



# **Aging in Reading, Massachusetts: A community needs assessment**

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Commissioned by the Town of Reading and the  
Elder and Human Services Division

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June 2017

Dear Reading Residents,

In December of 2015 the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) developed an Economic Development Plan for the Town. As part of the Plan the MAPC projected that by 2030 the senior population (age 65+) within the Town of Reading will increase by 73% or over 2,500 more seniors, bringing the senior population to nearly 7,000 residents. As the population of Reading changes so will the needs of its residents.

The town immediately began to work on solutions to some obvious issues, such as changing zoning through a vote of Town Meeting to allow accessory apartments to retain aging family members, and Senior Tax Relief to more easily allow our elder population that had purchased homes years ago to afford property tax increases.

To help identify longer term issues, we engaged the services of The University of Massachusetts Boston, Gerontology Institute Center for Social and Demographic Research to develop a Needs Assessment. Topics addressed included housing, transportation, social engagement, health and economic factors of aging in place.

In developing this Assessment, considerable time was spent interviewing community stakeholders (Police, Fire, Veterans, Housing, etc.), Elder Services staff members and residents. Two well-attended Community Forums were also held at the Pleasant Street Center. Through these Forums, residents of all ages were given the opportunity to actively participate in the process and share their ideas and areas of concern.

This report unites demographic information with what residents see as important to them as they age. Results of the study will serve as a guide to the Division of Elder Services, the Council on Aging and Board or Selectmen in planning efforts into the future

We are very pleased with the results of this effort, and grateful to all the participants and the Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts for their dedication to the success of the study.

We welcome your comments and suggestions anytime!

Sincerely,

Robert W. LeLacheur, Jr. CFA  
Town Manager

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## Executive Summary

This report describes collaborative efforts undertaken by the Town of Reading's Elder and Human Services Division and the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging, within the Gerontology Institute at the McCormack Graduate School, University of Massachusetts Boston. During Spring 2017, these organizations partnered to conduct a study to investigate the needs, interests, preferences, and opinions of the Town's older resident population, with respect to living and aging in Reading.

During this assessment, several research methods were utilized in order to sketch a multidimensional impression of the Town's older residents that could be used to plan and implement current and future services in the Town of Reading.

- ❖ We began the process by examining publicly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau to describe basic demographic characteristics, as well as economic characteristics, disability status, and living situations of older people in the Town.
- ❖ We conducted a focus group to obtain feedback from stakeholders who regularly interact with older residents, regarding issues and concerns about aging in Reading.
- ❖ We also invited Town residents to attend community forums in order to better understand how they perceive current and future aging-related needs of residents.
- ❖ We conducted interviews with five key informants to acquire input from local experts on the implications of the aging population, and the functioning of the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ Finally, we conducted a comparison of senior centers in six communities similar to Reading in order to assess resources available and how needs of older adults are met in similar communities in Massachusetts.

Collectively, the content of this report is intended to inform the Town of Reading's Elder and Human Services Division, other offices within the Town with a stake in the aging of Reading, and organizations that provide services to older residents, as well as those who advocate for older people, and community members at large.

## Key Findings in Brief

### Summary of Demographic Profile

- ❖ Over the next few decades, the number of residents who are age 60 and older will increase to make up as many as 29% of the population in the Town of Reading.
- ❖ Currently, more than one-third (38%) of Reading's households have at least one person who is age 60 and over.
- ❖ Greater than one in four (27%) residents age 65 and older lives alone in their household. In addition, 61% of Reading residents who live alone also own their home. This is important because home maintenance and modification are often necessary for older homeowners to remain living safely and comfortably in the communities of their choice.

- ❖ Economic security for older adults in Reading is a concern. Among householders age 65 or older, the median household income is approximately \$47,000, compared to over \$125,000 among households headed by younger residents of Reading.

### Summary of Focus Group

- ❖ Concerns were expressed about the ability to continue living in Reading in later life, citing lack of affordable downsizing housing options as a key barrier.
- ❖ Reading has valuable transportation services, including the MBTA Commuter Rail, The Ride, and Pleasant Street Center van service. However, many of these services were noted to be limited in terms of eligibility, affordability or accessibility. Collectively, transportation options in Reading were reported to be inadequate to meet the needs of older residents. This is particularly true for older residents who no longer drive themselves.
- ❖ Focus group participants highlighted the importance of addressing mental health needs of seniors in Reading. Moreover, access to an adult day health program was recommended as a valuable addition for community seniors.
- ❖ Questions about how information is shared both among Town departments as well as between the Town and the residents were raised. Focus group participants seemed doubtful that residents are adequately informed about the resources available to them. While relationships between Elder and Human Services and other Town divisions are reviewed positively, it was noted that continued support of these existing partnerships and the development of additional relationships across Town divisions and community organizations would promote high-quality and coordinated service provision as well as reduce duplication across Town departments and divisions.
- ❖ The layout and limited space of the Pleasant Street Center was cited as a challenge to meeting the needs of Reading's growing senior population. For example, full exercise classes crowd the area near the front desk which prohibits volunteer staff and walk-ins from being able to communicate clearly. Moreover, there is no bathroom on the first level of the Pleasant Street Center, where most of the major programming is conducted. Thus, participants have to climb the stairs or wait for an elevator to use the bathroom.

### Summary of Community Forums

- ❖ Residents described Reading as a great place to live as well as a place they would like to stay as they age. Attributes of Reading that were described as strengths included a sense of community among residents and overall neighborly consideration, as well as access to public transportation, area amenities like the YMCA and public library, and the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ Participating residents were aware of the community's shifting demographic profile and expressed concerns about how local resources would be allocated to meet the needs of Reading residents across the lifespan.
- ❖ Expansion of programming available to older residents was discussed at the forums. An interest in intergenerational experiences, and programs for active seniors was

voiced by forum attendees. Additionally, it was suggested that the luncheon program would benefit from improvements so that it could draw new participants to the Pleasant Street Center. Special event luncheons where there is entertainment and catered meals have shown an uptick in attendance. Making the luncheon program more welcoming to new patrons is another suggestion to consider in an effort to increase utilization.

- ❖ Despite the key functions provided to the community by the Pleasant Street Center, forum attendees acknowledged the limitations imposed on the services by the capacity of the building. Size and features of the Center have an impact on the breadth and size of programming of the senior center; but also have implications for the size of the staff. For example, office space for staff at the Pleasant Street Center is currently at maximum capacity. Indeed, the Administrator's office is located at Town Hall and the rest of the Division's staff have offices at the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ Forum attendees indicated that public awareness of the services and supports available to older Reading residents through the Elder and Human Services Division is insufficient.
- ❖ The hours of operation, costs, and range of local transportation options were mentioned as barriers to access for older residents wishing to get around Reading and surrounding communities.

### Summary of Key Informant Interviews

- ❖ Key informants discussed social isolation as a significant concern affecting homebound and frail seniors. All departments or organizations represented by the key informants are affected by isolated seniors. Town Divisions are already working together to address that need through coordination of outreach efforts and information-sharing and this model could be expanded to include a wider array of departments. Further, the development of programs and services to reach homebound or otherwise isolated residents would also aid in addressing this concern.
- ❖ Many discussed a disconnect between Reading residents, the Pleasant Street Center, and other organizations in Town. Although the Center offers a wide array of programs and services, key informants made the observation that many residents appear to be unaware of how much the Center has to offer. Key informants also made suggestions to increase awareness through electronic media as well as existing networks and other health and social service providers.
- ❖ There was awareness among key informants about the economic challenges faced by seniors in Reading. Many older adults are living on a fixed income, which is stretched thin with increasing costs of living (e.g., taxes). Key informants acknowledged that Town resources allocated to Elder Services are limited, despite shifting demographics toward a larger and older senior population.

### Summary of Community Comparison

- ❖ The Pleasant Street Center in Reading is the smallest in size in comparison to its six peer communities (Milton, North Andover, Bedford, Natick, Andover and Westborough).
- ❖ Reading is the only of its peers without fully private space to meet with residents about confidential matters. The semi-private space that Reading has available is an office that is shared by more than one staff member. As a result, staff routinely need to leave their workstations to ensure the clients being served by the Pleasant Street Center are afforded full privacy.
- ❖ Despite the greater size of the other senior centers in comparison to Reading, all of the senior centers identified space as a challenge, with the exception of Natick whose facility is the largest. As well, Natick's facility is operated as both the senior center and a community center.
- ❖ Reading and only one of its peer communities (Bedford) do not have dedicated programming or initiatives that specifically address mental and behavioral health issues among older residents.
- ❖ When it comes to paid staff, Reading and Bedford both have the fewest number of positions at six and Westborough has the most at 17 positions.
- ❖ Reading is advantaged over its peers in that the Elder and Human Services Division employs a full-time nurse and case manager. However, only Reading lacks a dedicated staff position that exclusively conducts outreach activities to reach older residents who are not currently accessing services or who actively pursues opportunities to educate the community about the options available to them. The Elder and Human Services Division also lacks a volunteer coordinator position, which several of its peers have. Currently, the Case Manager, Nurse Advocate and Administrator each conduct outreach activities, in addition to their other responsibilities. The duties of volunteer coordination are also spread across several staff members.

### Summary of Recommendations

Collectively, these results guided recommendations developed to aid the Elder and Human Services Division, as well as other Town offices as they continue to plan for the future. We offer the following recommendations to assist the Town of Reading in planning to achieve their mission and to meet their goals moving forward.

- ❖ Improve the accessibility of the Pleasant Street Center. We cannot know how many seniors have been discouraged from using Elder Services because the Pleasant Street Center becomes crowded or the building can be difficult to access, especially by those with mobility limitations or who use assistive devices. However, it appeared to be common knowledge among those with whom we spoke that access to the Pleasant Street Center is currently unacceptable. Perhaps most notable among the limitations mentioned during the community forums is that the building does not have a restroom on the first floor.
- ❖ Deepen public knowledge of existing programs and services throughout the community. Better communication about the programs already in place will increase the Elder and Human Services Division and the Pleasant Street Center's value to the



community. Consider developing a mechanism by which residents can provide feedback and ideas about the types of programs and events they would like to participate in. Alternatively, consider the development of a liaison program in which residents who currently participate at the Pleasant Street Center are incentivized to invite residents who have not yet participated at the Pleasant Street Center.

- ❖ Continue to support existing partnerships between Elder Services and other Town offices and community organizations. The roundtable discussions convened among the Elder and Human Services Division and Reading's Police and Fire Divisions were repeatedly described as a powerful and positive channel for communication, prevention and outreach. Drawing on this example, continue to draw on partnerships with the library, the Reading Neighbors Network, Veteran's Services and local schools. Through these partnerships, programs can be diversified and expanded and the web of community supports and services in Reading can be strengthened.
- ❖ Explore opportunities for expansion of the Property Tax Work Off Program. To address economic security among Reading's older adult population, expanding the number of available tax work off positions throughout varying Town departments, may open this benefit to a larger portion of Reading residents. Consider also the expansion of the program to include Veterans (of any age) or to include an option for proxy-workers (e.g., a family member can work to earn the credit for an older adult).
- ❖ Explore the feasibility of significant expansion of space for the Pleasant Street Center and Elder and Human Services Division. Expanding the services provided by Elder and Human Services staff in response to the increased number of Reading seniors may help residents age in place. Further, improvements to programming, services and staff can be expected to generate even higher rates of participation in Elder and Human Service programs and services such that an overly modest allocation of resources will be outgrown quickly.
  - Identify dedicated private office space for the case management staff of the Elder and Human Services Division. Currently the Nurse Advocate and Case Manager share office space. A large share of their work involves confidential communications with residents about their needs and concerns; currently, the Pleasant Street Center has no dedicated space for this purpose.
  - Identify on-site office space for the Administrator. Dispersing Elder and Human Services staff across multiple sites is not only confusing for potential participants but also creates additional, and unnecessary, barriers to communication and efficiency of staff.
  - Develop dedicated drop-in space. The Reading Elder and Human Services Division offers an appealing but limited range of programs (including exercise, educational programs and interest groups); however, it does not currently offer opportunities for unstructured socialization. Concerns about isolation and the need for socialization beyond the walls of the Pleasant Street Center were mentioned by many of the individuals with whom we met.
  - Plan to expand staffing. Soon, the Pleasant Street Center will likely need at least a part-time outreach worker and at least a part-time volunteer

coordinator, in addition to the existing staff positions. This level of staffing will bring Reading Elder Services closer to the levels observed in similar communities, and can be expected to more effectively meet needs in the community and maximize the volunteer workforce. As staff of the EHS Division grows, consider increasing the Administrator position to full-time.

- ❖ Expand and diversify programming offered through the Elder and Human Services Division to align with the needs of the community.
  - Further explore opportunities for resource-sharing and collaboration with the Reading School System. This type of partnership could bring older and younger residents together for mutually beneficial and engaging activities. A desire for intergenerational activities is evident.
  - Strengthen mental and behavioral health programs. Explore possible partnerships in surround communities and mental health providers to connect Reading residents with existing resources and consider ways to develop additional supports through the Elder & Human Services Division.
  - Promote community outreach and engagement of family caregivers in Reading. Sponsoring or advocating for expanded Adult Day Health opportunities, either in Reading or in collaboration with surrounding communities, may be needed. Outreach and engagement with this caregiver population may also yield new participants at the Pleasant Street Center.
  - Consider the accessibility of the congregate lunch program for frail residents and newcomers. The Meals on Wheels program is well used in Reading and serves as a lifeline for homebound seniors. However, most seniors are able to leave their homes and would benefit from having regular opportunities to visit with others over a shared meal. It is important that attendees at the lunch program feel welcome and included in conversation.
  - Further evaluate needs for expanded transportation services. Because accessible and affordable transportation promotes aging in place in any community, and existing options are limited in Reading, we encourage the Elder and Human Services Division to consider ways to better align the services provided with residents' needs. Consider the costs and benefits to partnerships with car-sharing services or consider the development of volunteer driver programs or taxi services to eliminate barriers and stigma to senior transportation options and mobilize more of the older residents of Reading.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the Town of Reading's Administration and the Reading Board of Selectmen, which generously provided support for this project. We thank Jane Burns, Administrator of the Elder and Human Services Division, the staff of the Pleasant Street Center, and the Council on Aging, who offered invaluable input and assistance as we defined research questions, recruited participants, and carried out our research plan.

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The authors, Caitlin Coyle and Jan Mutchler from the University of Massachusetts Boston would like to thank Hannah Curren, Claire Wickersham, and Ceara Somerville for their contributions to this report. The authors are responsible for the contents of this report; however, the project could not have been completed without the cooperation and efforts of those mentioned above.

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## Introduction

The Reading Board of Selectmen has established a goal of developing a master plan for the Elder and Human Services Division (EHS). In support of that goal, listening Sessions were held in advance of a Proposition 21/2 override that was voted on in the Fall of 2016. The public comments received at the listening sessions included strong support for existing EHS programs as well as for expanded programming. In addition, results from a recent community survey of EHS programs provided, broad, baseline information about the types of programming and services that community members value. The present project was designed to take a deeper look into the EHS Division in Reading and to specify recommendations that will advance the Division's master plan.

Similar to cities and Towns across Massachusetts, the population of the Town of Reading is getting older, with its proportion of residents age 60 and older expected to grow more rapidly than any other age group over the next two decades. Currently, many older residents benefit from programs and services designed to address their age-related needs, and prolong their independence in the community. As a municipal entity, The Town of Reading's EHS Division is an important and valued resource, operating as the Town's central point of contact for older residents who seek opportunities to participate in their community and for those seeking services and supports to promote healthy and fulfilling lives as they grow older.

As the demographics of Reading shift toward a population that is older and living longer, demand for senior services will likely increase over time. Planning is necessary to assure that the Town is adequately prepared to meet the challenges and to capitalize on the opportunities that an aging population presents. It is increasingly relevant and necessary for those who provide services in the Town to understand different stakeholder perspectives with regard to the aging-related needs of Reading's residents. Additionally, given the high rates of public engagement among adults age 65 and older, policymakers who are in tune and proactive about addressing the needs of older adults will benefit from awareness of shifting demographic trends and their implications for policy.

This report presents results of an examination of issues relating to aging and older adults in Reading. Research methods were chosen with an eye toward engaging a broad range of stakeholders including residents, municipal officials, and other Town leaders and advocates. The assessment's primary focus is on the current and future needs of Reading residents. The goals of this project were to identify characteristics and needs of Reading residents age 60+; to identify specific concerns of community members related to aging in Reading, and to make explicit their ideas about how quality of life could be improved for older adults who live in Town; to explore the current and potential role of the Pleasant Street Center in the lives of older residents; and to outline the implications of an aging population for the Town of Reading as a whole. The contents of this report are intended to inform planning by the EHS Division, as well as other Town offices, private and public organizations that provide services or advocate for older residents of Reading, and the community at large.

## Background and Literature Review

The Town of Reading is a community of approximately 25,000 residents located 10 miles north of Boston, Massachusetts. Reading expects to experience continued growth in its population of residents who are age 60 or older, as the generation of Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) age into later life (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Recent (2011-2015) estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS) indicate that there are 5,404 Reading residents age 60 and older, making up 21% of the population; and another 1,715 residents between the ages of 55-59 poised to move into later life in the coming decade (ACS, 2011-2015, Table DP05). Growth of the older resident population of the Town of Reading will occur at a rapid pace in coming years as current residents age in place. Growing numbers of older people may also be moving to Reading to take advantage of newly constructed housing options or to be closer to adult children and grandchildren.

A number of common age-related circumstances have been identified that place unique demands on the resources that communities have available as they plan to accommodate greater numbers of older people. Among them are changes in the health and service needs of older people. Many may experience physical and social changes that could threaten their independence and wellbeing, if not addressed. In addition, some retirees may experience constraints associated with living on fixed incomes that could limit their choices, and reduce their quality of life in retirement. Insofar as many services required by older populations are provided either publicly or through public-private partnerships, many Towns like Reading find it necessary to adapt to changing age profiles within their populations. To this end, the Town of Reading's EHS Division seeks to plan for the continued expansion of its older population by learning about the current and expected needs and experiences of its aging residents.

A commonly expressed goal of older adults is to remain living in their homes as long as possible. The phrase "aging in place" implies remaining in familiar home and community settings, with supports as needed, as opposed to moving to institutional settings, such as nursing homes (Salomon, 2010). By aging in place and in community, older people are able to retain their independence, as well as maintain valued social relationships and engagement with the community. In turn, aging in place may promote "successful aging," by supporting physical activities that reduce risk of chronic disease and by accommodating disabling conditions. By proactively taking steps to support the goals of older people in terms of successful aging and aging in place, Reading can retain a larger share of its older population in the community and benefit from the experiences and local commitment that vital long-term residents offer, while reducing potential demands on resources associated with frailty and dependence.

In this report, we describe recent activities conducted to assess the aging-related needs of current and future older adult residents in the Town of Reading. Our approach aligns with efforts to identify ways in which communities may become more "livable" for residents of all ages. Livable communities are said to have features that allow older adults "to maintain their independence and quality of life as they age and retire" (Nelson & Guengerich, 2009). Key

components that facilitate livability include adequate and appropriate housing and transportation options, along with community services that target the needs of older people.

### **Housing**

The availability and affordability of housing that is suitable to meet the changing capacity of older people are key factors that influence the ability of residents to age in place, and to lead fulfilling and healthy lives into old age. Many prominent studies point to the well-documented preference of older adults to remain in their existing homes as long as possible (e.g., AARP, 2005). For many, the home serves not only as a source of shelter, but also as the platform for maintaining social networks and connecting residents to neighborhood amenities. The home may also be the basis for long-standing memories that connect older individuals to their past. As well, homes are an important source of financial security, as home equity and/or ownership may represent one of the most significant sources of wealth held by many older people. Consequently, the attachment that many have to their homes is often substantial.

Nevertheless, as people age, the “fit” between individuals and their home environments may decrease (Pynoos, Steinman, Nguyen, & Bressette, 2012). Homes may become too large for current needs, or may become too cumbersome or expensive to maintain on a fixed income. Some older adults will develop functional impairments and disabilities; for these individuals, outdated home features may not provide adequate support for their changing physical and cognitive capacities. Design features of homes, such as the number of stories and manageability of stairs, may challenge an older resident’s ability to remain living safely in her home. Home modifications, including installation of bathroom grab bars, railings on stairs, adequate lighting throughout the home, ramps, and/or first floor bathrooms, may support the resident’s safety and facilitate aging in place; however, some individuals will need to change residences in later life.

The availability of affordable housing options, especially those with accommodating features, such as home modifications or universal design features, and housing that blends shelter and services, such as assisted living or continuing care retirement communities, may allow residents who are no longer able to stay in their existing homes to remain in the community (AARP, 2005), or at least delay the move into more supportive and expensive institutional alternatives. Aging in the community can be facilitated by making residents aware of home-based services for which they may be eligible, including services that would help maintain and modify a home for safe living, and programs that may help them pay utility or other home-related expenses.

### **Transportation**

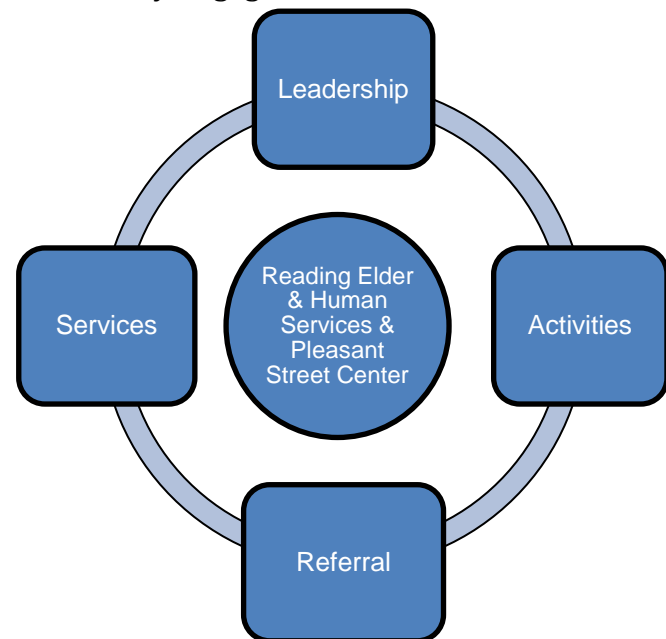
Along with housing, adequate transportation is also needed to maintain social ties, obtain needed goods and services, access community amenities and be engaged with others. The vast majority of Americans rely primarily on private transportation to meet these needs, and most individuals drive their own automobiles well into old age. Many communities have limited public transportation options, and those that do exist may be inconvenient, expensive, or unreliable. Due to difficulties with transportation, individuals with health conditions and disabilities that adversely affect their ability to drive safely may be unable to



participate in activities they previously enjoyed and valued. Indeed, a national survey of people aged 50 and older conducted by the AARP (2005) found that compared to older drivers, non-drivers reported lower quality of life, less involvement with other people, and more isolation. By supporting high quality, reliable and convenient local travel options, communities can promote quality of life and community engagement for older adults and other community members who are unable to drive safely, or who prefer public transportation alternatives.

### Community Features & Services

Livable communities also require adequate and appropriate community features and services designed to respond to the evolving needs of older people, including home- and community-based long-term care services. Older adults with mobility limitations or those who experience challenges with driving may need medical and social services that can be easily accessed or delivered within their homes. Programs that connect older homeowners with affordable assistance for maintaining their homes and their



yards can help protect the value of investments and improve the neighborhoods of older people. Safe and walkable shopping and entertainment districts are valued by all members of the community regardless of age and physical capacity, but may be especially helpful for those with mobility and transportation limitations. Providing opportunities for social engagement and participation in community events—through volunteer programs, learning opportunities and exercise programs, as well as social activities—can help community members maintain social support, remain active, prolong independence and improve quality of life. Research has demonstrated that social support is a key component of wellbeing in later life, and that continued engagement in social and community activities promotes successful aging (Pardasani & Thompson, 2012).

### The Town of Reading’s Elder and Human Services Division & Pleasant Street Center

In the Town of Reading, the EHS Division is charged with establishing priorities and offering opportunities to older residents, their families, and their caregivers. Programs and services offered through the Pleasant Street Center are designed to support the transition of residents through later life, and help promote their wellbeing.

When considering the mission of senior centers within communities, observers commonly think of two distinct responsibilities. First, senior centers promote wellbeing among older residents by offering activities that appeal specifically to older adults, are interesting, and that promote personal growth and social engagement. Book clubs, exercise classes, late-life learning programs, and many other programs are good examples. Second, senior centers

provide services to older residents and their families that meet needs in the community and promote physical and emotional wellness. For example, blood pressure clinics, support groups for family caregivers, and transportation services are common examples. Many observers are not aware of two additional important responsibilities of senior centers. The staff at senior centers link older residents in the community to existing programs for which they may be eligible by providing needed information and referring residents to appropriate programs and services. For example, staff may help seniors apply for income support programs or health insurance made available through the state or federal government. Finally, COAs and senior center staff provide leadership within the community around senior issues, by serving on Town boards, interacting with other Town offices, and serving as resources to residents and organizations.

The Pleasant Street Center operates Monday thru Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Its staff includes 4 full-time and 2 part-time employees. Not only does it serve as the local senior center but it also houses the staff of the EHS Division with the exception of the Administrator and part-time clerk who are located at Town Hall. Currently, the Pleasant Street Center offers an array of programs and services to residents who are aged 60 and older. According to records kept by the EHS Division, in fiscal year (FY) 2015, the EHS Division provided over 11,000 service units including nutrition, fitness and social programs offered at the Pleasant Street Center<sup>1</sup>. See Appendix A for a detailed listing of the services offered through the EHS Division. Specific programs offered through the Pleasant Street Center include:

- ❖ *Outreach Services:* In FY15, outreach staff made 3,530 contacts with residents who were seeking social services through the case manager, or health services requests through the nurse advocate. The Pleasant Street Center is unique to have both a full-time nurse on staff as well as a full-time case manager.
- ❖ *Transportation:* Between the two Elder Service vans, 5,658 one-way trips were provided in FY15. This includes door-to-door transport to grocery stores, pharmacies, banks, and to and from the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ *Volunteer Opportunities:* Volunteers provide invaluable support to the Center, assisting with many of the programs and activities including: volunteer medical transportation, friendly visitor program, assisting or leading activities or administrative tasks. In FY 2015, 168 volunteers donated their time and expertise to provide 6,149 hours of service.
- ❖ *Nutrition Programs:* Staff coordinates nutrition support via referrals for home-delivered meals and congregate meals. In FY 2015, 4,150 individual meals were served at the Pleasant Street Center and 96 older Reading residents currently receive home delivered meals through Mystic Valley Elder Services' Meals on Wheels program. The Pleasant Street Center also supports a food pantry for residents who may be struggling with food insecurity.

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<sup>1</sup> A service unit is one meal served, one fitness class attended, or one social program attended. The same individual may participate in more than one activity during the course of a fiscal year.

- ❖ *Health and Wellness Activities:* Regularly scheduled fitness classes, such as strength training, yoga, and Zumba, are offered at the Pleasant Street Center. The Nurse Advocate plans monthly wellness programs based upon trends in the community and requests from residents.
- ❖ *Reading Response:* Reading residents of all ages also have access to the Reading Response program. Benefits of the program include transportation to medical appointments in the greater Boston area, including a home health aide escort for procedures that require additional support. Another component of the Reading Response program is access to a lifeline emergency response system for residents. In November of 2016 Reading Response added a respite caregiver program. This program is funded through a trust fund and exists outside of the Division budget. The Elder Services staff promote and administer the program.
- ❖ *Social, Crafts, and Education Activities:* A variety of activities are offered on a weekly, monthly, or special occasion basis, such as card or board games, computer classes, art programs, such as knitting or painting, and social clubs.
- ❖ *Special Programs, Seminars, and Social Events:* Medical, educational and social functions are offered on an occasional basis depending on availability of space and resources. In addition, periodic day-trips are organized that allow older residents of Reading to attend theater performances or visit museums in neighboring communities.
- ❖ *Medical Services:* SHINE Counseling (Securing the Health Information Needs of Everyone) is offered to provide older residents with assistance with medical insurance questions, including selection of new plans or concerns about billing or payment. Blood pressure and podiatry clinics are also offered regularly at the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ *Non-Medical Services:* Support groups are hosted at the Pleasant Street Center. Topics include: low-vision, Memory Cafe, Parkinson's, alcohol or substance abuse, and others. In addition, salon services like hairdressing and manicures are offered at a low cost to Reading seniors at the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ *Marketing the Pleasant Street Center:* Various media are used to inform residents about available programs and services. In FY 2015, 900 copies of the monthly newsletter *Pleasantries* were made available by subscription or could be picked up at various locations throughout Town for no cost. Annual subscription to the newsletter is \$5. Residents can also subscribe to receive the newsletter by email at no cost. Three times per year, all households including a resident at 65+ receive the newsletter (in FY15, this was 3,000 households). In addition, the EHS Division sends out a periodic email message highlighting significant events or programs. Residents may request to be put on the email list in order to receive these notifications.

In general, the Town of Reading's of EHS Division plays an instrumental role in providing key services to older adults in the Town, and guiding older residents to services available to them. Currently, the Senior Center is able to effectively fill a crucial niche; however, as the

number of older residents increases, the need for resources dedicated to this segment of the population will continue to grow and change. Thus, it is crucial that the EHS Division plans in earnest to assure that resources are used efficiently and effectively to meet the current and future needs of older people in the Town.

## Methods

Mixed evaluation methods are often used to assess the needs of older residents and to aid organizations in planning and prioritizing the programs and services they provide in the community. Collecting data from multiple sources is a good strategy for converging on accurate and multifaceted representations of community needs from the perspective of a diverse set of stakeholders (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2010). In the current project, we compiled data from several sources, including publicly available information obtained through the U.S. Census Bureau and qualitative data collected directly from the Town of Reading's older residents, as well as administrative data from senior centers in similar communities in Massachusetts. All research methods and instruments used in this project were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board, which is charged with protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects who take part in research conducted at UMass Boston.

Our goal early in this study was to prioritize the concerns of stakeholders and identify research questions, which when approached systematically, could shed light on the support needs of the older population, and identify services and Town qualities that are most valued by the Town of Reading's residents.

In general, assessment goals identified at the outset of this study related to how the Town and the EHS Division could better facilitate aging in place by older adults in the community. This goal is consistent with efforts to identify ways in which communities may become more "livable" by supporting the independence and quality of life of older people as they age (Nelson & Guengerich, 2009). In the following sections, we describe methods used in this needs assessment, including development of appropriate instruments, selection and recruitment of study participants, and a brief section on data analysis strategies.

## Demographic Profile

As an initial step toward understanding characteristics of the Town of Reading's older population through quantitative data, we generated a demographic profile of the Town using data from the decennial U.S. Census and the American Community Survey (ACS)—a large, annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. For purposes of this assessment, we primarily used information drawn from the most current 5-year ACS files (2011-2015), along with U.S. Census data for the Town of Reading to summarize demographic characteristics including growth of the older population, shifts in the age distribution, gender, race and education distributions, householder status, living arrangements, household income, and disability status.

## Focus Group

During the month of March 2017, we conducted a focus group with stakeholders (N=18) all of whom were hand-selected and recruited by the Administrator of the EHS Division. The focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half and the discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participant quotations presented in this report come from these verbatim transcriptions. Generally, discussions focused on attributes of the community that promote aging in place; perceived challenges to aging in place in the Town of Reading; and opportunities that an aging population affords the community to improve its livability for people of all ages. Specific topics for discussion can be found in Appendix B. The focus group included five staff members from the Pleasant Street Center, three from other Town Departments, two representatives from local churches, two representatives from specific buildings that house a number of older residents, two representatives from the Reading Neighbors Network, one representative from the library, two members of the Council on Aging and the Veteran's Agent.

Most focus group participants were longtime residents of the Town of Reading, and all were knowledgeable about the Town's programs and services that are available for older residents.

## Community Forums

In April, 2017, we solicited participatory input from public stakeholders, including community members representing the Town of Reading's older population, via forums conducted on the premises of the Pleasant Street Center. Participation in the forum was open to all adult residents of Reading. In total, approximately 75 individuals participated in one of these two sessions.

The specific purpose of the forums was to develop a better understanding of the need for aging programs as experienced by current and future consumers of services provided by the Town of Reading's EHS Division. Discussion at the forum focused on the perceived *strengths*, *challenges*, and *opportunities* available to community members in the Town of Reading to facilitate aging in place and wellbeing in later life. The lead researcher, Caitlin Coyle, moderated the discussion.

## Key informant Interviews

We conducted telephone interviews with five individuals who serve in leadership roles in the Town of Reading. Participants were identified by the Administrator of Elder & Human Services. Questions focused on ways in which the Town has been shaped by the aging of its population; identifying challenges and opportunities for the Town associated with the aging population; and identifying ways in which the community could respond more effectively to its changing demographics. The Administrator of the EHS Division identified interviewees, and encouraged them to participate. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and thorough notes were taken during each interview. Prompts for these phone interviews can be found in Appendix C.

## Peer Community Comparison

We conducted telephone interviews with directors of Councils on Aging (i.e., senior centers) in Bedford, Milton, Natick, North Andover, and Westborough. In the case of Andover, we gathered peer-community information from existing sources. With input from the Town Manager, Assistant Town Manager, and EHS Administrator, these “peer” communities were selected based on total population size, the number of residents age 60 and older living in their community, as well as the median household income and levels of education of their residents. The UMass Boston research team developed several broad, open-ended questions to guide each conversation with Council on Aging (COA) or Senior Center Directors. Topics included staffing, programming and characteristics of the physical space occupied by the Senior Center or COA. Requests for information were issued by email, and a designated time to talk by phone was determined. Additional information on selected senior centers was retrieved from websites and other publicly available documents.

## Data Analysis

Notes taken during the study’s qualitative components (i.e., community forum, focus groups, and key informant interviews) were reviewed by multiple project staff and used to characterize and categorize salient ways in which aging issues are impacting older adults and individuals who work with older adults in the Town of Reading. Information collected from senior center directors in peer communities were compared side-by-side with information collected from the EHS Division Administrator. We used information from all sources of data to develop recommendations reported in the final section of this report.

## Results

### Demographic Profile of Reading

#### Age Structure and Population Growth

In the coming decades, the Town of Reading is expected to grow in total number of residents, while also becoming older. According to estimates from the American Community Survey (2011-2015), there are more than 25,000 residents living in Reading. About a third of these individuals are age 50 and older (See **Table 1**). Residents who are age 50 to 59 make up 14% of the population; residents age 60 to 79 comprise 16%, and another 5% of residents are age 80 and older.

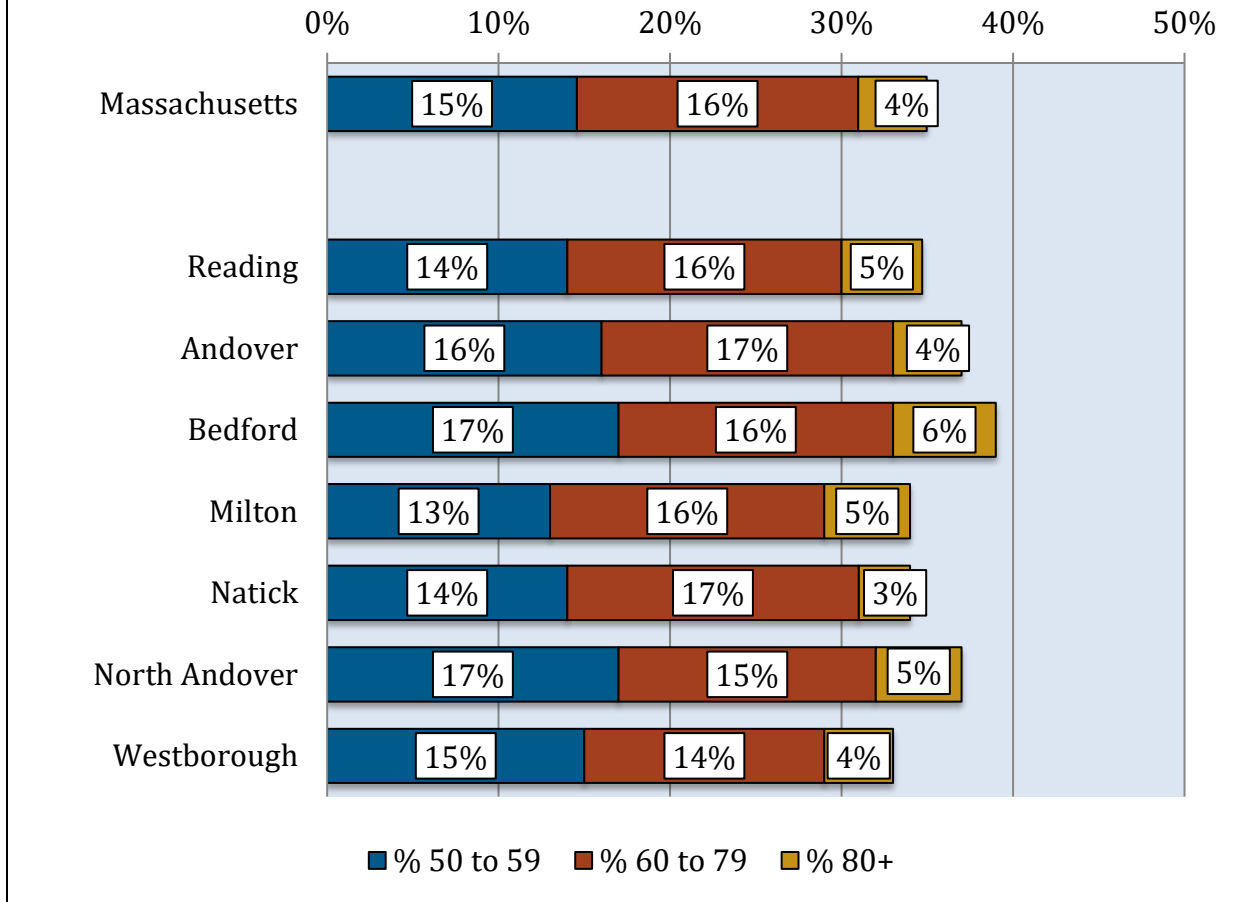
**Table 1.** Number and percentage distribution of Reading’s population by age category, 2015

Age Category	Number	Percentage
Under age 18	6,310	25%
Age 18 to 49	10,020	40%
Age 50 to 59	3,623	14%
Age 60 to 79	4,144	16%
Age 80 and older	1,260	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25,357</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 5-Year Estimates, Table B01001.*

According to recent (2011-2015) estimates by the American Community Survey, the proportion of residents who are age 60 or older in Reading (21%) is comparable to that in the state as a whole (20%; see **Figure 1**). Indeed, the relative size of the older population in Reading looks quite similar to that of a subset of its peer communities. Among these communities, Westborough has the smallest share of seniors age 60-plus, at 18%.

**Figure 1. Age distribution in Reading and comparison areas**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 5-Year Estimates (2011-2015), Table B01001.

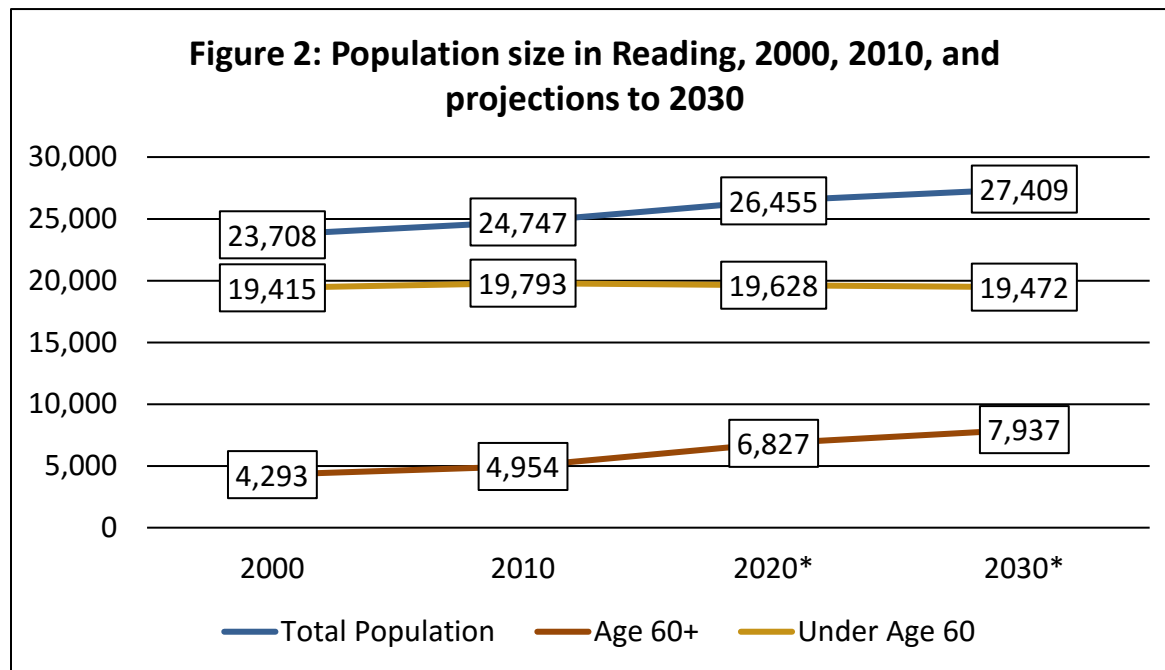
Looking ahead, projections suggest that Reading’s population will become slightly larger, as well as substantially older. Two sets of projections are available through the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, each based on somewhat different assumptions about future trajectories of growth. Using the Vintage Series<sup>2</sup>, **Figure 2** shows Reading’s population size for 2000 and 2010 based on US Census data, along with population projections through 2030, for the all-age population, for the population under age 60, and those age 60 or older<sup>3</sup>. These projections suggest that the total population of Reading is

<sup>2</sup> Donahue Institute Technical Report (2015). [http://pep.donahue-institute.org/downloads/2015/new/UMDI\\_LongTermPopulationProjectionsReport\\_2015%2004%2029.pdf](http://pep.donahue-institute.org/downloads/2015/new/UMDI_LongTermPopulationProjectionsReport_2015%2004%2029.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Population projections are shaped by assumptions about birth rates and death rates, as well as domestic and international in-migration and out-migration. The Donahue Institute projections used here also account for population change associated with aging of the population, which is a strong predictor of future growth and



expected to grow in coming decades, reaching over 27,000 by 2030. With respect to age, the under age 60 population in Reading remains relatively consistent over this time period, growing by fewer than 100 residents. In contrast, the age 60+ population is expected to grow to nearly 8,000 residents by the year 2030.<sup>4</sup>



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population for 2000-2010.

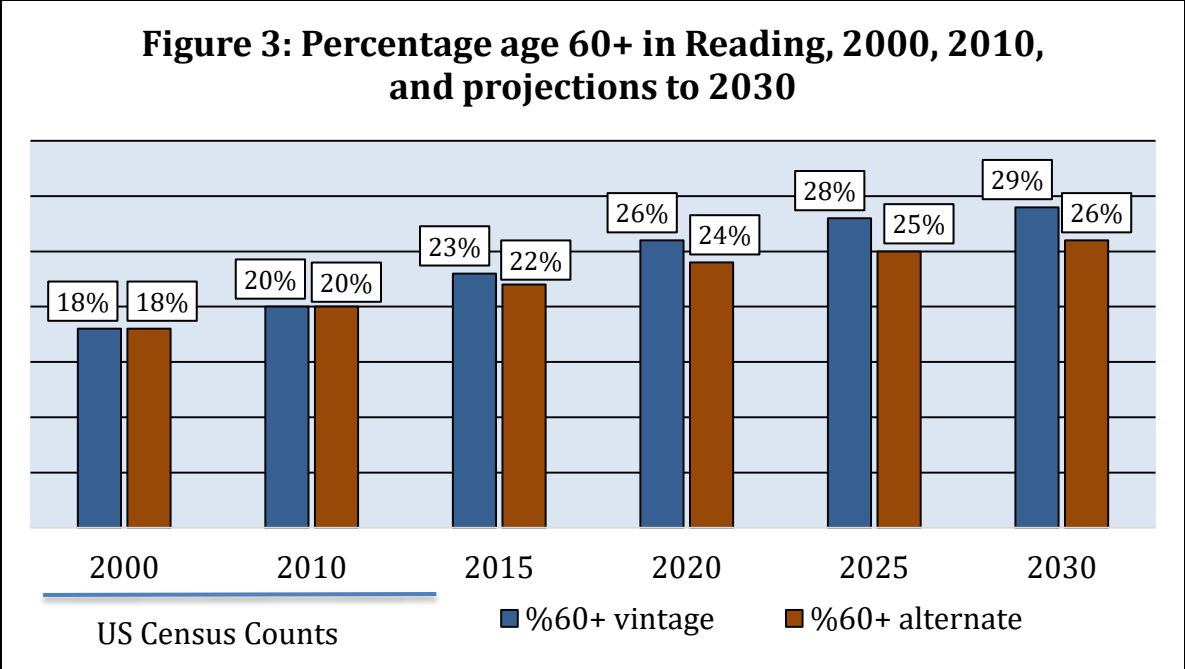
\* Figures for 2015-2030 are projections generated by the Donahue Institute, University of Massachusetts: <http://pep.donahue-institute.org/>. (vintage series).

The implications of these projections for the relative size of the older population in Reading is illustrated in **Figure 3**, which shows the percentage of the total population that is age 60 or older, for each year and for both projections series. This figure shows that the percentage of Reading’s population made up of residents age 60+ increased from 18% in 2000 to 20% in 2010. Both sets of projections suggest that currently, about 22% of Reading residents are age 60+. Moving ahead to the year 2030, a quarter or more of the community is expected to be age 60 or older<sup>5</sup>.

decline of population levels. For more information on the methods used to create Donahue Institute projections, see Renski & Strate (November 2015).

<sup>4</sup> The distribution using the Donahue Institute “alternate” series would be slightly lower at 6,176 residents age 60+ in 2020 and 6,934 in 2030 or 24% and 26% of the total population, respectively.

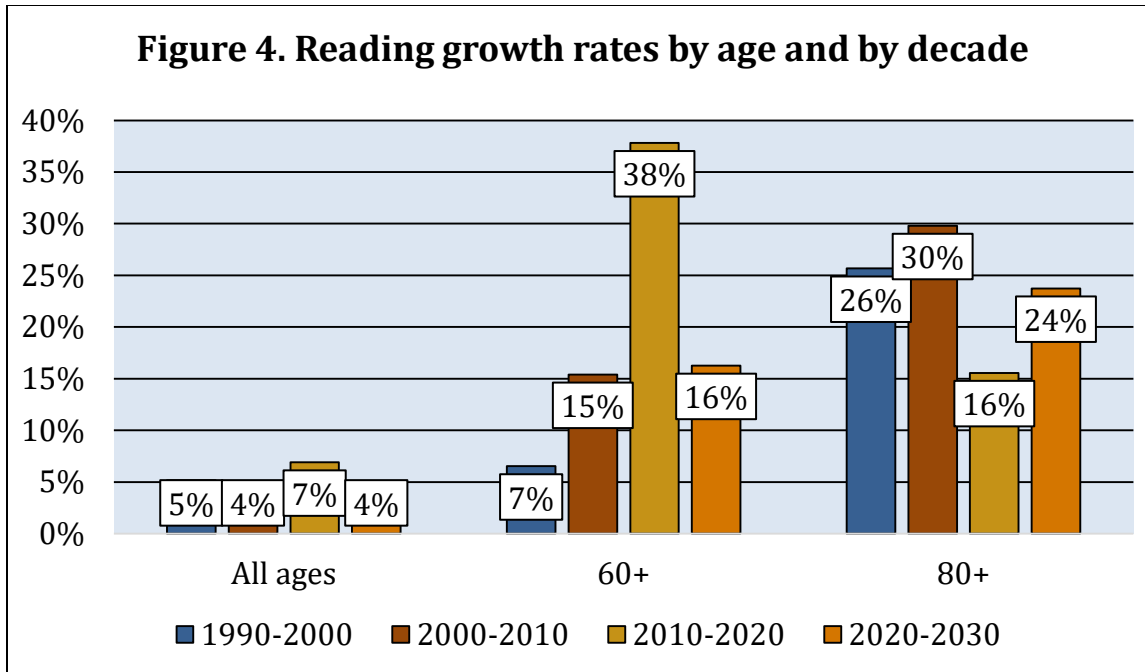
<sup>5</sup> Similarly, two sets of population projections produced by the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) indicate that the proportion of Reading residents age 60+ is expected to be 29% in 2030.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population for 2000-2010.

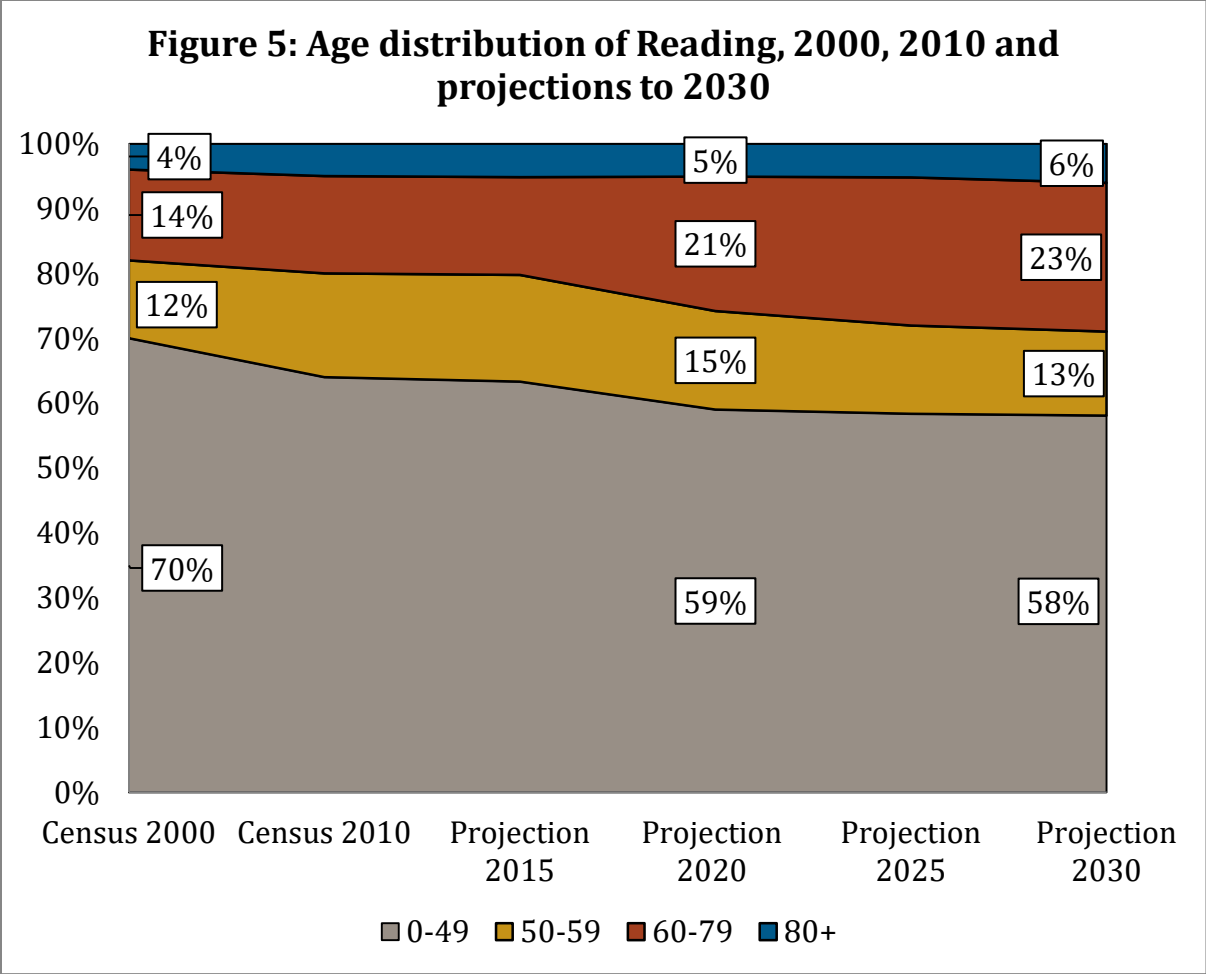
\* Figures for 2015-2030 are projections generated by the Donahue Institute, University of Massachusetts: <http://pep.donahue-institute.org/>

As noted, population growth in Reading was concentrated in older age groups during the last decade, and this pattern is expected to continue for some time (see **Figure 4**). Between 1990 and 2000, the total population of Reading increased by 5%; and the age 60+ population increased in number by just 7%. However, a different pattern was observed starting in the interval between 2000 and 2010; in that decade, the total population grew by just 4%, with the number of residents age 60 and older increasing by 15%. This pattern of a higher rate of growth among the 60+ population than among the population overall is expected to continue through 2030. Of special interest to the Reading Elder Services, growth has been and will likely continue to be high among the 80+ population. As discussed elsewhere in this report, the oldest-old populations are more frequent patrons of the Senior Center, and frequently have different needs and interests than younger seniors. The expected growth in this age group is worth considering as plans are made for the Elder & Human Services Division moving forward.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 1990-2010 Census; projections generated by the Donahue Institute, University of Massachusetts: <http://pep.donahue-institute.org/> (vintage series)

Implications of these expected trends for the overall age structure is shown in **Figure 5**, which shows the age distribution of Reading for 2000-2030, based on the Donahue “vintage” series. Growth of the senior population is clearly evident in this Figure, starting in 2000 and continuing to 2030. By 2030, nearly three out of ten of Reading residents will be age 60+, and over 40% will be at least age 50.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population for 2000-2010.  
 \* Figures for 2015-2030 are projections generated by the Donahue Institute, University of Massachusetts: <http://pep.donahue-institute.org/> (vintage series)

**Socio-Demographic Composition of Reading’s Older Population**

Reading is less diverse than the state with respect to race and ethnicity. For all ages combined, about 90% of Reading residents report their race as White, non-Hispanic (not shown). **Table 2** displays the race and ethnicity of Reading residents age 65 and older. The large majority of older residents report White race (93%). A small portion (6%) report Asian race, and the remaining 1% of the population 65 and older are some other race. Hispanics may be of any race; about 1% of Reading’s population age 65+ are Hispanic or Latino.

**Table 2.** Race distribution of residents who are age 65 and older in Reading, 2015

<b>Race</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>White</b>	3,364	93%
<b>Black or African American</b>	-	<1%
<b>Asian</b>	222	6%
<b>Other race</b>	18	1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,611</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Hispanic or Latino*</b>	25	1%

*\*Hispanics may be of any race.*

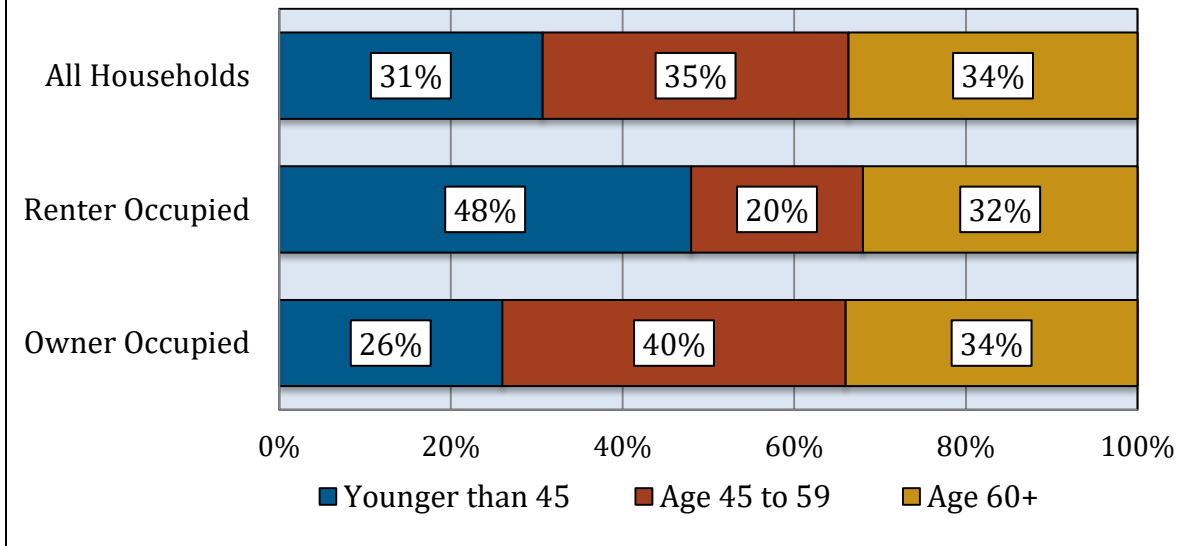
*Source: American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Tables B01001A-I.*

A small number (13%) of older Reading residents speak a language other than English at home (*ACS, 2011 – 2015, Table B16004*). Reading residents who speak a language other than English at home most commonly speak an Indo-European language, such as Italian, or an Asian language, such as Chinese (*ACS, 2011 – 2015, Table B16001*).

The gender distribution in Reading is similar to that of most communities— a majority of residents who are age 60 and older are women (56%; *ACS, 2011 – 2015, Table B01001*). The greater number of older women is largely due to longer life expectancies of women compared to men—a demographic disparity that is widely observed in older populations globally.

A majority of Reading’s households have householders who are middle-aged or older. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a “householder” is the person reported as the head of household, typically the person in whose name the home is owned or rented. Residents age 45 and older are householders of 69% of all households in Reading (**Figure 6**). Among renter occupied households, residents younger than 45 are heads of about half of households (48%), while 20% are aged 45 to 59 and 32% are aged 60 and older. In contrast, residents under the age of 45 make up only 26% of owner occupied households. Middle-aged residents, those between 45 and 59 years, make up 40% of homeowners. About one-third (34%) of homeowners in Reading are 60 and older.

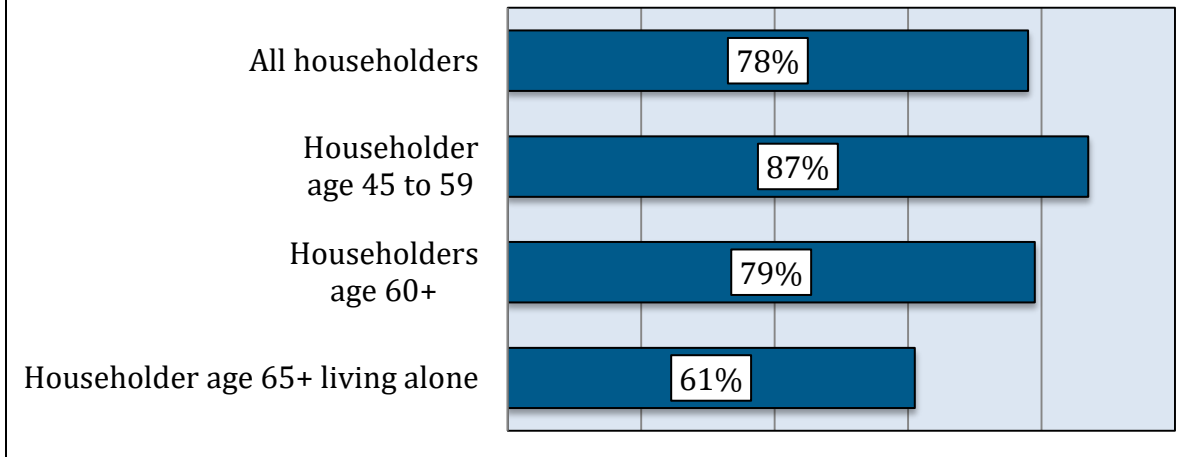
**Figure 6. Age structure of Reading householders by owner status**



Source: American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Tables B25007.

Most Reading residents live in homes that they own or are purchasing (78%; **Figure 7**). Nearly 9 out of 10 residents age 45 to 59 own their homes, as do 79% of householders 60 and older. In addition, 61% of Reading residents aged 65 and older who live alone also own their home. Home maintenance assistance is often necessary for older homeowners—especially those who live alone—in order to maintain comfort and safety in their homes.

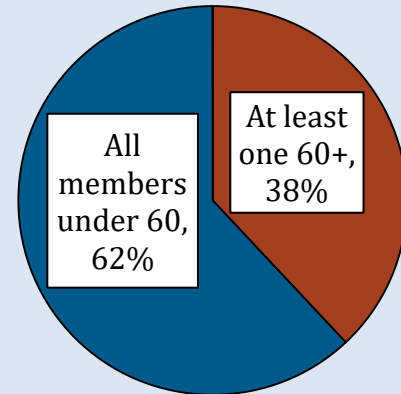
**Figure 7. Percent of Reading householders who live in owner-occupied housing**



Source: American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Tables B25007 and B25011.

According to data from the American Community Survey, an estimated 38% of Reading’s households have at least one individual who is age 60 or older (**Figure 8**). This high proportion— which is likely to increase in the future as the population continues to age— may reflect the widespread demand for programs, services, and other considerations that address aging-related concerns, including health and caregiving needs, transportation options, and safe home environments.

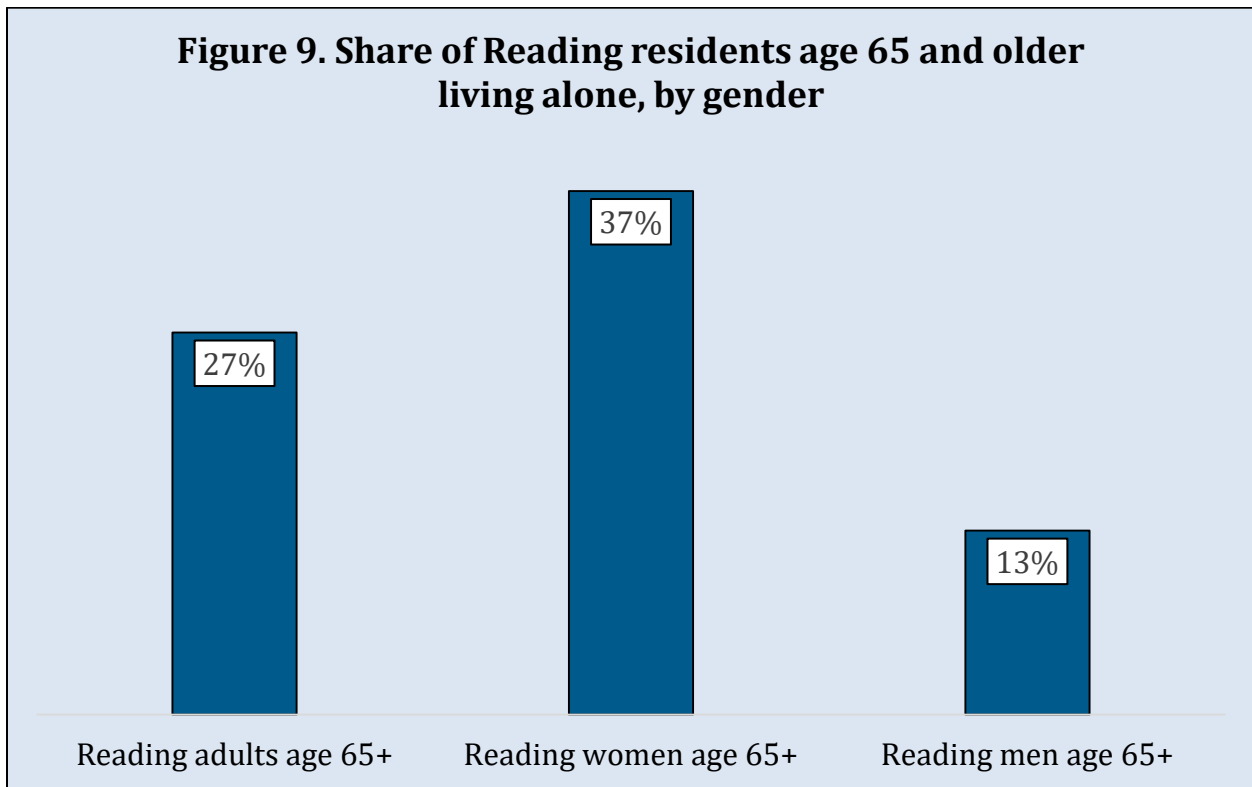
**Figure 8. Households in Reading with at least one member age 60 or older**



Source: American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Table B11006.

A sizeable share (27%) of Reading residents who are age 65 and older live alone in their homes. Older women are substantially more likely than men to live alone, with over one-third of women aged 65 or older living alone in their homes (**Figure 9**).

**Figure 9. Share of Reading residents age 65 and older living alone, by gender**



Source: American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Table B09020.

American Community Survey estimates suggest that Reading residents are well educated on average. About 62% of persons age 45 to 64 have either a bachelor's degree or a graduate/professional degree (*ACS, 2011-2015, Table B15001*). Among those 65 and older, nearly one-third have at least a bachelor's degree. Estimates for Massachusetts as a whole indicate that 29% of adults age 65+ have a bachelor's degree or more—very similar to the older population of Reading. This educational profile contributes to the vitality and character of the community, which depends on older adults who value opportunities to be involved through volunteer and civic engagement activities. Highly-educated older adults are often attracted to late-life learning opportunities offered through the Senior Center or other community organization (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014).

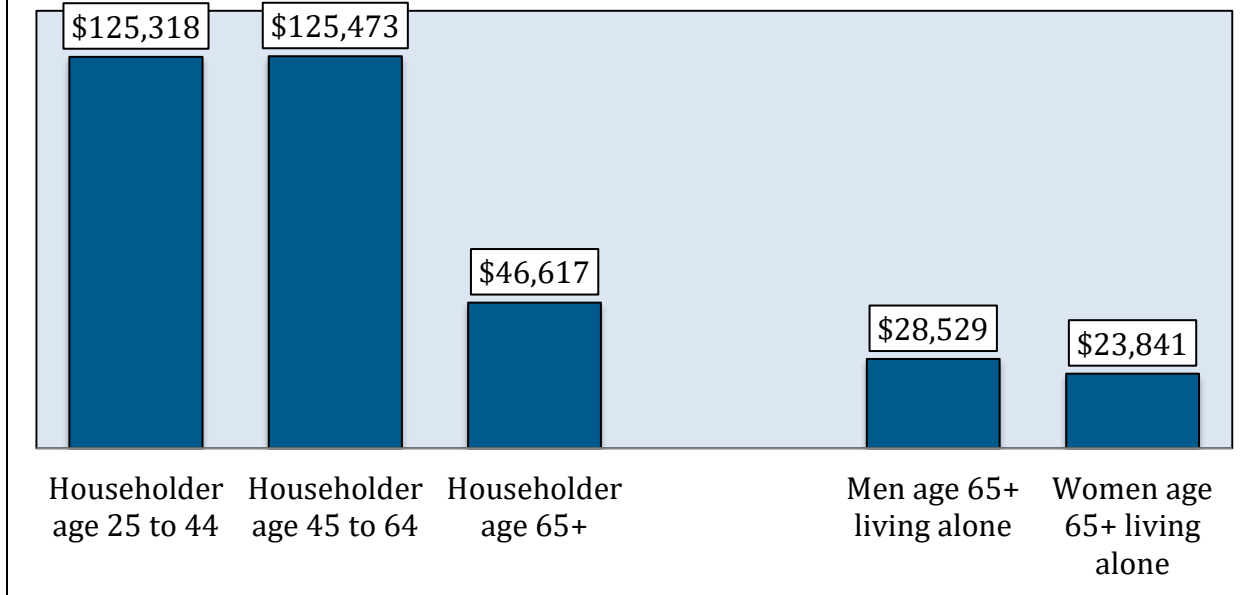
Similar to older adults living in communities throughout the U.S., a large proportion of older Reading residents remain in the workforce. About 72% of residents aged 60-64, along with nearly half of seniors age 65-69 and 14% of those age 70 or older are in the labor force (*ACS, 2011-2015, Table B23001*). Some of these individuals work full-time, while others may be working part-time or seasonally. Often, their work responsibilities are added to obligations to family members (such as older parents, grandchildren, or children) as well as valued volunteer commitments.

More than half (52%) of men age 65 and older report veteran status, as do a small share (1%) of Reading's older women (*ACS, 2011-2015, Table B21001*). As a result, many of the Town's older residents may be eligible to receive some benefits and services based on their military service or that of their spouses.

With respect to household income, older residents experience a comparative disadvantage (**Figure 10**). Householders aged 25 to 64 have the highest median income at over \$125,000. Among householders 65 and older, the median income is \$46,617, which is much lower than the median income of younger Reading households. Older residents living alone are at the greatest disadvantage in terms of household income. Older men living alone have a median income of \$28,529, compared to \$23,841 for older women living alone. Given that about 27% of older residents age 65 and older live alone in Reading, these figures suggest that a sizeable number of residents are at risk of economic insecurity.



**Figure 10. Median household income in Reading by age and living situation (in 2015 inflation-adjusted dollars)**

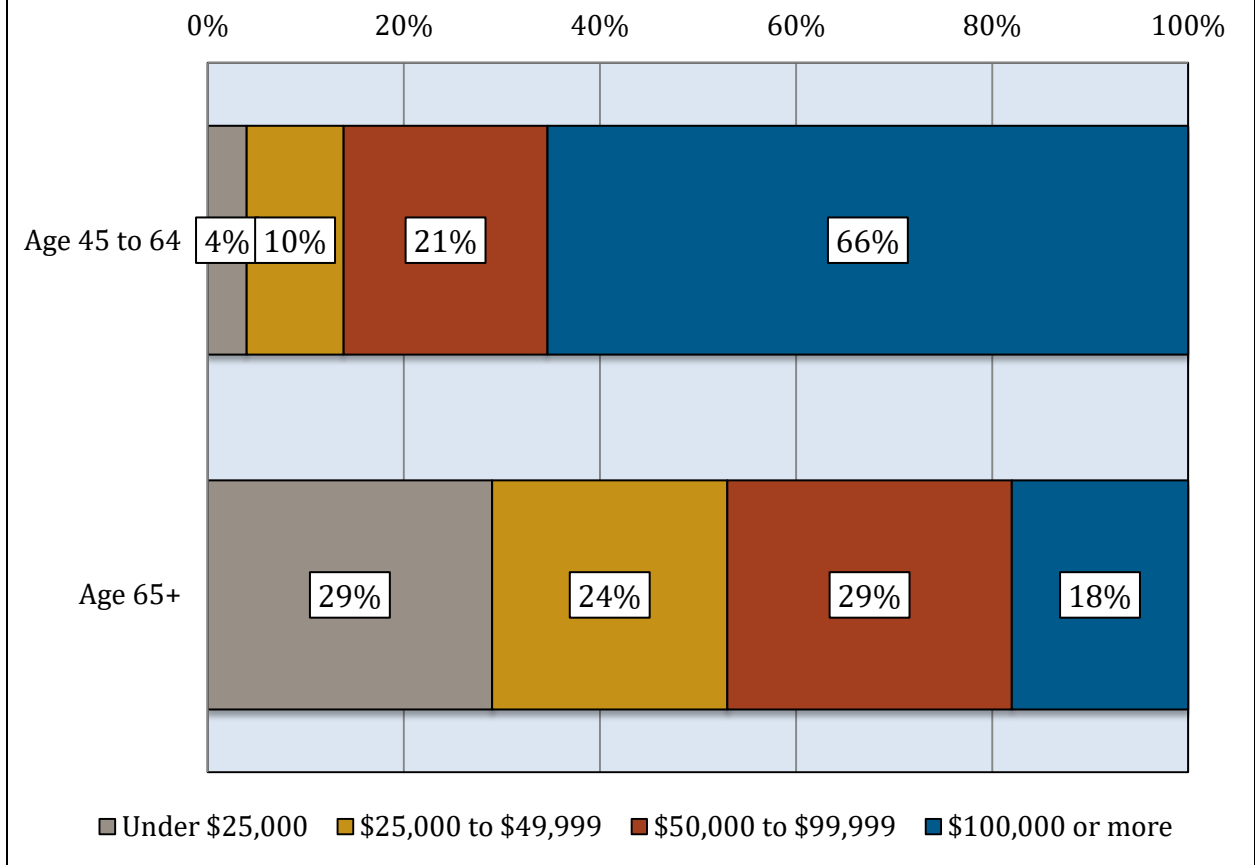


Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Tables B19049 and B19215.

Note: Includes only community households, not group quarters such as nursing homes.

The economic profile of older Reading residents relative to younger residents is further illustrated in **Figure 11**, which shows that many members of the older adult population live on a modest income. Approximately 18% of Reading’s householders age 65 and older report incomes of \$100,000 or more. By comparison, 66% of households headed by younger residents report this level of income. In contrast, more than one-quarter of households headed by someone age 65 and older report annual incomes under \$25,000. This compares with just 4% of households headed by individuals age 45 to 64. Thus, a sizeable segment of Reading’s older population is at risk of financial insecurity or economic disadvantage.

**Figure 11. Household income distribution in Reading by age of householder (in 2015 inflation-adjusted dollars)**

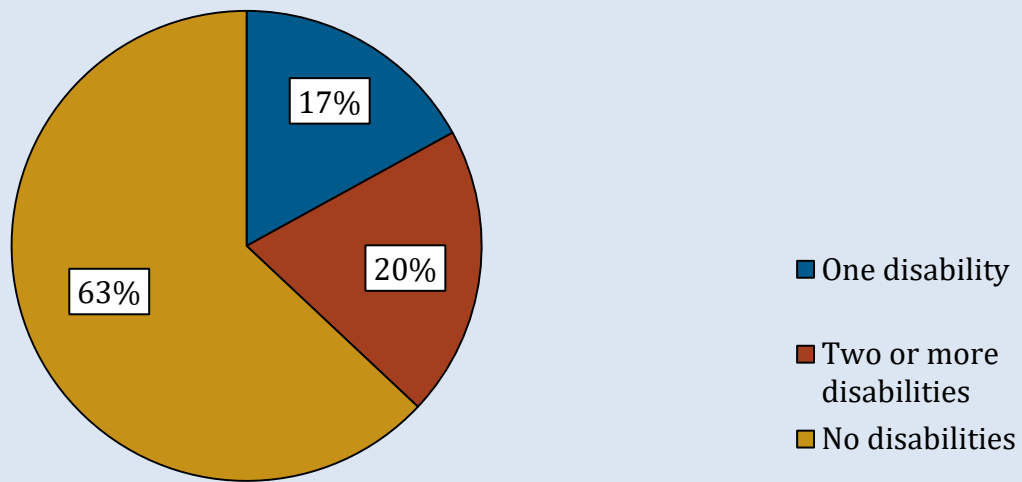


Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Table B19037.

Note: Includes only community households, not group quarters such as nursing homes.

Many Reading residents age 65 and older experience some level of disability that could impact their ability to function independently in the community. **Figure 12** depicts the proportions of older residents who report some level of disability. Seventeen percent of residents age 65 and older have one disability, while 20% report two or more disabilities. These rates of disability are comparable to those estimated for Massachusetts as a whole.

**Figure 12. Disability status for Reading residents age 65+**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2011-2015, Table C18108.

Among the different types of disability that are assessed in ACS, the most commonly cited by older Reading residents 65 and older are ambulatory difficulties—difficulty walking or climbing stairs—reported by 22% (ACS 2011-2015, Table S1810). Other disabilities experienced by older Reading residents included hearing problems (18%), independent living limitations (difficulty doing errands alone, such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping; 17%), cognitive difficulty (8%), and vision difficulty (5%). Seven percent reported self-care difficulties (difficulty with dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home). Some individuals who have disabilities may have greater difficulty accessing transportation; some many require in-home assistance; and some may require adaptations in their homes to facilitate single-floor living.

### Focus Group

Our primary goal in engaging with the focus group was to identify the concerns of community members who are actively involved in serving the senior population of Reading. The focus group consisted of emergency responders, Veterans Agent, Board of Health, Librarian, Council on Aging, Housing Authority and members of the public who have frequent contact and provide services to Reading’s residents. It also included staff members of the EHS Division, comprised of the senior center coordinator, the Town case manager, and nurse advocate. Topics for the group conversation focused largely on identifying the unmet needs of Reading seniors. The primary themes that the focus group discussed the most were housing, transportation, and health related services.

### Housing

According to focus group participants, appropriate housing options for older adults in Reading is a concern. There is a significant portion of Reading’s senior population who do

not qualify for subsidized housing options, and yet cannot afford private assisted living. If they wish to downsize from single family homes, individuals may not have the opportunity to obtain senior housing in Reading due to eligibility and availability. The Reading Housing Authority has a complex known as Tannerville that has 80 1-bedroom apartments. The population is a mix of lower income older adults and people with disabilities. However, the wait time to obtain public housing is 8-10 years.

Focus group participants discussed the potential implications of housing changes in Reading. New housing development, zoning regulations, and other local factors have the potential to change the age distribution of a community. For example, establishing more age-restricted (senior) housing may attract new older adults to the area seeking affordable and livable options, or looking for living options closer to friends or family members. Likewise, allowing accessory apartments through easy to navigate zoning bylaws, such as has been done in Reading, provides opportunities for intergenerational living arrangements which also would attract more older adults who would welcome the opportunity to occupy an “in-law” apartment with their extended family.

Focus group participants also voiced concerns about individuals who are living on the cusp of economic insecurity, and the difficulties that they face finding affordable housing and maintaining their life in Reading. The conversation of housing and livability costs was related back to other essential needs. For example, participants commented on the rising livability costs in Reading can easily lead to food insecurity and explain the growing number of households using the Town’s food pantry and other services available to them through the EHS Division and other local or regional providers.

### Transportation

According to focus group participants, public transportation is inaccessible and inadequate. The commuter rail and bus stop are not accessible for residents with physical disabilities and as a result, some cannot travel independently. One focus group participant from a local senior housing building said, “I asked the residents today (about their needs) and transportation was the first thing they said. We have transportation...the Reading Response program and I think a lot of people don’t know about that.” This participant illustrated that although there are multiple transportation options in Reading, they may not all be known. Others suggested that varying eligibility, costs and schedules make it challenging to navigate the transportation options available in Reading.

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*“it (commuter rail station) needs work... – it’s older and it needs to be upgraded. ...you know, the only bus stop here is right by the train station.”*

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The complimentary van service provided by the EHS Division was described by focus group participants as carrying a stigma among younger older adults of being unreliable and intended for seniors older than them. The current Pleasant Street Center’s transportation director driver works at full capacity. He reported that taking the van is useful for seniors who wish to be more social and yet are physically limited in their ability to drive or navigate

public transit. Besides regular routes around Town, the van makes trips to the Pleasant Street Center, and grocery store. The Division of EHS also coordinates trips into Boston, to museums in other communities, and out of state. These trips are almost always fully booked and on frequent occasions result in having to turn interested residents away.

Focus group participants mention a resource for medical transportation services for Reading residents. With funding from the Town of Reading's Hospital Trust Fund, the Division administers the Reading Response program. This income-eligible program escorts individuals of any age from their homes to doctor's appointments and medical procedures at little to no cost to the resident. However, focus group participants did not seem to think that many seniors are aware of this service and that better outreach is needed to make sure that older adults are aware of the program. The group discussion touched on the importance of a program like Reading Response for adults without family in the local area or are otherwise unable to accompany their loved one to medical appointments or procedures. For example, a conversation was had about how this program is also quite useful to family caregivers, who may otherwise have to take time off of work to transport their relatives to medical appointments.

### Health Services

Another issue, raised by focus group participants, facing Reading is that there is no adult day health program in Town. Adult day health programs allow participants to maintain their community life while coping with a medical condition or disability. They also provide respite to family caregivers and provide social stimulation for the participant. Although the EHS Division had recently started a respite program, focus group participants were unaware of such serve—although they certainly recognized the demonstrated need. Adult day health services are crucial resources for those with memory disorders wishing to age in place. A reported barrier to Reading residents receiving adult day health services is the lack of transportation to neighboring Towns that do provide it. Focus group participants recall that although the program was not sustainable in Reading, and the Pleasant Street Center does not have space or capacity for such a program, there is an opportunity to explore coordination with other Towns to ensure that residents of Reading may access adult day programming.

Focus group participants, particularly those who work for the Town of Reading's EHS Division, voiced concern over the growing number of mental health crises involving the 60 and over population, especially those involving addiction. It was noted that these cases further strain the Town's emergency services. As a result, Elder Services has created a roundtable that meets monthly to go over the community's need for increased mental health and addiction support as well as to generally maintain lines of communication about issues particularly challenging situations. The roundtable includes EHS staff, representatives from the police and emergency medical personnel from the Fire and Police Divisions. The round table participants discuss general mental health issues that are prevalent among residents as well as substance abuse. This

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*"We (EMS) can call them (EHS) any time and they call us. There's very good two-way communication."*

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collaboration is a positive aspect of Reading’s aging services and reflects the Town’s motivation to better understand issues relating to the growing older population. It is also a story of successful, interdisciplinary partnerships in Reading.

Focus group participants also referred to a high-level relationship between the EHS Division and Mystic Valley Elder Services (MVES), an Aging Services Access Point (ASAP). MVES provides an array of health and social services focused on care assessment and management. For example, MVES facilitates the home-delivered meals program in Reading (Meals on Wheels). This relationship was described as critical to the wellbeing of Reading’s seniors, particularly those who are homebound or do not have familial or social support that would otherwise assist in care management. Participants also described MVES as being a key resource for the case management staff of the Pleasant Street Center.

#### **Elder and Human Services Division and the Pleasant Street Center**

According to this knowledgeable group of community stakeholders, the Town of Reading’s EHS Division has a number of community programs that promote social inclusion of its seniors. Staff of the Pleasant Street Center described the close-knit social relationships that are built through the Center’s programs and services. Focus group participants considered ways to expand the number of residents who benefit from such social activity as one area of potential growth for the Center—reaching those who are not already connected.

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*“...we discuss in our (COA) meetings a lot..., how do we attract those folks so that they’re part of the center and part of the network. How do we attract...the younger elderly?”*

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In partnership with the local library, the EHS Division facilitates a Memory Café, which provides a welcoming space for individuals with memory loss and those who care for them. The Memory Café is hosted monthly and offers refreshments along with activities and entertainment. One Elder Services staff member noted that these have brought the issue of memory loss to the broader Reading community, which has led to additional partnerships. Said one participant, “I think that the memory café has opened up a lot. People have outreached to the community, like, ‘Oh, what can we do?’ I know next month, our entertainment’s being sponsored by a local foundation. A couple of the private assisted livings have done stuff here at the center, like sponsored, whether it was a luncheon or desserts.” This type of broader community visibility is an opportunity for the Pleasant Street Center to expand its outreach and build relationships with other provider organizations.

Participants named the lifelong learning program hosted by the Reading Public Library as being another key resource for Reading older adults. This program includes computer skills training courses. The library also collects large-print collections and digital media. The library has a program that coordinates volunteers to drop materials off to homebound seniors. Focus group participants mention the important of strengthening existing partnerships, and cultivating new ones, as activities that could bolster the work of the EHS Division and give residents of Reading a range of opportunities to engage with their peers. Identifying ways to work with groups like the Reading Neighbors Network could also be

productive moving forward. The focus group conversation acknowledged a willingness to work together as a community and the clear efficiency and effectiveness of such efforts.

Space and staffing capacity of the Pleasant Street Center were noted as presenting challenges to meeting the needs of Reading residents. Current staff have been perceived to be “maxxed out” when it comes to their busy schedules and full caseloads. It was noted in the focus group that due to space limitations, the office of the Administrator of the EHS Division is located in Town Hall while the rest of the Division’s staff is located at the Pleasant Street Center. Residents frequently come to Town Hall looking for the Case Manager or Nurse Advocate and are redirected to the Pleasant Street Center.

Yet there is also recognition that a segment of the population is not connected to the Pleasant Street Center, and that this portion of the community is growing in size. Currently, all large events occur in the “Hoyt Great Room” at the Center. Participants comment that during exercise classes, the area around the front desk is crowded which makes it difficult for walk-ins to get information as well as for the front desk staff to answer the phones and do their work effectively. Further, focus group participants emphasized that there is not a bathroom on the first floor of the Center—where much of the programming is conducted. Thus, residents have to climb the stairs or wait for an elevator to use the bathroom. The focus group discussion made it clear that services and programs that are administered and facilitated by the Pleasant Street Center are invaluable to the people they support; and there is potential to expand this network to reach more of Reading’s seniors, including the most vulnerable.

### **Community Forums**

Midway through the study (April 2017), we conducted two community forums at the Pleasant Street Center to acquire a better understanding of the Town’s residents and their priorities with respect to current and future aging in Reading. One session was held during the day and the other in the evening to ensure that working residents of Reading had the opportunity to participate. Both sessions were well-attended, a total of approximately 75 residents attended one of the two sessions. Participants were eager to share their thoughts and opinions with members of the UMass Boston research team. The forums were structured in three parts: 1) participants were asked to consider the strengths, its challenges and to describe opportunities that are available within the Town of Reading to improve the ability of residents to age optimally in the community. Key themes that emerged based on these three areas of focus are summarized below.

### **Strengths**

Participants reflected on the Town of Reading’s strengths as a community in which to age. Reading was described by participants as being a safe and welcoming community. This sense of safety and security that forum participants experience in their neighborhoods was named as a factor they value and a strength of living in Reading.

Another named strength of living and aging in Reading is the various options for transportation. Forum participants mentioned that the Town is on the commuter rail line into Boston, and that eligible residents have access to The Ride, which provides accessible



door-to-door transportation for those who cannot use regular transportation due to physical and/or cognitive disability. Residents have the option of using the Pleasant Street Center's van to get around locally and access programs and services. Furthermore, the Reading Response Program brings seniors to and from medical appointments and procedures during the weekdays. Some participants praised the walkability of downtown and how compact it is. Moreover, an ad-hoc group of Reading citizens who advocate for the expansion of pedestrian and cycling-friendly areas in Town was also mentioned as a piece of the transportation resources available in the community.

In terms of programs provided at the Pleasant Street Center, community forum participants reported being generally impressed by the staff, volunteers, and overall community involvement. One participant noted that "My mom moved in with me at age 85. She started at the Pleasant Street Center right away, now she loves it, just the goodwill of the people in the community at large, and the intimacy of it, how caring they are. If it weren't for the Center we would be at odds." Other forum attendees who are also engaged at the Pleasant Street Center commented on the great volunteers who give their time at the Center. They describe feeling that the Pleasant Street Center is a great resource for activities to stay socially and intellectually engaged.

Residents also identified value in having access to a nurse through the Pleasant Street Center. This has proven to be a real asset to the community as individuals who seek services and supports from the EHS Division can have their medical and social needs assessed and met simultaneously. This approach to case management was described both in the focus group and in the community forums as being holistic and thorough.

Besides the Pleasant Street Center, there are sites for recreational activities as described by community forum attendees. The Town of Reading has a local YMCA that was mentioned at the forum. While it provides a lot of activities for seniors, forum participants noted that the YMCA may not be affordable for everyone. Forum participants also mention the importance of having a number of faith communities in Reading. It was reported that several local churches supplement some EHS programs, by providing transportation and home visits for senior parishioners. Finally, the Reading Public Library is highly regarded among forum attendees for having great programs, an accessible building, and a collection of accessible materials for seniors. The library's services directed to older residents and its partnership with the Pleasant Street Center reflects the community's overall commitment to providing supplemental and inclusive programming that targets seniors and provides ways for them to stay intellectually engaged and involved in the community as they choose.

## Challenges

Collectively, forum participants suggest that the biggest challenge facing the EHS Division is strategic communication. Many of the Town forum participants were not aware of everything that they have access to through the Pleasant Street Center and EHS Division. Some were not aware that there are multiple transportation options which can be braided together and tailored to meet individual needs or that a caregiver respite program was started in 2016. Participants noted that programs and events are not advertised well to



diverse segments of the population. There was discussion about exploring technology as an option for wider reach about activities and programs as well as seeking supplemental funding so that the newsletter can reach every senior household in Reading by mail. Outreach to caregivers may be another avenue for marketing. All of that said, the issues of capacity of the building and the staff also present challenges. As noted by the Community Forum participants, potential for supporting a larger portion of Reading seniors does exist; but the capacity to accommodate these new participants remains under-developed.

While there are many options for seniors regarding transportation, community forum participants generally agreed that there needs to be an expansion of transportation during the evenings and weekends. Attendees described desires to have dinner with friends in Town or to attend performances or other local events that happen in the evening. Community forum participants reported that fewer transportation services during those times is an issue not just for senior-specific transportation, but also for the entire community. Participants attribute part of this challenge to the fact that the Town of Reading does not have a taxi company in Town or a local public bus. As well, the eligibility criteria, costs to riders, and accessibility to those with physical impairments were noted as barriers to access for some existing transportation options and, as a result, may also exclude a particularly vulnerable subset of Reading's older adults. Moreover, beyond the Town's center, participants cited challenges related to walkability. Participants describe things like cracked sidewalks and tree roots that create hazards to walkability. Community Forum participants suggested that older adults are likely to feel isolated, particularly during the colder months, if they cannot get outside and travel safely.

Similarly, Reading does not offer senior housing near the Town's center and a general lack of affordable housing options were noted. Keeping in mind that this is the only area of the Town that is perceived as walkable and there is lack of local transit, seniors face difficulty accessing downtown amenities. Without sufficient and affordable housing, seniors may not have the opportunity to downsize while staying in Reading. As a result, many older residents will remain in their original homes as they age in Reading. Forum participants cite home maintenance, lawn care and home safety modifications as being necessary for many older residents to maintain their property and live safely and comfortably in their homes.

Town forum participants also raised concerns about the Pleasant Street Center building. Perhaps most notable of the limitations mentioned during the community forums is that the building does not have a restroom on the first floor. As a result, older residents have to use the stairs or an elevator to access the nearest restroom. Forum participants perceived the Pleasant Street Center to be inadequate for current needs because there is not adequate space for all of the programs and services currently offered, as well as structural concerns such as poor ventilation. For example, some forum participants voiced frustration with the fact that due to space limitations, programs have to be scheduled at particular times and in particular rooms and that makes it difficult for them to attend the various programs of interest because of time conflicts. Further, space limitations require pre-registration for many programs and limit the number of seniors who can participate. This can result in seniors who wish to participate being turned away or put on a waitlist. One participant described being in a computer class and also wanting to attend a lecture event being held

simultaneously upstairs. Another participant seemed unnerved with the fact that often she attends an exercise class and only a couple of hours later is having a meal in the same space. Forum attendees acknowledge that with a growing aging population, a building that can accommodate more programs and more residents as well as the capacity of the Pleasant Street Center staff may need to be addressed.

Community Forum participants also voiced concern about the costs associated with some programs run by the Pleasant Street Center. Because some of the programs at the center are free while others are not— forum participants suggested that costs could be a barrier to entry for the many Reading seniors who are facing economic insecurity as costs of living in Town continue to rise. Forum attendees agreed that the EHS Division and the Pleasant Street Center will continue to be an important resource to the community, and particularly for economically vulnerable residents of all ages.

Forum participants commented that the Pleasant Street Center has had a difficult time attracting younger seniors. Forum participants said that this is because younger seniors do not want to be considered “old.” However, other programs (through the YMCA or recreation center, for example) do not have sufficient activities for younger seniors and the YMCA is comparatively more expensive. Forum attendees report that many seniors will not participate in the daily lunch program at the Pleasant Street Center because of the food quality and because they do not always feel welcomed by other participants. Promoting inclusion at the Pleasant Street Center certainly poses an opportunity for continued growth.

Another general issue of communication was raised at the community forums: older adults are unaware of laws and regulation changes that affect their age group. Forum participants are concerned with state-level changes that are often not covered locally and in time for them to have their voices heard. The opportunity for speakers to come and explain specific policy changes or legislation affecting older adults was described as being highly by seniors in Reading. In particular, Community Forum participants wanted to hear about local, regional, and state policies that would have an impact on their lives and on their community.

### Opportunities

Despite having challenges, forum participants agreed that the Town of Reading’s EHS Division and the Pleasant Street Center provides seniors with comprehensive programming and services that are really invaluable to those who take full advantage. Several Pleasant Street users outlined opportunities to maximize the space of the Center or identified areas for needed space expansion to accommodate the current and growing needs of the community. For example, one forum participant said that the building should be laid out and utilized in a way that would encourage seniors to mingle and facilitate relationships with newcomers. Separate rooms for meals and larger programs (e.g., fitness classes or films) would allow more residents to participate at the Pleasant Street Center and could perhaps even attract younger residents to participate.

Also noted, is the recent formation of the Reading Neighbors Network that is working to develop opportunities for social engagement beyond the walls of the Pleasant Street Center as well as an informal support network for residents who need some periodic support (e.g.,

a ride to the grocery store or help around the house). The formation of this group was identified as an important opportunity for the EHS Division, and other organizations in Town, to collaborate across sectors to ensure the needs of the community are being met.

Community Forum participants recognized that similar to activities run by the public library, there is opportunity for the EHS Division to leverage relationships with local schools to expand opportunities for older residents to get involved in the community. Specifically, attendees imagined a number of different volunteer opportunities for older and younger residents alike if more collaborative opportunities existed between the EHS Division and the Reading Schools. Currently, there is a literacy program through Mystic Valley Elder Services (MVES) that could be expanded upon to offer more opportunities for intergenerational exchange at the elementary school level. This particular example involves a small group of volunteers that read to elementary-school children, twice a week, for the purpose of improving literacy. There was also mention of getting volunteers from local high schools involved in senior-focused activities and events at the Pleasant Street Center. Besides enhancing intergenerational contact, high school volunteer programs can complement the services provided by MVES and the EHS Division by meeting the needs of the senior community. Examples generated by the Community Forum discussion included, high school students teaching seniors to use computers, smart phones, and tablets in order to build computer literacy. One potential byproduct of this type of activity could be that information about community resources would more easily be consumed in electronic media by older residents. These intergenerational volunteer opportunities could also reach homebound residents of Reading who may not be able to attend programs at the Pleasant Street Center. Finally, intergenerational activities and stronger relationships with the schools were also described by attendees as spurring future opportunities to work together and share resources. Forum attendees further commented that these opportunities could help to address the concerns raised at the forums about how Town resources are allocated across the lifespan.

### Key informant Interviews

Five key informant interviews were conducted, by telephone, to explore the perspectives of individuals who hold positions in the Town government or in local organizations, including the Pleasant Street Center. Specifically, we spoke with one member of the Board of Selectmen, one member of the Fire Department who serves as EMS coordinator, one member of the Council on Aging, one SHINE counselor who is also an active member of the Reading Neighbors Network, and a long-time Meals on Wheels delivery driver. These participants were encouraged to share their insights both as professionals in the community and as long-time residents of the Town. We were interested in common themes that would emerge between participants in response to our questions. In this section of the report, we present salient points that emerged across the five interviews. Some additional points raised by individual key informants are also described in this section.

Unmet needs. A substantial need in the community of older adults in Reading relates to social isolation. This group shared the concern that some older residents are isolated in their homes, lack nearby family or other informal support, are at risk of “falling through the cracks” with respect to having their social and health needs met. Key informants are

particularly concerned about frail and homebound seniors in Reading who may not be able to take advantage of the programs and services offered through the EHS Division and the Pleasant Street Center. One key informant reported that there is a group of frail or homebound residents that live alone in Reading with limited family support. She suggests that additional thought needs to be put into how the community is connecting to this group of vulnerable seniors. For example, one key informant who delivers Meals on Wheels (MOW) recalled multiple times that noticeable changes in a client's behavior, appearance or living environment moved him to report back to the case manager at MVES. Although many perceive Reading as a tight-knit community, these key informants speak to a less visible segment of the population with more social needs.

Key informants also commented on the lack of affordable and available senior housing in Reading due to waitlists and eligibility criteria. One key informant referenced the amount of housing being developed in Reading, including condominiums and apartments that are designated for seniors. Although these units are not necessarily affordable to Reading's existing older adult population, this key informant suggested that this new housing may attract older adults from other communities to move to Reading later in life. As well, it was reported that there is uncertainty about whether or not the residents of these new housing complexes are participating at the Pleasant Street Center or aware of their services. Further, key informants mentioned the strong desire of Reading residents to remain living in Town for as long as possible and preferably in their own home. Due to insufficient housing options, this may mean that older residents need to modify their existing property to make it safe and appropriate for life in old age. There are local programs available to help residents with yard work and minor home modifications; but awareness of these programs may be limited.

Role of the Elder and Human Services Division and the Pleasant Street Center. Key informants offered a number of reflections on how the offices and organizations within Reading, including the EHS Division, can work together to promote the wellbeing of older residents. According to most informants, there is adequate communication between the Town's departments, as the sharing of information is facilitated by monthly meetings between the Fire Department, Police Department and the nurse advocate and case manager from the Pleasant Street Center. These meetings were described by multiple key informants as being constructive and mutually beneficial. This collaborative was developed naturally through the identification of a need for case coordination and sharing of information across Town service providers. This collaborative was described as being successful as all participating parties have stronger linkages with each other's departments and an ability to approach cases with more understanding of the situation and awareness of the available resources to remedy the problem. All key informants seemed well informed about the Pleasant Street Center programs and services, referred clients to the Center readily, or received client referrals to their organizations frequently.

Finally, key informants shared their impressions of the Pleasant Street Center and its effectiveness. All participants evaluated the Pleasant Street Center in very positive terms, citing its excellent staff and volunteers and its value to the community. Key informants expressed uncertainty that the depth of resources offered by the EHS Division is known to the majority of Reading residents. They made suggestions for increasing awareness of these

resources through electronic media as well via existing networks in the community like Reading Neighbors Network and other health and social service providers. They also encourage planning for an older population, that will not only be larger in the future, but may also have different interests and needs. As a result, planning that incorporates a considerable amount of flexibility and adaptability is valued.

Several discussants cited areas where they had observed change in response to growing numbers of older adults in the population. For instance, the SHINE counselor indicated that she had seen an increase in older individuals seeking this free service, and in fact, there are waitlists forming as more and more residents seek information and guidance about their health insurance options. This is one example of how key informants illustrated the growing demand for aging services in the Town on reading.

Town-wide implications. Taken together, the perspectives of these key informants highlighted that the demand for services and supports currently provided by the Pleasant Street Center will increase not only because of sheer number of older residents; but also because the need for added supports and motivation to take advantage of local benefits and programs will become more salient to residents facing such economic constraints. These changes stand to have impact on Town Divisions beyond EHS. As indicated by one key informant from the Reading Fire Department, older residents are not always apt to ask for assistance when they should. To illustrate, this key informant commented that many times they receive calls from older residents only after a situation has become unmanageable. The perspective offered by this key informant is that these older adults have a lot of pride and tend to avoid asking for help. In addition, the key informant believes that some older adults in Reading are also fearful of losing independence. They also raised concerns about the imbalance of resources allocated to older residents of Reading and called on leaders to review ways to ensure that the growing older adult population in Reading, many of whom have contributed for a lifetime to the Town they are so connected to, are receiving adequate support and advocacy from Town departments and elected officials so that they may continue to thrive in Reading as they age.

Another key informant explained an increasing awareness of the financial constraints facing Reading's older adult population in two ways. First, this key informant noted that there are limited Town resources being allocated for senior services, despite the changing demographics. This demographic shift was described by this key informant as, "a bubble going through a boa constrictor", and it was stated that this situation would likely result on a squeeze on the Pleasant Street Center and the services it provides. As illustrated by this key informant, this issue is further confounded as living costs (i.e., taxes, utilities etc.) to all Reading residents continue to rise; but this issue is particularly important for older residents, many of whom are living on fixed incomes. Ultimately, key informants illustrated the point that a significant segment of Reading's older adult population is living in the face of economic security as they continue to age in community and that their need for support from the likes of the EHS Division, and other organizations in Town, will become more crucial to their ability to remain living independently.

Multiple key informants mentioned the wealth of programs, services and supports available throughout the Town of Reading, but also noted a real lack in awareness or information about how to access these resources for residents of all ages. Barriers to information acquisition were brainstormed: key informants hypothesized that one barrier to access some of the social service resources in the community was attributed to stigma about receiving “help” and retaining anonymity, others posited that older adults may be less likely to obtain information via the Internet than younger adults, and some commented that although word of mouth can be a powerful way of transferring information in a community—it is often difficult to ensure that information reaches all facets of the population in Town.

### Peer Community Comparison

Reading and its peer communities have many demographic and socioeconomic characteristics in common (see **Table 3**). The total population estimates for 2015 range from about 14,000 (Bedford) to 35,000 (Natick), with Reading in the middle at just over 25,000. All of the communities have nearly the same proportion of seniors age 60 or older, which is about 20%. As well, Reading and its peers have similar median household incomes at about \$100,000, substantially greater than the Massachusetts median income (at about \$69,000). All of the communities are well educated, indicated by the percent of adults with college degrees. However, compared to its peer communities, Reading has the lowest proportion of older residents with a college degree at 31% compared to 42% in Milton and North Andover, 47% in Westborough, 49% in Natick, 52% in Andover and 59% in Bedford

**Table 3.** Demographic features, Reading and comparison communities

Town	All-age population	Population age 60+	% age 60+	Median HH \$ (all households)	% age 65 with college degrees
<b>Reading</b>	<b>25,357</b>	<b>5,404</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>\$107,654</b>	<b>31%</b>
Andover	34,616	7,320	21%	\$129,082	52%
Bedford	13,921	3,056	22%	\$113,729	59%
Milton	27,303	5,618	21%	\$116,444	42%
Natick	34,892	7,038	20%	\$100,469	49%
North Andover	29,271	5,708	20%	\$100,286	42%
Westborough	18,611	3,389	18%	\$101,467	47%

Source: American Community Survey 2011-2015 estimates, US Census Bureau

### Space, staffing, volunteers, hours

The Town of Reading’s Pleasant Street Center and its peer senior centers differ in history and size (**Table 4**). Among these communities, the oldest senior center is in North Andover, which was established in 1965. The newest senior center, Natick, was built over a period of ten years and was finished in 2012. At 6,000 square feet, the senior center in Reading is the smallest in comparison to the other six communities. The second smallest is North Andover

at 7,400 square feet, while the largest is Natick at 36,468 feet. The other senior centers fall between 8,500 square feet (Milton) and 14,398 square feet (Natick). Despite the greater size of the other senior centers in comparison to Reading, all of the senior centers identified space as a challenge, with the exception of Natick whose facility is the largest. Directors at all of the other senior centers stated that they do not have adequate space to conduct the full range of programs and services they would like, and even Natick identified parking as a current challenge that may affect use of its programs and services.

Both Reading and the peer communities offer a wide variety of programs and services to the residents they serve. Common among all the centers were exercise groups, card games, arts and crafts classes, and transportation services of some kind. In an effort to improve marketing of its facility, the Bedford and North Andover senior centers make events available to the general public. Senior centers in Bedford, Natick and North Andover have at least one day per week that they stay open after 4pm to accommodate residents who are still working or providing care to a child or other family member. On Thursdays, the senior center in Bedford is open until 9pm and the center in Natick is open until 7pm. On Tuesdays, the senior center in North Andover is open until 6pm.

Property tax work-off programs are becoming more and more critical to older residents of the Commonwealth as costs of living continue to grow. For example, finances may be more difficult for older adults who live on fixed incomes after retirement. Senior centers and COAs can assist seniors in reducing costs through a number of services. Reading and its peers all offer a senior tax-work off program, a program in which seniors can work for the town a set number of hours to reduce the amount of property taxes they owe. Reading and all of its peer communities operate tax work-off programs. These programs allow older residents to work in Town departments to earn a credit towards their property taxes. Reading has 30 available positions and residents can earn a credit of up to \$1000 in a given year. Comparatively, Bedford has the least number of available positions (n=7) and residents can earn a maximum credit of \$850 and Milton has 25 available positions and a maximum tax credit of \$750. Natick has a very similar program to Reading with 30 available positions and an annual maximum credit of \$1000. North Andover, Andover and Westborough all have more available tax work-off positions than Reading, meaning that a larger share of community members have access to this program. Westborough has the highest maximum credit available to resident at \$1500 per year. Westborough is also the only one of Reading's peer communities that also includes Veterans in the tax work off program, regardless of age. In Reading, property tax workers are employed at the Pleasant Street Center. Property tax work-off participants in these peer communities work in a variety of municipal departments. In addition to the council on aging, participating adults work in Town Hall, local public libraries, with the board of health, at the local animal shelter and complete a variety of tasks from data-entry to gardening and help with special events. For example, in Natick participants of their tax work off program work at the Municipal Golf Course, the library and the public schools and in Westborough these workers are placed as crossing guards and in Andover they work as supervisors at the local composting site.

When it comes to paid staff, Reading and Bedford both have the least number of positions at 6 and Westborough has the most at 17 positions. Of course, each center is comprised of

different mixes of full-time and part-time staff. With the exception of Andover, which has 9 full-time staff, the Pleasant Street Center has a comparable number of full-time staff to its other peer communities at 4 full time individuals. However, with 2 part-time staff positions the Elder Services Division has the least number of part-time staff in comparison to all other peer communities identified. Further, these 2 part-time staff members have offices off-site in Town Hall. Meaning, there is no central location of Elder Services in Reading. The total number of part-time staff ranges from 3 to 13 for all other peer communities.



**Table 4.** Features of Senior Centers, Reading and comparison communities

Town	Senior Center Square Feet	Year Opened	Adequate Space?	Staff FT/PT	Volunteer Hours per week	Tax Work Off Program Positions	Max Hours Worked	Max Credit Earned
<b>Reading</b>	<b>6,000</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>4/2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>\$1,000</b>
Andover±	9,000	1983	No	9/6	350	300	100	\$1,000
Bedford*	14,398	NP	No	3/3	150	7	100	\$800
Milton	8,500	2001	No	4/3	10	25	75	\$750
Natick**	36,468	2012	Yes	5/5	250	30	125	\$1,375
North Andover	7,400	1965	No	5/7	75	45	100	\$1000
Westborough	10,000	1989	No	4/13	45	60***	125	\$1,375

*Note: NP = Not Provided; N/A = Not applicable; FT = Full time; PT= Part time*

*±Information about the Andover Senior Center was taken from their needs assessment report completed in 2014.*

*\*Located in a shared municipal building*

*\*\*Located in a shared community center building*

*\*\*\*Ten of these spots are available to Veterans of any age*

All of the senior centers depend on volunteers to accomplish their day-to-day business and meet the long-term goals of their facilities. Similar to its peer communities, the Pleasant Street Center seems to rely on a significant amount of volunteer work. Bedford, Natick and Andover reporting more volunteer hours per week than Reading, and Milton, North Andover, and Westborough reporting less. The towns of Natick, Westborough, Andover and North Andover have a dedicated staff person responsible for volunteer coordination. In Milton, this duty is also the responsibility of the senior center director and in Bedford, volunteer coordination occurs across municipal departments, including their senior center. In Reading, volunteers at the Pleasant Street Center are coordinated by more than one member of the EHS staff, in addition to their other duties. Although volunteers are a resource in any community, limits on support, guidance and supervision offered to them by EHS staff can weaken the Division's ability to attract, retain and expand opportunities for maximizing a volunteer workforce in Reading.

Similarly, the Pleasant Street Center is the only center among its peers without a designated Outreach Coordinator position. Nearly all of Reading's peer communities have full-time Outreach Coordinators. The Outreach Coordinator position is typically responsible for identifying and engaging with isolated seniors through phone calls, home visits, and referrals from public and private organizations. Outreach Coordinators also monitor and evaluate the status of seniors and the support services provided. They conduct follow-up communication with seniors and family members and provide referrals to services when needed. Another major component of outreach is to increase the senior center's visibility within the community. These outreach activities are currently conducted by several members of Reading's EHS Division including the Case Manager, Nurse Advocate and Administrator, in addition to their other responsibilities. Due to volume of work, outreach activities are currently limited.

### **Programming & Services**

Reading and its peer communities offer a wide variety of programs and services. Popular among all the senior centers were exercise groups, various card games, arts and crafts classes, and other leisure activities. All senior centers charge fees for seniors to attend some of their programs/activities, however many programs and services are free and others are deeply subsidized. Many senior centers have programs targeting isolated seniors including memory cafés, friendly visiting programs, and regular outreach/volunteer calls to homebound seniors in the community. The Natick Senior Center also offers a teleconferencing program that connects homebound seniors with a social network from the comfort of their own homes. The Westborough Senior Center has an Outreach Coordinator who speaks two different languages and is able to connect a more diverse population of older adults to the senior center. The Division of Elder and Human Services in Reading does not currently have a position dedicated specifically to outreach and communication to isolated seniors may be more challenging, as a result, compared to its peer communities.

Reading and only one among its peer communities do not have dedicated programming or initiatives that specifically address mental and behavioral health issues among older residents. Milton, Natick, and North Andover all offer some type of programming related to hoarding or other behavioral health issues. Informational presentations and lectures are common, and the Natick Senior Center offers a monthly hoarding support group to its residents. The Town of Bedford has a task force within the community dedicated to hoarding and other behavioral health issues.

Andover is the only community that operates an adult day program. Their “Senior Connections” program is run on-site at their senior center. While some senior centers anticipate offering an adult day program in the future, others do not have the room or the staff necessary to implement such a program. All peer communities offer a tax work-off program. The number of slots for these programs vary by Town and range from 7 to 300 positions available. Similar to Milton, Natick and North Andover, the Town of Reading has 30 tax work-off program positions to offer.

The Pleasant Street Center in Reading has two vans for transportation, which is comparable to its peer communities. Like Reading, the Town of Bedford has a subsidized community transportation program for medical appointments funded by a private, local, and resource. Interestingly, the Town of Natick is piloting an Uber program at no cost to seniors to allow them access to transportation on evenings and weekends, which is funded by a foundation grant. Other communities have volunteer driver programs to help them accommodate older adults who may not be able to access the vans or would prefer an individual ride to a medical appointment or to the grocery store.

Both print and electronic methods of advertisement are utilized by the senior centers. Communities distribute monthly newsletters and flyers, and make their calendars available online. Senior centers also advertise events and updates through weekly emails and local television broadcasting. Many communities utilize social media as an important marketing tool and others hope to expand their social media presence in the future.

## **Conclusions & Recommendations**

Collectively, these results guided recommendations developed to aid the EHS Division, as well as other Town offices, as they continue to plan for the future. Foremost, the Town must approach issues associated with the aging of its population broadly and with a far-reaching vision. In considering the future need for services, staff, and infrastructure, planners must bear in mind both projections of a rapidly growing older population and potential changes in needs and preferences of older residents in the Town. The goal of achieving a highly livable Town for all residents, regardless of age, can be enhanced by improving communication structures and continuing to foster collaboration between municipal departments like public schools and transportation that serve the Town’s older residents as well as with the

community-based organizations that provide support and service to Reading's older resident population. In this process, the EHS Division and the Pleasant Street Center can serve as a hub to strengthen linkages between other Town offices and community organizations around issues relating to the older adult population. We offer the following recommendations to assist the Town of Reading's EHS Division in planning to achieve their mission and to meet their goals moving forward.

### Summary of Recommendations

Collectively, these results guided recommendations developed to aid the Elder and Human Services Division, as well as other Town offices as they continue to plan for the future. We offer the following recommendations to assist the Town of Reading in planning to achieve their mission and to meet their goals moving forward.

- ❖ Improve the accessibility of the Pleasant Street Center. We cannot know how many seniors have been discouraged from using Elder Services because the Pleasant Street Center becomes crowded or the building can be difficult to access, especially by those with mobility limitations or who use assistive devices. However, it appeared to be common knowledge among those with whom we spoke that access to the Pleasant Street Center is currently unacceptable. Perhaps most notable among the limitations mentioned during the community forums is that the building does not have a restroom on the first floor.
- ❖ Deepen public knowledge of existing programs and services throughout the community. Better communication about the programs already in place will increase the Elder and Human Services Division and the Pleasant Street Center's value to the community. Consider developing a mechanism by which residents can provide feedback and ideas about the types of programs and events they would like to participate in. Alternatively, consider the development of a liaison program in which residents who currently participate at the Pleasant Street Center are incentivized to invite residents who have not yet participated at the Pleasant Street Center.
- ❖ Continue to support existing partnerships between Elder Services and other Town offices and community organizations. The roundtable discussions convened among the Elder and Human Services Division and Reading's Police and Fire Divisions were repeatedly described as a powerful and positive channel for communication, prevention and outreach. Drawing on this example, continue to draw on partnerships with the library, the Reading Neighbors Network, Veteran's Services and local schools. Through these partnerships, programs can be diversified and expanded and the web of community supports and services in Reading can be strengthened.
- ❖ Explore opportunities for expansion of the Property Tax Work Off Program. To address economic security among Reading's older adult population,

expanding the number of available tax work off positions throughout varying Town departments, may open this benefit to a larger portion of Reading residents. Consider also the expansion of the program to include Veterans (of any age) or to include an option for proxy-workers (e.g., a family member can work to earn the credit for an older adult).

- ❖ Explore the feasibility of significant expansion of space for the Pleasant Street Center and Elder and Human Services Division. Expanding the services provided by Elder and Human Services staff in response to the increased number of Reading seniors may help residents age in place. Further, improvements to programming, services and staff can be expected to generate even higher rates of participation in Elder and Human Service programs and services such that an overly modest allocation of resources will be outgrown quickly.
  - Identify dedicated private office space for the case management staff of the Elder and Human Services Division. Currently the Nurse Advocate and Case Manager share office space. A large share of their work involves confidential communications with residents about their needs and concerns; currently, the Pleasant Street Center has no dedicated space for this purpose.
  - Identify on-site office space for the Administrator. Dispersing Elder and Human Services staff across multiple sites is not only confusing for potential participants but also creates additional, and unnecessary, barriers to communication and efficiency of staff.
  - Develop dedicated drop-in space. The Reading Elder and Human Services Division offers an appealing but limited range of programs (including exercise, educational programs and interest groups); however, it does not currently offer opportunities for unstructured socialization. Concerns about isolation and the need for socialization beyond the walls of the Pleasant Street Center were mentioned by many of the individuals with whom we met.
  - Plan to expand staffing. Soon, the Pleasant Street Center will likely need at least a part-time outreach worker and at least a part-time volunteer coordinator, in addition to the existing staff positions. This level of staffing will bring Reading Elder Services closer to the levels observed in similar communities, and can be expected to more effectively meet needs in the community and maximize the volunteer workforce. As staff of the EHS Division grows, consider increasing the Administrator position to full-time.
  
- ❖ Expand and diversify programming offered through the Elder and Human Services Division to align with the needs of the community.
  - Further explore opportunities for resource-sharing and collaboration with the Reading School System. This type of partnership could bring older and younger residents together for mutually beneficial and engaging activities. A desire for intergenerational activities is evident.

- Strengthen mental and behavioral health programs. Explore possible partnerships in surround communities and mental health providers to connect Reading residents with existing resources and consider ways to develop additional supports through the Elder & Human Services Division.
- Promote community outreach and engagement of family caregivers in Reading. Sponsoring or advocating for expanded Adult Day Health opportunities, either in Reading or in collaboration with surrounding communities, may be needed. Outreach and engagement with this caregiver population may also yield new participants at the Pleasant Street Center.
- Consider the accessibility of the congregate lunch program for frail residents and newcomers. The Meals on Wheels program is well used in Reading and serves as a lifeline for homebound seniors. However, most seniors are able to leave their homes and would benefit from having regular opportunities to visit with others over a shared meal. It is important that attendees at the lunch program feel welcome and included in conversation.
- Further evaluate needs for expanded transportation services. Because accessible and affordable transportation promotes aging in place in any community, and existing options are limited in Reading, we encourage the Elder and Human Services Division to consider ways to better align the services provided with residents' needs. Consider the costs and benefits to partnerships with car-sharing services or consider the development of volunteer driver programs or taxi services to eliminate barriers and stigma to senior transportation options and mobilize more of the older residents of Reading.

We believe that implementing the changes outlined above would expand demand as well as capacity considerably. The most consistent need we heard in our conversations was for increases capacity (e.g., space, staffing and programming) for the invaluable services being provided through the EHS Division. Expanded space will help address that need, especially if coupled with expanded programming that targets interests of Reading seniors, both now and in the future. Overall, the volume of programs offered by Pleasant Street Center has been heavily constrained by lack of dedicated space.

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## Appendix A – Programs and Services Offered by the EHS Division

### Service Inventory - Elder/Human Services

#### Transportation

- Elder Services Van – local shopping
- Medical transportation program for Reading Response
- Referral to outside agencies (MBTA Ride, TRIP Program)
- Pleasant Street Center:
  - Socialization (entertainment, games, movies, painting, crafting)
  - Education/Wellness/Health programs for seniors
    - Low Visions Support Group, Parkinson Support Group
  - Congregate meals (lunch, dinners monthly during the summer)
  - Fitness programs (Zumba Gold, Yoga, Walking Club)
  - SHINE (Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders) Counseling (Medicare/Insurance)
- Crisis Intervention
  - Respond to residents in crisis through referrals from Police, Fire, neighbors, family members and others.
  - Expedite request of emergency funds for residents in crisis
- Social Services
  - Provide information and referrals to residents of all ages
  - Home safety assessments
  - Coordinate Homecare services
  - Reading Response: Lifeline, respite care, medical transportation with escort
- Nurse Advocacy
  - Transition counseling from hospital/rehab/skilled care to home.
  - Educate and counsel residents on health matters including medication management, chronic disease management, etc.
  - Aid residents with healthcare advocacy
- Memory Café for residents living with memory loss
- Pleasantries: monthly newsletter of programs, services, information
- Property Tax Worker Program
- Programs benefiting seniors and low income residents
  - AARP Tax Preparers
  - Fuel Assistance
  - Food Pantry
  - Holiday programs
- Town-wide volunteer programs
  - Shopping assistants, medical escorts, friendly visitor, weather related assistance
  - Receptionists, kitchen assistants, program leaders at Pleasant Street Center



## Appendix B—Focus Group Questions

### *Introductions*

*How would you describe your organization's contact with older residents in Reading?*

*How would you describe your organizations interaction with Elder Services in Reading?*

*More specifically, tell me about the things you find challenging for older residents in Reading?*

*What are the features of Reading that promote aging in community?*

*Do you feel that needs of older residents of Reading and/or their families are being met? Why or why not?*

*What changes or improvements could Reading put in place that would improve the health, wellness and quality of life for aging residents in Reading?*

## Appendix C—Topics for Key Informant Interviews

### *Introductions*

*Has your organization been impacted by the aging of Reading's population? [If yes] How so?*

*In your opinion, what are some of the unmet needs of the older population in Reading?*

*What are your concerns about the future aging of Reading's population?*

*What aspects of the aging population of Reading are most important for organizations working in Reading to know about and understand?*

*What changes have you seen in the last 5 years that are affecting the need for elder services in Reading?*

*From your perspective, what strategies would you suggest for making elder services more widely known and used?*

*What can you suggest about how organizations and offices within the Town could work together more effectively to respond to the aging of the Reading population?*

*Do you have anything else to add?*

