

**MOBILITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN WATERTOWN:
AN ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

PREPARED BY

WATERTOWN FOR ALL AGES – TRANSPORTATION INITIATIVE FOR SENIORS

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MOBILITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN WATERTOWN: AN ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PROJECT REPORT

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Supporting information is found in a separate document, *Supporting Information for Project Report*

**That document, and an *Executive Summary* of this report, are available on the WAA website:
www.watertownforallages.org.**

MOBILITY FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN WATERTOWN: AN ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BACKGROUND

What Watertown’s older residents say about their mobility needs:

I’ve got friends that would love to come down to the Senior Center or the library, but don’t have the means. Watertown, yes, it’s convenient and kind of small in a way, but still, when you’re in your eighties, you’re not able to walk down to the library or down to the town hall and pay taxes and things like that.

I need to get to the Veterans Administration facilities in Bedford and JP. Not only am I a disabled veteran, I volunteer at Bedford.

I have to see my ophthalmologist at MIT Medical, and I can’t drive because my eyes are going to be dilated. Trying to get there and back—and I have a bad leg, so it’s hard for me often to take the MBTA to try getting to Kendall Square.

[Not driving] means I miss visiting friends – I can’t get there. I like to go to the movies, which I don’t get to go to.

I’d like occasionally to go to a concert or a play in the evening but can’t. We have some right here in Watertown, and Boston and Cambridge, too.

I missed a Christmas concert this year because I didn’t want to drive there at night and I didn’t have a friend that could drive me. That was too bad.

Not to be morbid, but there have been several tenants who have passed away in the last year, and sometimes it’s a hassle to get to wakes and funerals.

I live within walking distance of the Senior Center, which is a good thing. My church, I go to Payson Park, which is just over the line in Belmont, and they have a contract with Watertown Taxi, so I get a voucher, give it to the driver. I’m lucky in that respect.

-Quotes from Focus Group participants

* * * * *

Watertown for All Ages (WAA) envisions Watertown as an age-friendly community, a place that promotes the well-being and contributions of everyone as they age.

Transportation is an essential component of an age-friendly community. When older people can get where they need and want to go, the whole community benefits. Seniors are healthier mentally and physically. They can engage in the community’s social, cultural and civic activities. They are able to contribute through paid and volunteer work and share their experiences and knowledge at town meetings and forums. Furthermore, efforts to improve mobility for older people directly benefit other residents. Sidewalks that are easy for older people to navigate are easy for someone pushing a stroller. Benches at

bus stops are good for commuters as well as older riders. More convenient transportation options help people with disabilities of all ages as well as seniors with limited mobility.

Watertown is making significant progress in addressing transportation issues. The Department of Community and Development now has a Senior Transportation Planner on staff. The Town Council’s Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee and other groups are looking at infrastructure enhancements. Now is an ideal time to begin to engage older residents in this planning.

Watertown for All Ages – Transportation Initiative for Seniors (WAA–TIS), with funding from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation and the Watertown Community Foundation, spent much of the past year researching how Watertown’s older residents currently get where they need and want to go, identifying unmet needs, and determining how the town can best address these needs in the future.

RESEARCH METHODS

We researched existing mobility options, sources of information about transportation, the experiences of older people, transportation initiatives underway in Watertown, and successful models in other towns, using the following strategies:

- Consultation with members of the WAA–TIS Advisory Committee, who represent town organizations and agencies and the town’s older population
- Six focus groups with 63 older people of varying ages, living situations, physical abilities, and experiences with driving and other forms of mobility
- Individual interviews with a number of older people about their experiences driving and getting around without a car
- Key informant interviews with staff at organizations serving older people
- Interviews with staff who coordinate transportation for older people in 11 nearby cities and towns, and with staff at state agencies knowledgeable about senior transportation issues
- Online collection of information about available transportation modes in Watertown and other communities

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE LEARNED

Older people need and want mobility options that meet specific criteria. Watertown’s older residents described the characteristics a transportation option should have, if it’s to be something they can use on a regular basis. We summarized these characteristics according to four essential criteria.

| Criteria | Definition |
|------------------|---|
| Affordable | Free or subsidized for older people |
| Accessible | Can be used by people with a cane, walker, or rollator; possibly a wheelchair |
| Available to All | No eligibility requirements, such as having a certain income or disability |
| Convenient | Curb-to-curb service, same day service, on demand, variety of destinations |

While Watertown has a variety of transportation options available to older people, none meets all four criteria. Buses are affordable and go to many destinations, but present numerous obstacles for people with physical challenges. The Senior Center Shuttle is affordable, provides door-to-door service by a helpful driver, but is available only certain days per week to specific destinations. Taxis and Transportation Network Companies (e.g. Uber and Lyft) are flexible and convenient but expensive to use on a regular basis.

Many older residents are unaware of what is available and how to access it, despite the fact that several agencies and organizations provide helpful information on current transportation options.

Watertown is well-positioned to address these challenges, with solutions likely to succeed.

Watertown is engaged in a number of initiatives to improve transportation and walkability for all residents. Efforts to address the needs of older people can be integrated into these planning efforts, building on existing services for older people offered by the Council on Aging and Springwell, and drawing on successful models in nearby communities.

A significant outcome of our research this past year is the engagement of town leaders and community members with us and one another in the goal of making Watertown more age-friendly by improving mobility for older residents. We learned that our Advisory Committee, Focus Group participants, and the many individuals we talked with are interested and enthusiastic about addressing the unmet needs we identified in Watertown. We are excited to build upon this momentum and to harness the energy into a strong group of advocates to help campaign for any future transportation initiatives that might be an outgrowth of what we have learned.

NOTE: Supporting information for the needs assessment and recommendations is found in a separate document, *Supporting Information for the Project Report*.

MOBILITY OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO WATERTOWN'S OLDER RESIDENTS

Focus group participants were asked where they need and want to go, and which places are particularly difficult to get to. Essential destinations include medical appointments, food shopping, town offices and church. In addition, they *want* to go places that help them stay engaged mentally, socially and emotionally such as movies, concerts and theater, the library, the hairdresser, the mall, friends' homes, restaurants, exercise facilities. The destinations most often cited as particularly difficult to get to are medical facilities outside of Watertown, anyplace on weekends and evenings, and other towns and cities, especially Belmont and Waltham.

Transportation options listed below are organized by walking/biking, local non-profit and volunteer programs, and regional public and private transportation. A description of each option is followed by an *italicized summary* of Focus Group participants' experiences with that option. Details of mobility options are in Supporting Information, Part A-1 and for the focus groups in Supporting Information, Part A-2.

Walking/Biking

Watertown's Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee is initiating a comprehensive planning process to develop a bicycle and pedestrian plan for the community. This initiative presents a good opportunity to

address the concerns of older people. While walking can be a good option for getting around at least some parts of Watertown, especially in good weather and for people who don't have mobility problems, for those with any kind of mobility issues, this option is limited. The two major commercial districts (Watertown Square and East Watertown) are dense and have crosswalks, some with and some without traffic signals.

Older people's experience:

- *Many appreciate being able to walk to stores, businesses*
- *Older people's concerns:*
 - *Inadequate snow removal on residential streets and around bus stops, curbs, street corners*
 - *Encountering uneven and cracked sidewalks in some areas*
 - *Difficulty crossing streets: Poles with buttons to request WALK aren't always accessible;*
 - *Watertown Sq. is very difficult to get across; cars turn on WALK; drivers aren't considerate of pedestrians*
 - *Bicyclists sometimes ride on sidewalks. Bike lanes in the street can be a problem especially for blind people because they have to cross them to board the bus*

Local non-profit and volunteer organizations

Watertown Senior Center Shuttle: A 22-person (including 2 wheelchair spots) van travels three days/week from the rider's home to specific grocery stores and one afternoon/week to Target/Arsenal Mall. The Town funds the part-time driver.

Older people's experience:

- *Pluses: On time, pick up at house, driver helps with groceries*
- *Problems: One hour isn't enough time in the grocery store; 3-bag limit; want more destinations esp. Market Basket*
- *Some were unaware of it*

Watertown Council on Aging's Emergency Taxi Program: Older residents with no other way to get to a medical appointment can arrange for a taxi by calling the Senior Center. Normally the ride must be arranged 2 days ahead. (Subject to availability of funding.) The ride is free; donation suggested.

Older people's experience:

- *Emergency rides (rides of last resort) from Senior Center helpful but limited*

Transportation options from Springwell: Springwell (the regional Area Agency on Aging) offers transportation options for older people. An overview of these options is on the website at www.springwell.com. Since some services have eligibility requirements, and since the options vary from program to program, Springwell encourages people to call its Information and Consultation experts at 617-926-4100.

Older people's experience with Springwell's medical escort service:

- *Good, but have to plan well in advance*
- *Most people didn't know about it*

Medical transportation for people with low income and/or specific conditions: Several organizations, such as the Cancer Society and hospitals, offer transportation to medical appointments. MassHealth also provides transportation to medical appointments. Restrictions apply in all cases.

Neighbors Who Care: A non-profit organization in Waltham arranges volunteer drivers for older people, including those in Watertown. Rides can be for various purposes, but the number of drivers is very limited, and rides need to be booked in advance.

Friends and Family: Many older residents of Watertown rely on transportation provided by friends and family. This informal option has the advantage of being flexible, covering areas not reached by other options, and providing for assistance carrying items or getting into vehicles.

Regional Public Transportation

MBTA Buses: A number of bus routes serve various sectors of Watertown. The most commonly used routes run frequently during weekdays; less so on weekends and evenings. They operate only on the major thoroughfares, so to access these buses people must get to Main Street, Mt. Auburn Street, Trapelo Road/Belmont Street, or Arsenal Street. Destinations include Cambridge, Waltham, parts of Boston (including a local bus to Kenmore Square and two express buses at the Watertown Square terminus), and Needham (via Newton). Older people are eligible for a reduced fare with a Senior Charlie Card.

Older people's experience:

- *Bus stops: Not enough shelters or benches; signage is unclear*
- *Sidewalks: Can be hilly, cracked, icy in some places, making it difficult to get to and from a bus, even if stop is nearby*
- *Routes: No bus on Pleasant St; some routes don't run on Saturday; need more frequent transfer points; no cross-town bus (e.g., Mt. Auburn St. to Belmont St. or Trapelo Rd)*
- *The bus ride itself: Hard to get on and off bus; starts before person can sit down; people take a seat that's supposed to be reserved for older people*

The RIDE: Anyone who has a disability that prevents them from using the MBTA bus or train some or all of the time is eligible for The RIDE, the MBTA's door-to-door, shared-ride paratransit service provided in a van or car. Eligibility requires a letter from a primary care physician, registration and an interview with the MBTA in Boston. 1-7 days advance booking is required. The RIDE has a [pilot program](#) with Uber and Lyft, which allows riders to book their rides through one of those services. (See: <https://www.mbta.com/accessibility/the-ride/on-demand-pilot>)

Older people's experience:

- *Pluses: Inexpensive; drivers are courteous and help you get in and out of vehicle; best if you use it on a regular schedule*
- *Problems: Timing can be a challenge because of carpool model; sometimes pick-up location is mixed up and the person misses the ride*

Private/For Profit Companies

Transportation Network Companies

Uber and Lyft are widely available in Watertown.

Older people's experience:

- *Pluses: Very caring service; flexibility is wonderful; for blind riders—'a game changer'*

- *Problems: Sometimes driver refuses to take service dog (refusing is illegal); language differences can be a challenge; some drivers won't get out of the car to help; some wait across the street and we can't see them (need better communication)*
- *Reasons they haven't tried it: No smart phone; cost too high; don't have a credit card; apprehensive about traveling in a stranger's car and of traveling alone.*

GoGoGrandparent: This national for-profit company offers 24-hour service on Lyft or Uber to callers, for a fee in addition to the TNC cost.

Older people's experience:

- *Pluses: Can connect to Uber or Lyft without having a smartphone*
- *Problems: expensive*
- *Reasons they haven't tried it: Most hadn't heard of it*

Taxis: Watertown is currently served by only one company, Watertown Taxi.

Older people's experience:

- *Limited number of vehicles; experience is mixed*

Private home care organizations: Some agencies include transportation as one of the services offered clients, for a fee.

TRANSPORTATION-RELATED INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE AVAILABLE TO WATERTOWN RESIDENTS

Organizations that provide information/guidance re: transportation to older people

The Watertown Senior Center is the most comprehensive resource on transportation options in Watertown, providing free transportation-related information and referral to consumers on a daily basis through phone and in-person consultations, in their monthly newsletter, and in its new directory. Tel. 617-972-6490

(See: https://www.watertown-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/26650/WatertownCOA_Directory-of-Senior-Resources_2019)

Springwell is the local Area Agency on Aging and the Aging Services Access Point and has a wealth of information available to older residents of Watertown. The Community Resource Specialists in the Information and Consultation (I & C) department are specially trained to offer help in finding transportation options tailored to an individual's needs. There is no charge for this service. It is available to anyone who is looking for information and resources, regardless of age, issue or location.

In addition, Springwell has an extensive resource library with many books, videos, and pamphlets that is open to the public. However, because it may be challenging for older residents to get to Springwell's offices in Waltham, it is recommended that people call the I & C specialists for individualized assistance. In addition to providing information by phone, I & C staff will also mail (or email) materials upon request. Contact information: 617-926-4100 or inforef@springwell.com.

Watertown Free Public Library: The Watertown Public Library has bus schedules, pamphlets, flyers, and official information from the Town of Watertown about transportation options within

Watertown. Transportation help may be found at the reference desk. In addition, there is often information posted on the bulletin boards that may be helpful in finding transportation services.

MassOptions (MassOptions.org) has a very useful chat function and a toll-free number (1-844-422-6277) that can give more personalized help.

Resource Guides/ Databases

Ride Match is a statewide website that offers a one-stop searchable directory of public, private, and accessible transportation options in MA. Users indicate where they want to go, whether they have special requirements (e.g., related to cost, accessibility) and are given various options, with descriptions and contact information. <https://massridematch.org>

Senior Transportation Resource & Information Guide: Brookline & Newton, MA

Profiles of 40+ transportation options, including information on cost, hours, coverage areas, eligibility, accessibility, contact details, and much more. The guide is created for Newton and Brookline, but many entries would be relevant for Watertown residents as well. (See: <https://trippsmass.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/trig201610-bw.pdf>)

800AgeInfo is a searchable online database of all Massachusetts resources for older adults. <http://800ageinfo.com/site/>

Workshops for older people

RMV Safe Driving Workshops: The Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles (RMV) offers free workshops on issues facing older drivers, their families, and caregivers: 1) Shifting Gears – rules of the road, defensive driving, and safe driving tips; 2) The Driving Decision – Advice for families and providers who are concerned about a person’s ability to drive safely; 3) Disability Placards and Plates – information on how to obtain a placard or plate and the laws governing them 4) Real ID – Information on new federal and state requirements concerning driver’s license and ID card

renewals. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/older-drivers#safe-driving-workshops-and-travel-instruction-training->

Smart phone instruction workshops: The Watertown COA recently offered a workshop for older people interested in learning how to use their smartphones to contact Uber or Lyft. The workshop was facilitated by a TRIPPS instructor, who is available for additional sessions.

Travel Training: The MBTA’s travel training is a free program for older people and people with disabilities. Individual instruction and 2.5-hour workshops are available. Topics include: trip planning, boarding, exiting, operational responsibility, general safety, and where to get a Charlie Card. Forty-nine individual Watertown residents have used this program over the past few years; most are people with disabilities. Likewise, Perkins and employment centers in Watertown have requested group sessions – primarily for people with disabilities, not older people.

Contact: Kelley Campbell: 857-283-4484 or email: howtotravel@mbta.com.

See *Travel Instruction* – August 2016 (Program Brief describes the service, how to access it, tools and how to implement a travel instruction program) [Travel Instruction - August 2016](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/10/31/Travel%20Instruction.pdf?_ga=2.69692884.554405332.1553022459-1872616260.1553022459)
(https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2017/10/31/Travel%20Instruction.pdf?_ga=2.69692884.554405332.1553022459-1872616260.1553022459)

Older people's experience accessing information

Lack of information was a theme in all the focus groups. In each group, a number of participants who were either unaware of or didn't know how to use one or more of the transportation options being discussed.

Information is available in various places, but there is no comprehensive list.

People need hands-on help with specific issues and destinations.

Challenges can and do change as people age.

Focus group participants mentioned using the following as sources of travel information:

- *The Senior Center (by far the most frequently used source both directly and through the newsletter)*
- *The library, including reference librarians*
- *Springwell*
- *The MBTA website, MBTA Trip Planner, and the RIDE site*
- *Google*
- *Friends*

Some also use the following apps: Transit, Blindways, Rideguru, Zemcar, "AIRA" for blind travelers

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING OLDER RESIDENTS' MOBILITY NEEDS

Our research identified four major challenges:

- Many older people are not aware of, and/or don't know how to use, existing mobility options
- Older people are looking for more transportation options to get where they need and want to go in ways that are affordable, accessible, convenient and available to all
- Walking conditions in Watertown are difficult for many older people
- No single agency or organization is responsible for all aspects of transportation for older residents

We sought to develop recommendations that would be feasible and likely to succeed, based on our understanding of current transportation initiatives, funding sources, and the experiences of other communities. *Supporting Information for the Report*, Part B contains details on what we learned about the following:

- transportation-related initiatives underway in Watertown which can address the needs of older people (Part B-1)
- sources of funding that could be used to support new programs (Part B-2)
- descriptions of successful services and programs in other communities that offer lessons for Watertown (Part B-3)

The following recommendations could address the identified needs:

- 1) Increase the KNOWLEDGE of older people about existing transportation options and how to use them
- 2) Increase TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS for older residents that are affordable (free or subsidized), accessible (can be used by someone with a walker/cane/rollator), convenient (curb to curb, on-demand, variety of destinations) and available to all (no eligibility requirements)
- 3) Advocate for policies that would increase PEDESTRIAN SAFETY for older residents
- 4) Develop a COORDINATED APPROACH to transportation for older residents

Details on each recommendation are organized below according to steps that could be taken this coming year, followed by long-term strategies. Implementation of these recommendations will require the engagement of members of the community and identifying specific steps, costs, and funding.

1) Increase the KNOWLEDGE of older people about existing transportation options and how to use them

This coming year

Partner with the Senior Center on the creation and distribution of a Resource Guide of available transportation options and development and delivery of informational workshops.

Long-range strategy

Seek appropriate funding and identify a host for a 'Senior Transportation Facilitator', who would offer ongoing education; provide individualized support to older residents; and enlist volunteers to help other older people with transportation options. (This is based on the TRIPPS model.)

2) Increase TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS for older residents that are affordable, accessible, convenient and available to all

This coming year

Suggestion: Pilot a program to subsidize up to \$10 of the cost of a ride-share for older people, especially those who are vulnerable or isolated due to finances or disabilities. We would enroll pilot participants in one of 2 models: 1) Lyft Partnership (LP) for clients who want to use Smartphones to book rides directly with Lyft and 2) GoGoGrandparent (GGG) for clients who want to book rides on Lyft or Uber via a phone call to GGG.

Steps:

- Outreach and education: WAA provides education and information about ride sharing and the Pilot Program to potential participants in public and private senior housing.
- Ride Pilot: WAA registers clients who want to participate and sends names to Lyft and GGG. Clients book rides with LP or GGG, which bill clients for first \$2, WAA for up to next \$10, and client for remainder.
- Tracking and evaluation: WAA uses data from Lyft, GGG, and our own client surveys to learn about and report on usage, destinations, satisfaction, etc.
- Institutionalization: WAA would spend the year identifying a permanent host and sources of ongoing funding for the program. Results of Pilot Program, if successful, will be used to justify the value and need of a permanent program.

Benefits of piloting a combination of Lyft Partnership and GoGoGrandparent:

- *Flexibility:* Serves older people with and without Smartphones. Clients using LP may like the independence and control and the fact that there is no surcharge for the booking assistance. Clients using GGG may not have a Smartphone and/or may want the support. GGG has a surcharge, so clients using that program cannot go as far for the same cost as clients using LP.
- *Minimal staffing:* Once clients are enrolled, staff is not required to help clients with booking and tracking. (If clients want help, they can select the GGG option.) This model is more sustainable going forward.
- *Making the case:* The lessons learned from the pilot can be used to refine and advocate for funding for an ongoing subsidized ride-share program.

Long-term strategy

If the pilot is successful, institutionalize subsidized Lyft Partnership and GoGoGrandparent in appropriate agency or organization. Begin to consider additional options, such as expanding the Senior Center Shuttle and implementing a volunteer driver program.

3) Advocate for policies that would increase PEDESTRIAN SAFETY for older residents

This coming year

Create a Senior Pedestrian Advocacy Corps to advocate for policies related to pedestrian safety for older residents, in coordination with existing town initiatives promoting walking/biking. Enlist participants from focus groups and elsewhere. Consult with WalkBoston¹ and coordinate with Watertown Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee and other town organizations. Select one issue on which to focus this year; e.g., improving particular intersections; identifying sidewalk snow removal solutions; addressing problems with bus stops, etc.

Long term strategy

Advocate for additional policies

4) Develop a COORDINATED APPROACH to transportation for older residents

This coming year

Organize a Senior Transportation Advisory Committee (STAC) of key stakeholders who will meet regularly to consult on, and guide the implementation of, the projects listed above (1-3). Membership to include current members of the WAA-TIS Advisory Committee along with representatives from all transportation-related town initiatives and additional consumers.

Long-range strategy

The STAC will continue to serve its function of providing communication among key stakeholders and guidance on initiatives promoting mobility for older residents. Consider the advisability of creating a Transportation Program (or Senior Transportation Program) that would coordinate all relevant services, funding, etc.

NOTE: We will consult with Mass Mobility and MCOA on the best ways to share information with other communities.

¹ WalkBoston is a pedestrian advocacy organization dedicated to making communities more walkable and safer for pedestrians. Founded in 1990, it has served as the model for others across the U.S. and in 1996 cofounded the umbrella organization America Walks.