

Coffee and Conversation

Looking for a friend?
Visit a local senior center.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Laura Jean Whitcomb

A few ladies are seated on the couch, chatting about local news. Some couples are standing, other individuals are milling about, and there's a group crowded around the piano for a good, old-fashioned sing before lunch. It's a typical day at the Kaarle Lehtinen Senior Center in Newport, one of the local senior centers offering daily meals to seniors.

"We see about 40 people each day," says Joan Willey, director. "More on Wednesday, which is bingo day."



An old-fashioned sing, with Rita Smith at the piano, adds a festive air to the lunch at the Newport Senior Center.

“It depends on the meal,” says Larry Eaton, vice president. The lunch is provided by Sullivan County Nutrition, a state-funded program with variety of services from congregate dining to meals on wheels in three towns: Newport, Claremont and Charlestown. The Newport Senior Center, as it is commonly called, was formed in 1972. It moved from place to place until 1987, when it relocated to a former supermarket building on the corner of Route 10 and Church Street.

People come for the balanced meals, which are \$2 (\$3.50 for those under 60) and served at tables with family-style seating. “I like the variety,” says Eaton, a Sunapee resident. “Some kids like carrots; some don’t. We don’t scold them.”

Willey laughs. “You can have the carrot if you want or you can leave it on your plate.”

People also come for the companionship. There’s music every day at noon, with Rita Smith at the piano. Tables form a large “U”, and people can sit with friends or sit with people they don’t know. “I like everything about it,” says Pauline Cunningham of Newport. “I come most every day. You become a family. You care for each other and keep in contact.”

People need people

Aging isn’t easy, and living in a rural area of New Hampshire can make it even more difficult. How do you find a friend when there’s no public transportation? Or if Mother Nature has gently iced your front sidewalk and you’re not as steady on your feet as you used to be? And your immediate family lives hundreds of miles away?

The Mountain View Senior Center in Bradford has a few tricks up its sleeve to keep seniors connected with the community. For example, the Meals-on-Wheels driver combines a meal delivery with a wellness check. “Not all clients are the same,” says Phil Stockwell, director. “There are some frail older adults without family, and the driver may be the only person they have contact with.”

Stockwell periodically rides with each of the three drivers on the routes through Bradford, Warner and Contoocook so he can meet clients, see what they might need, and get them in touch with services that might be helpful. “Fifty percent of the delivery is a meal, but the other 50 percent is a safety and wellness check. We make sure they are comfortable, and there is no immediate need or anything out of the ordinary that might imperil this person,” he says. “If there is, the driver

might call me or call their emergency contact person.”

Last Christmas, Stockwell proposed an idea to his volunteers: get as many Meals-on-Wheels clients to the center’s annual noontime Christmas party. “There are a number of people who don’t get out at all,” says Stockwell. Two large donated fresh turkeys were hand carved and served with all the fixings, and attendees were entertained by the Kearsarge Regional

► COFFEE & CONVERSATION *continued on p. 44*

NEED A RIDE?

We love our cars. But when we lose the ability to drive, it is a life altering event — especially when you live in a rural area.

“It is easy to age in place as long as you have the facilities to drive and a decent pension plan. The hard part is, especially in New Hampshire, if you’re not able to drive,” says Scott Fabry, president of Lake Sunapee Region VNA & Hospice. “There are ride boards, but if you have a regular need for transportation, you’ll be in a lot of trouble.”

“When people lose the ability to drive, there’s not a lot of transportation available for them,” says Lila Dickinson of Armistead Caregiver Services, a Lebanon-based organization that subcontracts to the Lake Sunapee Region VNA & Hospice. “Neighbors are further apart than they used to be, and sometimes family isn’t nearby.”

In Grantham, three good citizens have formed an organization to help those who have an occasional need for transportation. Ebba McArt and Ted and Heddy Fantl are the three coordinators of Grantham Good Neighbors, a group of volunteers who will drive folks to doctor’s appointments or pick up prescriptions.

“An elderly man was hospitalized with a broken hip. He was able to return home after several weeks,

but had a number of physical therapy visits,” describes McArt. Grantham Good Neighbors would pick him up, bring him to his appointment, and bring him home. “We are also set up to help someone pick up groceries or run an errand. It’s been pretty busy. Slowly but surely the word is getting out.”

Although Grantham Good Neighbors helps people of all ages — such as a stay-at-home mom with no car during the day — they know there are more seniors in town who could use the help. “We think it’s the Yankee mindset or something. People will often turn to a friend or relative but it takes a little courage to call someone cold,” says McArt. “We suspect there are a few other folks out there who could use some assistance.”

In New London, the COA Chapin Senior Center offers a transportation service to seniors, so there hasn’t been the pressure on the town to offer public transportation. That doesn’t mean the town isn’t thinking about it, however. “New London is a hub,” says Town Administrator Jessie Levine. “Long range, I can envision a public transportation loop from one end of town to the other. But it’s an effect of the greening of the economy as well as aging. People just want to drive less.”

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COFFEE & CONVERSATION *continued from page 43*
High School Girls Chorus. "Our drivers donned Santa caps, picked up and returned our guests, and passed out the gift bags to their respective clients, who were most appreciative! Out of 54 clients, 30 attended. Everyone had such a good feeling about it."

"Social isolation is the biggest challenge for aging people. Senior centers create a community for people. It's vital," says Nancy Friese.

"We offer many programs and services, but we also want older adults to have fun and be connected to other older adults for meaningful relationships," says Kris Bregler, assistant director of Elder Services with the Community Action Program Belknap-Merrimack Counties, Inc. (CAP-BM). CAP-BM is a nonprofit organization that sponsors and manages 85 programs designed to meet the needs of children, families, single parents and the elderly. "For many seniors, the center is a home away from home."

Find what you need

Every senior is unique. Some will accept outside help, while others are fiercely independent. Some have the companionship of a spouse, while others do not. A widow-to-widow support group, sponsored by the Lake Sunapee Region VNA & Hospice,

> COFFEE & CONVERSATION *continued on page 46*

RESOURCES

Mountain View Senior Center
Bradford
938-2104

Kaarle Lehtinen Senior Center
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863-3177

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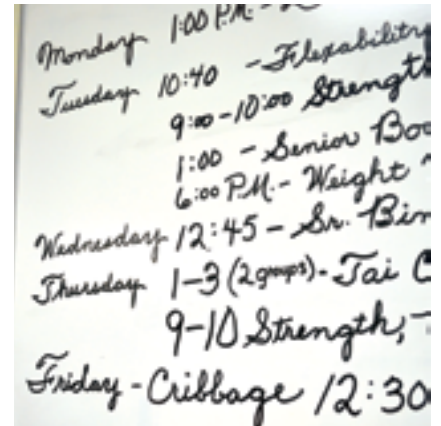


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COFFEE & CONVERSATION continued from page 44 meets monthly for six weeks three times a year, but a group for men didn't work out the same way it did for the women.

“The women go out to lunch with each other,” says Meg Ames, bereavement coordinator for hospice and volunteer coordinator for the Lake Sunapee Region VNA & Hospice. “They have a bond that only a widow can have; there are lots of tears but lots of laughs, too. Men grieve differently, and they don't want to talk about this stuff. The one man who showed up to the widower group said, ‘I don't want to sit around and talk about my feelings.’”



The Newport Senior Center activity board is full of options.



A Bradford Senior Center outing

The Tom & Tom's Men's Discussion Group at the COA Chapin Senior Center, located on Pleasant Street in New London, is a different story. Guys meet for coffee one morning a week, and share stories, talk about politics and tell bad jokes. “The people you meet at the men's group turn into friends, social connections,” says Nancy Friese, executive director of the COA. “Social isolation is the biggest challenge for aging people. Senior centers create a




Joan Willey helps organize the Friday afternoon cribbage games.

community for people. It's vital."

Don't expect that the senior center you visited once 10 years ago is only offering knitting groups or weekly bingo. "People underestimate senior centers; they have a perception that isn't reality," says Friese. "At the COA, we have many outdoor programs: kayaking every Tuesday, bicycling every Friday. People want to socialize, want to work out, want to give back and have a sense of purpose. They want friends."

The CAP-BM team is always on the lookout for ways to make programs more inviting. A new dining opportunity, called Café Bienvenue, offers a buffet with brunch items. You don't have to line up promptly at 11:30 for the meal; you can visit any time during the hour and select what you'd like to eat. Café Bienvenue is available one day a week at all nine dining sites, including Bradford on Wednesdays. "We want to bring programs and opportunities to older adults that they might not have access to," says Bregler. "If we can get one person to come through the door, we're good at finding out what they might need."

"I encourage seniors to drop into our center and see what it is all about," says Eaton of the Newport Senior Center. "If they are looking for their friends, they should check out a center." 



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