur among older adults, according to the report. Countering this trend is a priority for many nonprofits but they need more resources to succeed. A 2021 state survey of administrators at Vermont’s approximately 40 senior centers found that 50 percent said they lacked sufficient funding to operate, pay employees, and offer the programs participants want. Among the biggest needs: Donations to help transport people

to the centers, funding to expand hours, dental and health screenings, and activities ranging from cooking classes to yoga.

Philanthropy can also help centers that are trying to broaden their appeal by offering intergenerational programming and co-locating with programs that serve younger age groups. “That’s a big push right now,” Boutwell said.

A little rebranding might be due. About 15,000 people annually visit Vermont senior centers but some people won’t go even when they crave companionship. Boutwell recalled a recent conversation with an 80-year-old man who told him: “Only really old people go to senior centers and I’m not one of them yet.”

Other barriers to connecting are physical: [Older people surveyed](#) in a recent state “listening session” report talked about the difficulty of getting places when they live in communities with few sidewalks, no public transit, and long distances between home and other destinations. One woman said she was “petrified” as she walked on a road with no shoulder as cars whizzed by. Support for organizations such as AARP VT and the Vermont Natural Resources Council as they advocate for compact, pedestrian-friendly community design with sidewalks, bike trails and transit stops can help people of all ages.

Reduce age bias

About a third of Vermont residents 60 and older are in the workforce, and 20 percent work past age 65. More than a few older adults report that they have experienced age discrimination in the workplace, surveys show. Sometimes they are stereotyped as people who are allergic to innovation. Or their experience and skills are “brushed aside,” said Baker, at COVE. “There’s a cultural problem in our workforce that needs to be addressed.”

Charitable individuals can help by supporting nonprofits that advocate for older adults and work against age bias in all settings. Organizations including the Tri-State Learning Collaborative are using leadership training, conferences, and other tools to reduce age discrimination, increase positivity about aging, and build age-friendly state policy. The organization, which has received support from the Vermont Community Foundation and works in Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire, also promotes alternatives to what is sometimes called “elder speak,” which can be patronizing with its use of diminutives such as “honey” and “dear.”

It’s also important to make Vermont a place where older people who have already worked for decades can afford to retire when the time is right. As Baker puts it: “We want people to be able to retire with financial security and dignity.”

As it stands now, comfortable retirement is out of reach for many Vermont residents — nine percent of older people live at poverty level, with higher rates for people who are BIPOC, female, or have disabilities. Many middle-income Vermont residents also struggle to save enough: A major medical event, career setback or family challenge can blow up the budget.

Solving these problems will be easier when everyone pulls together. It’s encouraging to know that the state of Vermont is developing a comprehensive plan on aging and collecting public input along the way. With the help of charitable individuals and nonprofits engaged in this work, Vermont can make real progress toward becoming a place where the motto “age strong” really means something.

Join us in supporting this work

- 1 Ready to open a fund so you can support this work in partnership with us? [Click here](#) to learn more about opening a donor advised fund at the Vermont Community Foundation or to connect with a philanthropic advisor.
- 2 Have a donor advised fund with us? [Click here](#) to support older Vermonters through our Health & Wellbeing Opportunity in your DonorCentral account.
- 3 Want to learn more about our strategies and grantmaking to expand support for older Vermonters? [Visit](#) our Health & Wellbeing page.

Deeper reading

[U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community](#)

[Age Strong Vermont Roadmap for an Age-Friendly State](#)

Reach out to us at philanthropy@vermontcf.org or (802) 388-3355 opt. 5 to be connected with a philanthropic advisor.

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