

## We Can Make our Community More “Senior Friendly”

Currently almost 24% of Bedford’s population is 60 or over, up from 14% just 15 years ago. While many, many factors affect any town’s senior population making it difficult to predict exactly what how many elders Bedford will have in five or ten years, it is clear that Bedford is extremely fortunate to have and will continue to have a large, active group of senior residents.

The presence of elders in Bedford is essential for a number of reasons. Among them are the importance of having elders who carry with them a sense of the town’s history, of retaining a group that has traditionally contributed significant volunteer services, of justly considering the needs of those whose work and taxes made Bedford the desirable town it is today, and of garnering the wisdom and neighborliness of so many individual elders as they interact with residents of all ages. In addition, it is always worthwhile to make sure that Bedford is a town in which elders can comfortably live because someday, if we are lucky, we will all be older and will need the same considerations that we offer to the elders of today.

Bedford’s large elder population is the future of our nation. Within the next few years other towns and cities across the state and country will catch up to Bedford in their proportion of seniors in the population. Thus, Bedford has an opportunity to become a model town for being “senior friendly” and showing the way for other communities who will need to see to the special needs of growing elder populations.

How can Bedford as a community ensure that we maintain the many benefits of having nearly a quarter of our population be seniors by becoming more “senior friendly”? Everyone, even those who may not come into contact with elders during the course of their usually daily routines, can help. The key is to be mindful of both the physical limitations that older age may bring as well as find ways to engage the wisdom and strengths of elders.

First, we can make our town one in which elders are able to participate fully by making slight adjustments to the way we do business and interact with others. Many older people have some visual impairment. So, if you are printing information about an event you are planning, a sale you are running, or services you offer, consider making the type at least 14 points and the colors contrasting so that aging eyes can read what you have to say. Dim light may be atmospheric in a restaurant or store, but it can also make it impossible for an elder with sight problems to see. Bright, natural light is best if you want elders to be comfortable.

In addition, remember that some elders also have hearing problems. Make sure that any sound system you use for an event is loud and clear enough to be heard by everyone. Also, background music in a place where conversation is meant to take place can make hearing impossible for those with hearing aids.

Is your business, agency, or home safe for the elders who may come into it? Falls are a major reason why elders end up in hospitals and nursing homes. An extra effort to keep boxes and other objects off the floors could save someone from a broken hip. Does your space have many levels and stairs that may make it difficult for elders to move around? If

so, do you have a provision for services or purchases to be completed on a ground level for those who have trouble going up ramps or steps? Do you have stock on high shelves that someone who is unable to stretch will pass on rather than risk trying to reach? Take a walk around your business or agency and look at it through the eyes of someone who may not be able to move as well as you do.

A key to being accessible to elders is taking into consideration the fact that many elders do not drive, especially at night. If you are planning an event between November and April, can you make it in daytime or early evening, before dark? If not, are you willing to arrange carpools or other transportation for those who would not otherwise be able to attend? Can you offer your services through home visits? Will you deliver your products to those who cannot come to your store? All these considerations are not just simply courtesies, they are good business.

Everyone meets elders in the course of their day and your extra mindfulness could make a big difference to an older person. Children running through stores or down sidewalks can be a serious hazard to a frail elder who may fall if bumped. If an older person is ahead of you and you are in a hurry, consider whether the few seconds you will save is worth asking someone with mobility problems to go faster. This also applies to older pedestrians in a crosswalk. Honking your horn will not miraculously increase the ability of someone using a cane or a walker to cross more quickly. When you speak to an older person with hearing aids, talking slowly and looking directly at them will help them to understand what you are saying.

Later life brings with it not just physical limitations but also wisdom and life experience. Bedford's elders have much to offer everyone in town and one way to make our community "senior friendly" is to ensure that we are offering accessible ways for elders to contribute. Older adults can be a wonderful resource to boards and committees, even if the organization does not directly serve elders. Make an effort to invite our community's elders to join and then make it possible for them to participate. If you hold your meetings at night, consider whether you could change the time to early morning, a Saturday, or early evening. If you must meet at night, perhaps you can arrange for transportation. If you have volunteer programs, make sure that you are conducting outreach to elders, a group which is well known for reliability and skills.

Everyone can make a difference in creating a more "senior friendly" community. Everyone benefits from having elders in our midst and ensuring that they can participate fully in community life. How else can you make our town's elders feel more welcome as you encounter them in town?