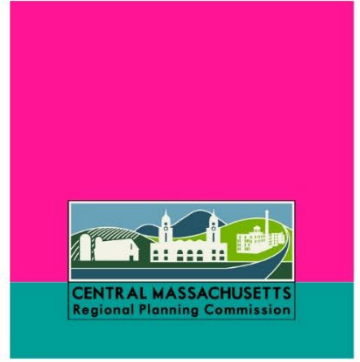


DISCOVERING THE HAPPY FACTOR



A REPORT DRAFTED BY THE
CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS
REGIONAL PLANNING
COMMISSION, 2026

Acknowledgements

Massachusetts Community Health & Healthy Aging Funds

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Community Leaders & Locations

Worcester Senior Center
Northborough Council on Aging
Hopedale Council on Aging
19Carter, Berlin
Holden Council on Aging
Grafton Public Library
Merrick Public Library
Jacob Edwards LibrarRutland Council on Aging

Age Friendly Action Team

Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative
Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health
Quaboag Valley Community Development Corporation
Tri Valley Inc.
Worcester Department of Public Health & REACH
Worcester Regional Transit Authority (WRTA)
Elder Services of Worcester Area
Town of Boylston Council on Aging
Town of Upton Council on Aging
Town of Millbury Council on Aging
Town of Barre Council on Aging
Town of Uxbridge Council on Aging
Town of North Brookfield Council on Aging
Town of Hopedale Council on Aging
Town of Shrewsbury Council on Aging
City of Worcester Senior Center
American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health
South Central Mass Partnership for Public Health

“I’d say that certainly the civic activities that I’m involved in contribute a lot to my sense of well being. I feel like I’m really contributing to the town, and I get some deal of satisfaction that I’m helping my community in one way or another.”

- Dave, Grafton

Acknowledgements

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CMRPC would like to thank the many residents, community leaders, and organizations who contributed their time and perspectives to the Happy Factor project. Their experiences and insights helped shape this work and informed the recommendations in this report.

We are especially grateful to the following organizations and partners for their support in outreach, interviews, and project development:

- Worcester Senior Center
- 19 Carter
- Holden Senior Center
- Northborough Senior Center
- Hopedale Senior Center
- Rutland Senior Center
- Uxbridge Senior Center
- Dudley Senior Center
- Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative
- AARP Massachusetts
- Central Massachusetts Age Friendly Action Team

Background

In 2023, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) published the first regional Age-Friendly Plan for Central Massachusetts. Through our research, we found a lack of access to social capital as a prevailing theme in our region for older adults.

In our role as regional planners, we were curious to know how policy decisions, including everything from land use regulations to public meeting standards, are consequently affecting older adults facing loneliness and isolation.

'Discovering the Happiness Factor in Central Massachusetts,' a distinctive project designed to examine the influence of social connections throughout our region, aligns seamlessly with the objectives of the Age-Friendly Central Mass Action Plan. It addresses critical concerns related to social isolation, a topic highlighted by the recent U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on loneliness and further emphasized by initiatives like End Loneliness MA.

“The magnitude of risk associated with social isolation is similar to the risk of cigarette smoking.” - Exploring the Social Determinants of Health Issue Brief No.3 Princeton: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2011.

In this unique endeavor, we delve into how civic involvement impacts happiness and well-being among the diverse populations of Central Massachusetts. Our method of conducting interviews offers a more intimate and thorough exploration of personal experiences and perspectives. This not only brings an empathetic dimension to our project but also helps to convey the real stories and emotions behind the data.

As planners, we are uniquely positioned to intersect community organizing with community planning. Our expertise in local government and quality of life best practices places us in an advantageous position to enact tangible change. This project is not just about gathering data; it's about using our comprehensive understanding of various community dynamics and leveraging CMRPC's expertise in numerous fields to propose practical, impactful solutions.

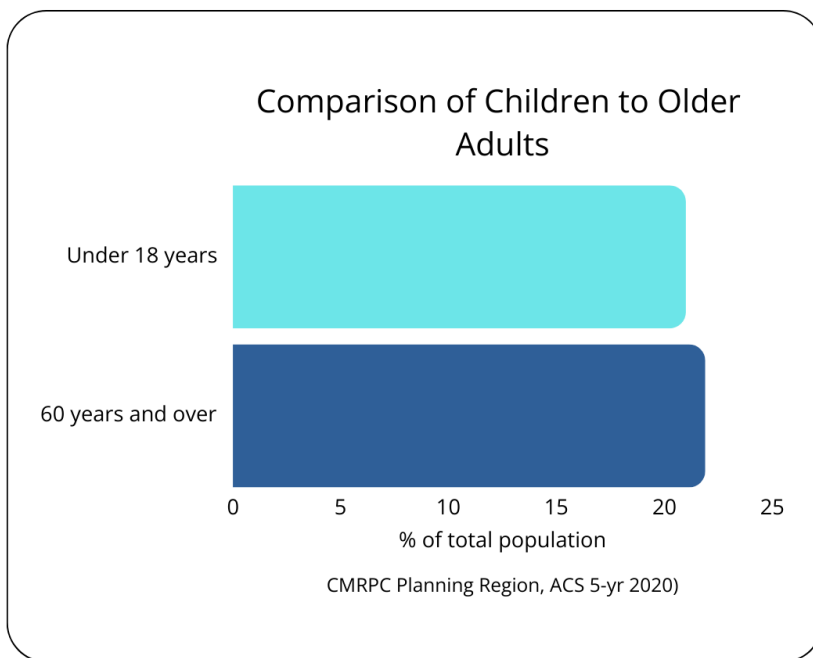
We hope to engage municipal leaders in implementing our proposed solutions to build civic capacity and support inclusion of older adult participation in planning decisions, multiplying the impact of this project. Our goal for 'Discovering the Happiness Factor in Central Mass' is not only to build a more inclusive, engaged, and supportive community for all residents, but also to demonstrate how thoughtful planning and community organizing can play a pivotal role in enhancing quality of life, particularly for our older adults.

Project Timeline

September 2024	Coalition Building & Discovering Interviewees
October 2024	Crafted Interview Questions with the Age Friendly Action Team
November 2024 – June 2025	Conducted ~50 Recorded Interviews with Seniors Across the Region
Summer 2025	Analysis of Themes & Video Structuring
Ongoing	Presenting Strategies to Municipal Leaders

Our Region

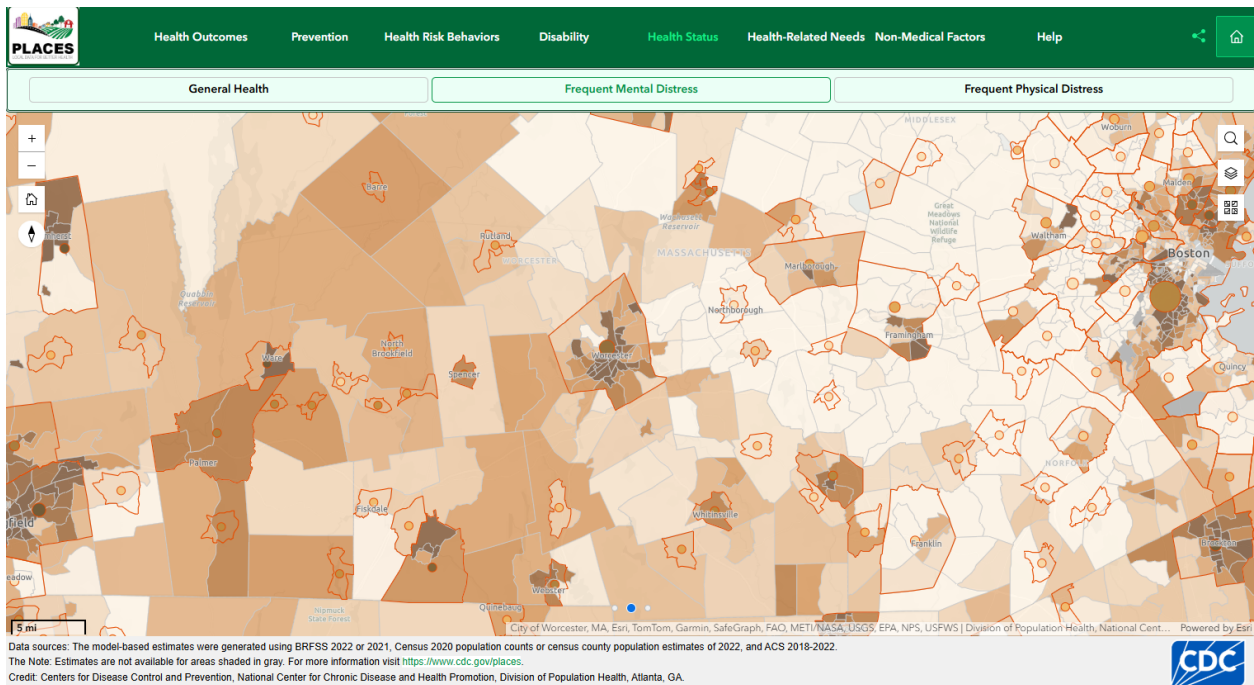
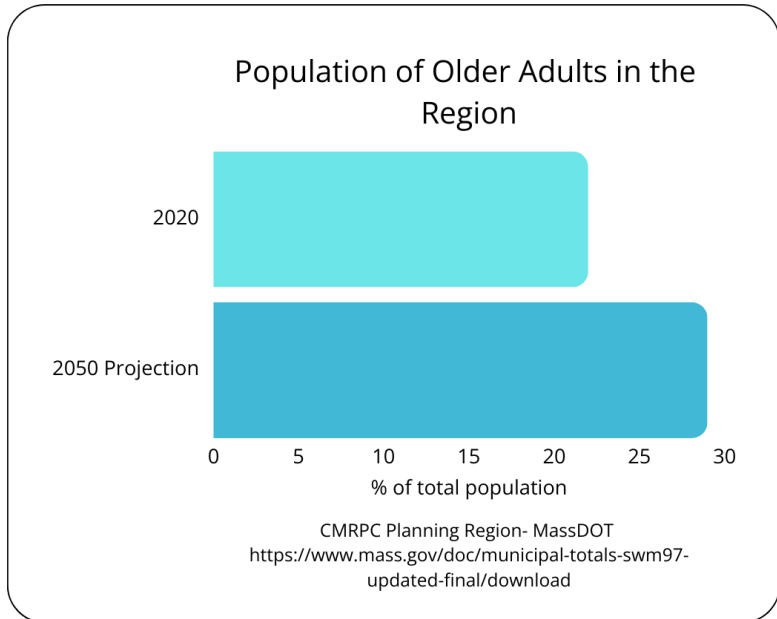
The CMRPC region is made up of the City of Worcester and 39 surrounding towns of southern Worcester County. The region is diverse, extending from the urban core of Worcester, the second largest city in New England, through the suburban neighborhoods of greater Worcester, to the rural fields and farms of the Brookfields, Hardwick, and New Braintree. Half of our communities are defined as “rural”, and Worcester is a Gateway City.



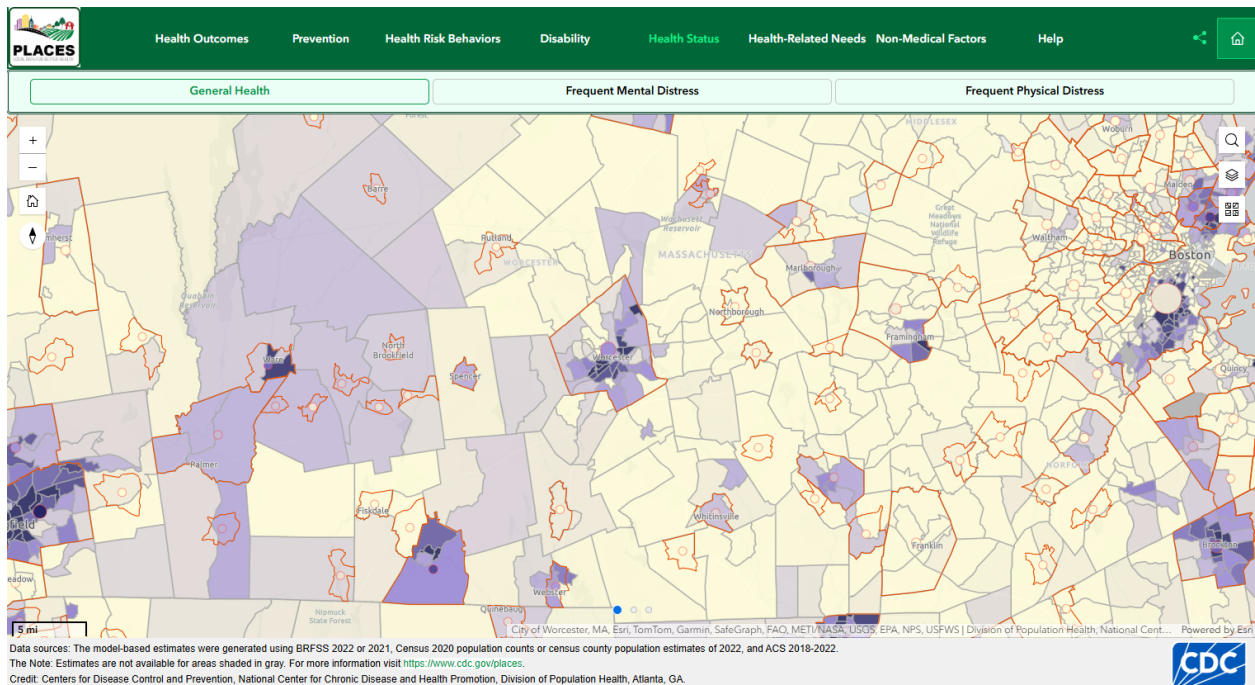
Like most regions in the state and country, Central Massachusetts is experiencing a major demographic shift in population. By 2030, 72 million adults across the United States, or nearly 1 in 5 people, will be age 65 or older. Setting the stage for this unprecedented shift in population, the year 2035 will mark the first time in the history of the country that there will be more older adults than children.

Data shows that Central Massachusetts may experience a “shift” in population between 2025 and 2030, sooner than projected for the country. By 2050, the older adult population in the region will account for 29% or more of the total population.

Central Massachusetts [CDC Places](#): Mental Distress
 Self-reported mental health data shows that towns in the region, including Millville, Northbridge, Dudley, Webster, Southbridge, Warren, Spencer, Leicester, Worcester, Barre, and Hardwick, all have areas with more reported frequent mental health distress prevalence compared to the national average (Source: CDC Places Interactive Map).



Central Massachusetts [CDC Places](#): General Health



Additionally, half of our communities are rural, which face unique loneliness issues.

Currently, the City of Worcester is home to more foreign-born residents than any other Massachusetts Gateway City. This diversity necessitates culturally sensitive social services, underlining the importance of community health centers and other organizations that support immigrants, migrants, and refugees.

County Health Ranking and Roadmaps reports the number of membership associations per 10,000 population.

“Minimal contact with others and limited involvement in community life are associated with increased morbidity and early mortality. Research suggests that the magnitude of risk associated with social isolation is similar to the risk of cigarette smoking. Social support networks have been identified as powerful predictors of health behaviors, suggesting that individuals without a strong social network are less likely to make healthy lifestyle choices than individuals with a strong network.” (County Health Ranking)

In Worcester County, there were 8.6 memberships per 10,000 people. These include civic, political, religious, sports, and professional organizations. Worcester County is reported as 11th out of 14 regions for social association rate, lower than the state (9.3) and the country (9.1).

Survey Results

- ⇒ Respondents over the age of 80 who reported an annual income at or lower than \$30k were less likely to own a personal vehicle.
- ⇒ Survey respondents used public transit and senior center transportation services at a low rate of 14%.
- ⇒ Respondents with incomes of less than \$10k were more likely to report poor access to healthcare services that are respectful, have well-trained home-healthcare staff, and are offered in different languages.
- ⇒ 60% of respondents with household incomes at or lower than \$10k reported being sometimes or often lonely, isolated, or excluded.
- ⇒ Majority of respondents stated they would like increased amounts of activities with younger and older people interacting, increased access to in-person information for people who may be unable to leave their homes, and increased access to community information in different languages.
- ⇒ Most respondents stated they would like increased amounts of affordable activities in their communities and transportation to volunteer opportunities in their communities must be improved.

“When addressed in nonconfrontational or non-embarrassing ways, difficult conversations about community issues- such as senior hunger, elder abuse or the impact of drug addiction on families- can take place and lead to solutions” - AARP Livability Workshop Report, 2020

Happy Factor Theory of Change

This Theory of Change underscores the importance of identifying and understanding the specific challenges older adults face in civic engagement. By investigating these barriers through direct stakeholder input and adapting civic processes accordingly, the project aims to foster a more inclusive and engaging community environment. The ultimate goal is to ensure older adults feel valued, connected, and motivated to participate in volunteer activities, thereby combating social isolation and enhancing community health.

Vision:

Inspire local boards and committees to create an inclusive, connected, and supportive environment that enhances the well-being and happiness of older adults in Central Massachusetts.

Mission:

Equip local boards and committees with the resources to understand and improve how civic engagement processes can be made less intimidating and more inclusive, thereby reducing social isolation among older adults.

Context:

There is a general perception that civic engagement processes can be unwelcoming, overly technical, or intimidating. Specific impacts on older adults' participation are not fully understood but are suggested by broader trends of declining volunteerism and increasing social isolation. Current civic frameworks may not effectively engage diverse populations, particularly older adults, potentially exacerbating feelings of exclusion and isolation.

Problem Statement:

This project addresses the observed decline in volunteerism and the increase in social isolation among older adults in Central Massachusetts, alongside uncertainties about their perceptions of civic engagement barriers.

Goals:

- Conduct public outreach with older adults and key stakeholders to ascertain the specific barriers and perceptions older adults face regarding civic engagement.
- Develop and implement strategies to make civic participation more accessible and less daunting for older adults.

Outcomes:

- Short-Term
 - Gather detailed insights into older adults' perceptions of civic engagement barriers through surveys and interviews.
 - Utilize findings to inform the development and adoption of a best practices guide aimed at improving civic engagement processes.

- Long-Term
 - Achieve more inclusive civic engagement practices that actively reduce social isolation and enhance volunteerism among older adults.

Strategies and Key Activities:

- Conduct interviews, surveys, and focus groups with older adults and other key stakeholders to identify perceptions and barriers to civic engagement.
- Develop an inspirational video and a best practices guide based on the qualitative findings to promote more inclusive practices.
- Disseminate findings and resources to local boards and committees and offer guidance on implementing changes.

Stakeholders and Partnerships:

- Municipal Boards and Committees will be involved in designing and implementing civic processes.
- Senior Advocacy Groups and Community Organizations to facilitate outreach
- Direct engagement with older adults to ensure their experiences and insights shape project outcomes.

Assumptions:

- There is a willingness among local boards and committees to explore and address potential barriers to civic engagement.
- Accurate identification of barriers will lead to effective strategies that can be widely adopted.
- Improvements in civic engagement processes will correlate with reduced isolation and increased volunteerism among older adults.

Overarching Assumptions & Values

#1 Loneliness is a national epidemic that can increase a person's risk of a variety of physical and mental health issues

#2 Routine and sense of purpose in retirement increase metrics of well-being, impacting physical health benefits

#3 Volunteering for municipal roles has the potential to contribute to a sense of purpose and connection to community

#4 Investing in board and committee recruitment leads to more representative government, high capacity, less burn-out, and new ideas

Recommendations

Focus: Recruitment

Recruitment for civic engagement and elected or volunteer municipal positions is often challenging due to a number of factors, including limited resident awareness, changes in media types & information distribution, and structural barriers. In addition, municipal roles are frequently perceived as complex or technical, and there is limited outreach explaining what these positions actually involve or why they matter. This recruitment challenge is significant because local boards, committees, and volunteer roles are essential to the functioning of municipal government, particularly in smaller and mid-sized communities. Strong civic participation helps ensure representative decision-making, builds local capacity, and strengthens trust between residents and government; equally as important, this participation can build community and a sense of individual well-being.

1. Advertising, Marketing, & Management

Local news and information dissemination has changed significantly in recent years, and for many older adults, technology has become a barrier to receiving valuable communications. While some residents are tech-savvy, not all communities provide adequate materials or take advantage of up-to-date tech options for residents looking to learn about or engage in civic activities.

- 1.1 Sustain print media, especially Council on Aging and Library newsletters, and streamline content between town boards/committees/departments through those established outlets.** This can provide more consistent reach and community engagement, and works to fill gaps left by the disappearance of legacy media. Additionally, leverage town resources (transportation, technology, etc.) across departments to make opportunities as accessible as possible.

“There was always someone in The Landmark (local newspaper) at every school committee meeting, every select board meeting, and they reported on what was going on in the town and they printed real estate deals that had gone through and they were a real town newspaper. And now there’s nothing. It’s a very sad thing.” -Patricia, Rutland

“We’re working right now with the library. They’re expanding the newsletter to not just cover their own programming. For all of the committees I am on I submit a blurb for the library newsletter, and it is outside of the door for anyone to grab at any time.” -Amie, Brookfield

- 1.2 **Update online resources for board vacancies to include board descriptions, responsibilities, and contact points, and ensure the Town’s website is accessible and easy to navigate.** Website designers or platform hosts can assist with this work; Reading, MA worked with CivicPlus to redesign their website with an emphasis on positive resident engagement and constructive experiences.
<https://www.civicplus.com/case-studies/ce/enhancing-civic-engagement-and-streamlining-communication-in-reading-ma>
- 1.3 **Create efficient ways for residents to express interest in volunteer positions.** “Select interest” contact forms for volunteering can direct residents’ requests to the correct department, eliminating red tape or internal miscommunications. On their website, the Town of Sutton offers a ‘Board Vacancies/Volunteer Action Form’, which both displays open positions and collects information from interested residents.
<https://www.suttonma.org/town-clerk/webforms/board-vacancies-volunteer-action-form>
- 1.4 **Establish a role for managing volunteer recruitment and community outreach.** This could be taken on by the Town Clerk, or be a dedicated Volunteer Coordinator. Duties could include distributing informational packets at town meetings and creating and comprehensive onboarding process (including information about Open Meeting Law, relevant local bylaws, role expectations, public meeting rules, etc.) for new volunteers, so they do not feel lost or unprepared. The Town of Concord implemented a similar program:
<https://www.mma.org/concords-effective-governance-workshop-prepares-volunteers-for-town-service>
- 1.5 **Host volunteer fairs with board and department representatives to meet new people and introduce them to the function of the group.** To aid in attendance, host town tables at occurring farmers market, craft fairs, or other local events.

“The next thing we’re doing is a community expo where we invite all the non-profits, town committees, and town staff to have a table or outside space where they share with the public what they do and hopefully attract volunteers. As a new person in town, we find many people don’t know what the committees are.”

- 1.6 **Create a resource guide for new (and old) residents with available volunteer opportunities & functions.** The Town of Wakefield’s Board Vacancies webpage links to a ‘Handbook for Boards, Committees, Commissions, and Councils’ created by the Town Administrator’s office, which has in-depth information about local positions, meeting structure, and protocols.
<https://www.wakefieldma.gov/202/Board-Committee-Commission-Council-Vacan>

- 1.7 **Continue to partner with and support local newspapers in covering town news, particularly for the older population who continue to rely on traditional media.** Be sure to use available channels to inform residents if/when print and legacy media will no longer be an option for them.

2. Leveraging Career & Personal Strengths

Our communities are made up of many residents with talents or interests that are well suited for volunteer or elected positions – they might just not know it yet! Implementing methods of recruitment and outreach that speak to individual talents and existing relationships rather than relying on established mechanisms may be beneficial.

- 2.1 **Seek residents with related job fields for specific vacancies.** Institutional knowledge – long-serving board members with a wealth of experience – is valuable, but new members with direct experience, education, or understanding of elements of a particular board or committee can be a very helpful even in the short term, and can build a board member’s confidence and desire to contribute.

“That’s a trope- ‘no one is volunteering anymore.’ There are volunteers. The problem is the people using the volunteers don’t know how to use them.” -Evy, Founder, 19Carter, Berlin

- 2.2 **Personalize roles within boards to match skill sets.** As boards and committees are built, a volunteer coordinator could pay attention to the skills, interests, or proficiencies of members and capitalize on those abilities. This can also help to retain members and foster appreciation and value.

“They were looking for someone to sit at the (front) desk and because I’d always stop and talk to the girls there one of them said ‘oh you would be perfect behind the desk’ and I said ‘Oh, you think so? That’s right up my alley as a former receptionist where do I apply?’ and now when someone comes in the senior center, I greet them. And I feel like if I made somebody smile, I made their day and they made my day.” -Kay, Worcester

2.3 Personalize asks to join boards. Recognize that potential members may be unaware of opportunities or how their unique skill sets may be able to be utilized.

"I think there are a lot of good people. Even though they have an active life if someone was to ask them to participate, they would participate. It's always nice to be asked. And some people might think they don't have the talents to help anybody, but they certainly do." -Bill, Dudley

3. Optimize Board Make-ups

Many communities operate municipal boards or committees with only 3 members. This often creates open-meeting law snafus, reluctance to get involved in the first place, and difficult personal relationships can be exacerbated in these situations.

3.1 Avoid 3-person boards for quorum issues and personal relationship conflicts. Many communities in the Commonwealth have expanded Board and Committee membership in order to increase diversity, ease quorum issues, and allow for duties to be more equitably delegated. Some communities have justified the change through governance studies, such as this one from the Town of Sharon:
<https://www.townofsharon.net/governance-study-committee/pages/resources-b-governance-study-committee-research-findings>

*"We went from a three-person board to a five-person board which has been wonderful. Enough work for everybody. It makes it easier to talk to other individuals because open meeting law in Massachusetts says you can't talk to another board member of the board without declaring it a public meeting. With five members you can talk to one other person without declaring a quorum."
- Dr. Tapscott, Uxbridge*

"I haven't really sought to volunteer for any of those boards because, really, it all comes back to the fact that I like to avoid conflict!"

3.2 Allow alternates for older members with health concerns or fatigue. Offering pathways to participation without concern for extenuating circumstances can build trust and involvement. This change to a Board's makeup may need to be codified in a local bylaw, as

evidenced by Lexington, MA, and other communities – such as Southborough – have noted that alternates are key to making sure a board can fulfill its duties, saying that “*The Town is promoting the need for an alternate member to step in when needed on Zoning Board of Appeals decisions.*”

<https://www.lexingtonma.gov/1848/SECTION-933-ASSOCIATE-PLANNING-BOARD-MEM>

<https://www.mysouthborough.com/2023/07/26/zba-seeking-alternate-members>

- 3.3 Consider term limits to shorten the time of responsibility and create regular opportunities for new participation.** Municipal boards often rely on long-serving volunteers whose experience and institutional knowledge are extremely valuable. At the same time, when positions remain filled for long periods, it can unintentionally discourage new residents from getting involved or create the perception that civic roles require an indefinite commitment. Establishing more defined service periods may help create natural opportunities for new members to participate while still allowing experienced volunteers to contribute their knowledge through mentorship, advisory roles, or future service. Framing civic participation as something people can step into for a defined period may make it easier for residents to say yes to volunteering and help boards bring in new ideas while maintaining continuity.

“We have 60 volunteers. We have so many volunteers we don’t know what to do with them. What is that? I try to talk about it to help people see that it’s because we let volunteers come and go. We have very active people that were very active for 2 years and now they don’t do anything. And they say to me ‘I’m sorry I can’t be a volunteer’ and we say that is so fine. You leaving gives us a chance to get someone else in here” -Evy, Founder 19Carter, Berlin

- 3.4 Emphasize the benefits of intergenerational membership.** Towns can recognize the positive learning opportunities that come from intergenerational groups, and may be able to increase participation of younger members by leveraging community service opportunities.

Focus: Retention

Retaining municipal volunteers, elected officials, and committee members is becoming increasingly difficult due to accessibility issues, time pressures, and the growing complexity of local governance. Volunteers are often asked to take on expanding responsibilities, navigate regulatory requirements, and respond to heightened public scrutiny, frequently with limited or no administrative support or training. Meeting schedules and uncompensated workloads can further discourage service. When experienced volunteers leave, communities lose expertise, relationships, and momentum, increasing strain on remaining members and reducing the overall stability and effectiveness of local government.

4. Trainings

Once on board, municipal volunteers are often faced with a steep learning curve. Topical and specialized trainings are available for volunteer and elected members, as well as opportunities for broader, more generalized trainings on leadership, governmental process, meeting rules, and community interaction and engagement.

- 4.1 **Host or provide trainings for specific boards and responsibilities.** When available, take advantage of trainings and informational webinars that are applicable to specific boards or committees. Organizations such as the Citizen Planner Training Collaborative and the Massachusetts Association of Health Boards offer free or inexpensive sessions directed at staff, board members, or laypeople working or volunteering for municipalities. The Town of Concord links to a number of trainings and presentations designed to benefit municipal volunteers: <https://concordma.gov/1893/Committee-Resources-Laws>
<https://masscptc.org/index.php/training/>
<https://www.mahb.org/category/training/>
- 4.2 **Offer trainings for full boards to understand personal role and long-term vision.** It can be helpful for municipal boards and committees to define and understand their mission; this can be accomplished through trainings, strategic planning, and discussion among members.
- 4.3 **Provide leadership training for chairs and future chairs.** There are opportunities for board and committee members to learn effective strategies and techniques when acting as the Chair. Directing and guiding a group of volunteers requires special skills, and organizations such as the Massachusetts Municipal Association, Massachusetts Association of School Committees, and Leadership MetroWest can build those skills. This allows for a more cohesive, effective, and efficient committee, that can better serve the community.
<https://leadershipmetrowest.org/>
<https://www.masc.org/events-landing/charting-the-course>
<https://www.mma.org/members/msa>

5. Assist in meeting basic needs for meeting participation

In some cases, board or committee meetings are difficult to attend due to transportation or other accessibility constraints. In order to adequately recruit, retain, and accommodate volunteers, consideration should be given to making meeting locations accessible to all residents.

5.1 Provide transportation options for volunteers. Transportation is a noted barrier to participation in volunteer activities. Towns would benefit from supporting those with limited transportation options to enhance and increase engagement and participation on boards and committees. This has been implemented through travel reimbursements for members in Nantucket (<https://www.nantucket-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/23999/Committee-Handbook---Updated-Feb-2022>). Other communities have eliminated travel issues by holding either hybrid or fully remote meetings, as allowed by law (<https://www.mma.org/gov-signs-extension-of-remote-and-hybrid-meeting-allowances>).

“The nutrition program I can’t do anymore because of transportation. I have to be the one that’s early and I can’t be late, especially in the winter.”

“When I have to give up my license I’m going to be a very sad person” - Patricia, Rutland

5.2 Make sure meeting spaces and online platforms are fully accessible. Towns should think intentionally about making meetings as accessible as possible for all. This provides opportunities for participation that may otherwise be impossible. Grant funding is available through the Municipal ADA Improvement program (<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/municipal-ada-improvement-grant-program>) in the event that town buildings or infrastructure require renovations or upgrades.

“They should have a disabled person come along in a wheelchair or something similar and say is this really accessible because there’s a lot of places that say they’re accessible, but you can’t get to the bathroom. Sometimes I base where I’m going on if its accessible. You have to. Some people become disabled and now they say I can’t go, this isn’t for me anymore. And that’s difficult.” -Amy, Shrewsbury

5.3 **Provide food and refreshments.** Food and refreshments both incentivize meetings as well as make them more comfortable for members. The Town of Mansfield’s Financial Policies specifically allow for town funds to be used for this purpose.
(<https://www.mass.gov/doc/mansfield-financial-policies/download>)

“Food! People come together around food.” -Eva, North Brookfield

5.4 **Rethink meeting days & times based on committee member availability and the availability of other attendees.** Consider using scheduling tools to match availability. Many organizational handbooks in MA municipalities provide recommendations and processes for rescheduling meetings and recognize that flexibility is a necessity (Paxton is a good example: <https://www.paxtonma.gov/town-clerk-board-registrars/pages/meetings>) – this ability should be used in a way that best serves the public as well as the board members so that attendance is as regular as possible.

*“The select board, finance board, those types of (boards) all meet at night at the convenience of the business community. But it’s hard for the business community too who would rather do it during the working day and do something else at night. So, it meets at a time that’s hard for people who can’t drive at night, don’t like to drive at night, or are just tired at the end of the day.”
- Sue, Uxbridge*

6. Member Recognition and Succession Planning

Volunteers frequently fly under the radar and may not always receive recognition for their efforts and accomplishments. While accolades are not an expectation, acknowledgement of achievements can increase morale and individual happiness and may lead to a greater personal investment in volunteer responsibilities.

6.1 **Hold annual and regular activities for volunteer acknowledgement.** Town Boards and committees should make an effort to express appreciation for their volunteers to increase awareness of their activities as well as foster pride among members.

“Every volunteer place that I have ever worked for has always acknowledged us- with a dinner once a year, to say thank you for all you volunteers.”- Kay, Worcester

- 6.2 **Borrow culture from places that have an easy time recruiting volunteers.** Use existing models that are successful in finding volunteers, even if the organization may have a different mission or purpose.

“We welcome everyone who comes through the door. That’s part of what we do...We have somebody that sits at the front door, and when the person walks in, we say ‘Welcome...’ The group I was talking to said, ‘We don’t have staff for that’. I’m like, ‘We do it with volunteers!’ ”
- Evy, 19 Carter

- 6.3 **Ask each board member to identify and mentor potential future chairs and members.**

Municipal boards and committees benefit greatly from the knowledge of their members, and collaborative learning experiences help to build cohesion and consistency. Preparing future members and chairs for the position sets the group up for success and builds confidence among members. The town of Wellesley’s Select Board Handbook recommends that a continuing member works to “familiarize the new member with the practice and work of the Board to minimize transition time and support their contributions to the board.” (<https://www.wellesleyma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/48203/Select-Board-Handbook-June-2025>)

- 6.4 **Create “vice-chair” roles or unofficial paths to build a leadership pipeline.** Many communities in the region plan for succession by requiring boards and committees to elect vice-chairs. This builds the knowledge base of board members, and maintains continuity if/when the Chair is unable to attend a meeting. (<https://www.westboroughma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1517/Committee-Handbook-PDF>)

“I’m blessed to be living with someone...and we’ve been together a long time. Other than that, if we weren’t living together my contacts with people in local government and these projects I do would be elevated to a new level of importance...Even with that its still incredibly wonderful. Having contacts of people that you trust that you can listen to is wonderfully important and healthy as a person.”

- Dr. Tapscott, Uxbridge

Municipal Happy Factor Report Card

Always	Sometimes	Never	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Town staff capacity includes personalized recruitment of seniors to board positions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our town website is up to date with board vacancies and contact information.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our town website includes descriptions and responsibilities for boards.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Board vacancies are promoted through local and regional digital and print media.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Town meetings are promoted through existing department newsletters, such as the library or Council on Aging.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town hosts informal meet and greets with town boards through an organized volunteer fair or tabling at existing community events like farmers' markets and fairs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town promotes a Resource Guide with local non-profits, boards, and committee positions.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All Town boards have more than 4 people.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All Town boards allow and support alternates.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our boards have term limits.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Town staff organizes and supports training for board members (current and potential).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Town staff organizes and supports full board retreats and trainings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Town staff organizes and supports leadership training for chairs and potential chairs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town organizes transportation (for example, a partnership with Council on Aging buses) to public meetings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town only hosts public meetings at fully accessible buildings and meeting rooms.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town is actively implementing an updated ADA Compliance Plan.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town provides water and light refreshments at town meetings.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town regularly hosts activities to acknowledge volunteer efforts.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting lengths do not last longer than advertised.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Our Town has regular boards or committee meetings that adjourn before the sun sets.

Mini Grants

To support implementation of the recommendations identified through the Happy Factor project, CMRPC will offer a small round of mini-grants to municipalities and community-based organizations in Central Massachusetts. These grants are intended to help communities test practical strategies that reduce barriers to civic participation among older adults and strengthen connections between residents and local government.

Purpose

The mini-grant program is designed to translate the findings of the Happy Factor project into local action. Through interviews with older adults across the region, the project identified a number of barriers that limit civic participation, including a lack of awareness of opportunities, accessibility challenges, transportation barriers, and meeting structures that can be difficult for volunteers to attend or navigate.

Mini-grants will support local efforts that address these barriers by implementing strategies aligned with the recommendations in this report. Communities are encouraged to propose practical projects that make civic participation more accessible, welcoming, and sustainable for older adults.

Eligibility

Eligible applicants include municipalities within the CMRPC region and community-based organizations that support older adults' engagement in local government. Applicants must demonstrate how their proposed project connects directly to one or more recommendations identified in the Happy Factor report.

Funding

CMRPC will allocate approximately \$20,000 in remaining project funds to support a round of mini-grants. Individual awards are expected to range from approximately \$1,000 to \$5,000, depending on the scope of the proposed project.

Application Process

Applicants will complete a roughly 10-minute application via Survey Monkey describing their proposed activity, how it connects to the recommendations in this report, and how the funding will be used. The application process is intentionally designed to be simple and accessible in order to encourage participation from municipalities, volunteer groups, and community organizations.

Review Process

Applications will be reviewed by a small team coordinated by CMRPC. Interested members of the Central Massachusetts Age-Friendly Coalition and individuals who participated in Happy Factor

interviews will be invited to provide input on the applications. Projects will be evaluated based on alignment with the report recommendations, feasibility within the project timeline, and the potential to reduce barriers to civic participation for older adults.

Timeline

The mini-grant application will open in early April 2026, with awards announced in May 2026.

Outreach

CMRPC will promote the mini-grant opportunity through direct outreach to municipalities, Councils on Aging, and community-based organizations. The opportunity will also be shared through the Central Massachusetts Age-Friendly Coalition and with participants who contributed to the Happy Factor project. The application link will be posted on the CMRPC website:

<https://cmrpc.org/happyfactor>

Lessons from funded projects will help inform future regional work aimed at strengthening civic engagement and reducing social isolation among older adults.