

Testimony to Vermont House Human Service Committee, February 12, 2020
Support of H.611

By Bill Doelger, participant and Advisory Council member at Montpelier Senior Activity Center

I am here to briefly tell my story and propose some kind of image for the future of senior centers based on my experience with the Montpelier Senior Activity Center (MSAC).

In 2003 my wife and I retired, sold our house in the Boston area, and moved to Montpelier to look after my recently widowed father-in-law, Stretch Normandeau. Because he played drums in the band at the Center, I joined the MSAC.

A year later I had open heart surgery at the Cleveland Clinic for a valve repair. Apparently now they do not have to open you up to do this procedure, but I could not wait.

When my physical therapy ran out, I wanted to find something that would keep me in shape; so, my wife and I tried the Strong Living class at the center. How hard could it be if nearly half of the exercises were done in a chair? After that class, we were tired enough to go home and take a nap. Now called Bone Builders, I have been doing that class twice a week for sixteen years.

When I joined there was cable TV and not a lot happening. The number of members was unclear until membership and a nominal fee were required to identify who wanted the newsletter. At the start of every year membership begins at zero. There were less than 400 members then. The number of classes increased some and we stopped the cable TV for lack of use.

In our case in Montpelier, something unusual happened when in December of 2009 there was a fire that closed the building. We moved our operation next door and work began to completely refurbish the building and add fourteen apartments.

We moved back to virtually a new facility. Over the years we have continued to grow our membership, programs and budget while at the same time reducing the percentage of our budget represented by the City appropriation. We have about 1200 members now.

This quarter, we have 119 activities to choose from not including the UVM Osher Life Long Lecture series, community lunch twice a week, foot clinics, trips, and much more. We are out of space and we make up for that by using off sight locations where we can. Can other centers grow like this?

We are in a world of change and attitudes on aging should not be immune for the need to think differently. There is this sense that I have where our independence largely depends on us, not pills or doctors or bad habits.

There are places in the world where people stay independent beyond age 100. These places, reviewed by scientists, are called Blue Zones. These places share similarities such as socialization, activity and nutrition. Could our state work towards becoming a kind of Blue Zone where people take better care of themselves and feel valued in their lives?

The aging of our state should not be a burden but an opportunity for all of us to live better lives. We should have the freedom to choose how we live and the unity to work together as citizens toward a stronger population. Can the state work with various partners (federal, state and private) to make activities and services broadly supported and more readily available?

The aging landscape includes so many crippling characteristics like isolation, depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, lack of transportation and limited income, but senior centers can be a place that shines light on that darkness. Can we create places where older folks can come in for tea or coffee and talk, a kind of life zone?

What if senior centers could draw in even more community participation? For example, we have a member who lived in Stowe and moved to Montpelier so that she could regularly attend the MSAC. Something good is happening here, and that can happen elsewhere with planning and funding.

My neighbor, Dr. Ron Ferry, in his 90's would remind me from time to time that aging is not for sissies. He would not come to his senior center. It is time to change attitudes and get people moving toward better health.

My wife promised Stretch, her father, that he would never go to a nursing home. He had the best room in our house and died peacefully in his own bed with his two daughters by his side.