



# Aging in Somerville: A Community Needs Assessment Report Summary

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A community needs assessment was undertaken by the Center for Social & Demographic Research on Aging (CSDRA) within the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts Boston, on behalf of the City of Somerville to support planning on the part of the City of Somerville, the Council on Aging (COA), and the community as a whole. **The goals of this project were to investigate the needs, interests, preferences, and opinions of Somerville residents age 60 or older by engaging the community regarding their experiences and needs relevant to the Council on Aging's (COA's) objective to identify and serve the needs of all Somerville citizens 60 and older.**

A broad range of findings are presented in the full report, highlighting the many positive features of Somerville as well as concerns expressed by older residents. While many of our findings, and the recommendations that follow, intersect with the scope of responsibility of the Somerville Council on Aging, it is understood that responding to many needs and concerns expressed in the community will require the involvement of other municipal offices or community stakeholders, and some will require substantial collaborative effort. This overview document summarizes the key findings and presents recommendations with potential action items the city could consider implementing to address the identified needs. For more details, please refer to the full report.

## Project Components

- ❖ A demographic profile of Somerville, focused on the older population
- ❖ Key informant interviews with 5 stakeholders who have direct experience with aging in Somerville
- ❖ A community survey of residents age 60+
  - The survey was open to all older residents, with access online, by phone, and by paper
  - We mailed paper copies to a random sample of 5,000 residents age 60 or older and additional paper copies were available at the COA
  - The paper survey was also available in Chinese, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish
  - We received 1,519 responses to the survey, representing a strong survey return rate of 30% and representing approximately 15% of the City's 60+ population

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## Somerville Council on Aging: Opportunities for Growth and Recommendations



**Key finding: Many older residents are not aware of the full range of offerings at the COA. As well, there is a perception that one must have “need” to participate at the COA, not just desire.** Among those who never participate at the COA, 41% reported that they do not know what is offered, and 31% reported that they do not need the services offered. Furthermore, “if I had more knowledge about programs and services available” was a top response from both participants (36%) and non-participants (61%) when asked what would increase the likelihood of attendance at the COA.

**Recommendation: Focus efforts on increasing awareness of the Council on Aging.** The COA currently advertises programs and services through a variety of media (e.g., COA newsletter in print and online, social media, email). In addition to continuing those efforts, consider expanding outreach efforts and messaging. Residents will realize even stronger benefits from the COA when awareness is strengthened.

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**Key finding: Programs that support active aging are desired by many survey participants, especially among those who do not currently attend.** A quarter of non-participants and 35% of COA participants would be more likely to participate in Somerville COA offerings if programs and services were better suited to their needs and interests. Among all survey respondents, 37% prioritize indoor fitness programs for expansion, followed by day trips and excursions (35%), lectures and other one-time education events (33%), and performances (33%). Older Somerville residents want opportunities to remain not only physically active, but intellectually and socially active as well.

**Recommendation: Expand programs and services offered by the COA to reach a broader segment of Somerville residents.** While the COA already offers a variety of programs, identifying opportunities for expansion is critical to continue meeting the needs and interests of older residents of Somerville, which is comprised of a very diverse group of individuals, backgrounds, and experiences.



**Key finding: The Somerville Council on Aging provides crucial programs and services to a portion of Somerville residents; but its capacity to serve the diverse needs and preferences of older residents is limited.** The COA has seen increased demand for services since the pandemic and is managing waitlists for nutrition services (i.e., lunches) and cultural events because neither the Holland Street Center nor the Ralph & Jenny Center have sufficient space to accommodate current demand. Approximately 1 in 5 survey respondents would be more likely to attend COA programs and services if it included residents of all ages and functioned as a community center. When survey respondents were asked to rate their preferences for each of three scenarios regarding how and where COA programs and services are provided, no clear ‘winner’ resulted, with large shares of non-participants selecting “I don’t know.”

**Recommendation: Address immediate space needs of the Council on Aging, focusing on short-term accommodations.** The COA is already at capacity with its current space. Some of the recommended programmatic changes cannot be implemented without access to additional space.

**Recommendation: Collaborate with City leadership and other departments to plan for long-term space needs.** Further community engagement and assessment is needed before making any major or long-term decisions about COA space changes (e.g., new location, community center, etc.).

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## Aging in Somerville: Opportunities for Growth and Recommendations



**Key finding: Maintaining safety and quality of walkability and access to public transit are top priorities for older residents. This is particularly true for those with mobility limitations.** Although older adults value walkability around Somerville, navigating uneven sidewalks, poor snow removal, and bike lane safety were described as common challenges for older residents by three key informants. About two-thirds of survey respondents rely on driving themselves to get around, though that share decreases with age. About 23% of older residents who do not drive have had to miss, cancel, or reschedule a medical appointment in the past 12 months, compared to 16% of those who drive with some limitations (e.g., avoid driving at night or on highways), and just 3% of those who drive with no limitations. Nearly 1 in 5 survey respondents identified lack of parking as a difficulty getting needed transportation. Moreover, 21% reported public transportation being unavailable, inconvenient, or unreliable as a difficulty.

**Recommendation: Continue efforts to make Somerville accessible for all, with particular attention on those with mobility impairments and advanced age.** Build upon current initiatives to improve walkability and safety across Somerville. Consider expanding transportation options available to older residents, which can help reduce dependence on driving.



**Key finding: Accessibility of current housing stock, including ongoing home repair and maintenance are key features to being able to age well in Somerville.** Older residents are concerned about their ability to maintain and modify their homes; if they cannot, they are concerned about where they would be able to move to and stay in Somerville. About half (54%) of the survey respondents need home repairs to continue living in their residence safely. A third of survey respondents would prefer a senior independent living community if they had to move in the next 5 years due to health or physical ability; 23% would prefer a condo or town home. Older residents need more information and access to resources as well as greater availability of alternative housing, both with services included and independent living.

**Recommendation: Continue to develop, implement, and advertise information and resources that support aging in the community.** Find ways to promote existing resources available to older residents, such as direct support services provided by the Office of Housing Stability<sup>1</sup>. Continue and expand the support of the Somerville Housing Authority to provide affordable housing options as well as case management services for residents.



**Key finding: Financial insecurity among older adults is a growing concern, as many face challenges in maintaining quality of life and good health.** The median household income for Somerville residents age 65 and older is \$41,630, which is less than a third of the median household income for younger Somerville residents. Survey respondents of color reported greater financial insecurity than white non-Hispanic or Latine survey respondents, when asked if they have adequate resources to meet financial needs and if they have worried about food running out before getting money to buy more. Rising costs of rent and property taxes are among the major drivers of financial insecurity in later life coupled with the rising costs of things like insurance, utilities, and groceries, which make being able to stay in Somerville on a fixed income near impossible for many who have called Somerville home for decades.

**Recommendation: Bolster communication & information about existing financial security supports.** Strengthen communication across City departments and organizations about resources available to help seniors who are struggling financially. Strengthen mechanisms for other City Departments and local organizations to refer residents to outreach staff at the Senior Center when a community member is known to need assistance.

**Recommendation: Facilitate new approaches to address financial insecurity.** Forge new partnerships with local businesses and organizations and develop programs focused on financial literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.somervillema.gov/departments/office-strategic-planning-and-community-development-ospcd/office-housing-stability>



**Key finding: Caregiving is common, and families could use support.** A third of survey respondents reported providing care or assistance to someone with a disability or frailty in the past 5 years. Caregiving was higher among younger seniors (41% of those in their 60s), who are also more likely to still be working. Almost two-thirds of caregivers described their experience as somewhat or very challenging. The most frequently identified supports that were or would have been helpful included informal support from friends and family (47% of caregivers) and formal in-home caregiving or homemaking services (35% of caregivers).

**Recommendation: Enhance direct support for caregivers in Somerville.** Create new ways of providing information and assistance for caregivers, support groups for caregivers, and provide information about referral resources available.

**Recommendation: Promote public education and awareness of caregiving experiences, particularly for Alzheimer’s Disease and other dementias, as indirect support for caregivers.** Dementia Friendly Massachusetts<sup>2</sup> can provide resources and sample materials.

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**Key finding: Risk of social and political isolation among older residents is growing.** About 37% of older adults live alone in Somerville; that increases by age with almost half (48%) of those age 80 or older living alone. Those who live alone reported worse emotional wellbeing than those who live with others. About 16% of respondents reported feeling excluded in Somerville due to age, and there were several written responses that articulated a sense that older residents are not valued by the community or local policymakers; many of which included a call for additional advocacy and recognition of residents of all ages. Older residents of Somerville have a complex set of needs and wide range of interests in social, recreational, and civic activities—they would benefit not only from new opportunities for engagement but increased awareness of existing opportunities.

**Recommendation: Mobilize neighborhoods and communities within Somerville to combat social isolation.** Drawing on neighborhood connections, Somerville could foster ways for residents to work together on strategies for addressing social isolation among seniors.

**Recommendation: Foster and expand strategies to empower older adults living in Somerville to remain civically engaged through advocacy and volunteer work.** Continue efforts such as the Somerville Civic Day<sup>3</sup>, and identify new ways for getting older residents involved.

**Recommendation: Greater awareness and understanding of the diversity of aging experiences is needed.** Identify ways to educate the public as well as City staff and elected officials to reframe aging as active an experience and to dispel notions of ageism.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dfmassachusetts.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.somervillema.gov/civic-day>