

“Gathering the Harvest - The West County Summit on Aging”

Harvest time is fast upon us. After many months of discernment and reflection, a new vision of how we understand and work with elders has germinated and grown to maturity. We are now ready to “bring in the sheaves” so that this vision can be worked, prepared and transformed into bread for all the people of West County.

Like any good harvest, it will require a community effort. The work begins on Friday evening and Saturday morning, September 12th and 13th when the Center hosts a West County Summit on Aging. People from all nine towns will gather to discuss ways to better meet the needs and welcome the gifts of our older neighbors and family members. It will be a chance for elders to speak their minds and hearts and for people of all ages to listen.

Most of all, though, the Summit will be a call to action. It will identify and encourage personal gestures of caring and creativity that can make a difference in the life of the person next door or down the street. It will also explore new neighborhood or regional initiatives that are needed in these challenging times.

The Summit is a response to our mandate to rethink the mission of the Shelburne Senior Center. In crafting a new mission statement, we need far more than some nice words that we file away and forget. We need a transformed and transforming articulation of a vision that is truly rooted in the needs of elders and that guides and inspires us daily in our work.

Here is a brief summary of where our reflections have led us so far. These are the priorities that will guide the Summit agenda:

Social Renewal Our goal is nothing less than social renewal through the full participation of elders of all ages in every aspect of West County life.

Source of Wisdom Elders can be a vital source of wisdom. They often have “a glimpse of eternity” without which our common life is impoverished and our planning is short sighted.

Deep Listening Every aspect of our work must derive from an understanding of the real, primary, and urgent needs and aspirations of elders. *We cannot assume that we know what those needs are.* Not only do we need to begin again, we need to *institutionalize* a readiness to always begin again.

Works of Compassion We seek to work with others to meet the physical and emotional needs of elders who are poor. We recognize that to serve is a privilege and a gift.

Neighborhood Growth We recognize that people are hungry for meaningful human connection. We seek to nurture small, local neighborhoods of mutual support where elders are able to give and receive, welcome and be welcomed.

Education for Wisdom We seek to foster new educational forms that are responsive to elders’ capacity and desire to grow in wisdom, and that bring this wisdom to bear in the lives of children, youth, and younger adults.

Small is Beautiful We want to “grow” neighborhood relationships, not the Senior Center. We seek to remain small and flexible, with semi-autonomous, localized programs throughout West County.

Volunteer Based We see “volunteers” not as people who work for an organization for free but rather as people willing to enter into freely given relationships with elders as advocates and friends.

Hospitality We want the Center itself to be a place of extravagant welcome for people of *all* ages.

The Summit, then, marks a “starting over” with regard to how we understand and respond to the realities of aging in West County. It is an opportunity to find new ways to work together for social renewal in challenging times. Every person and group has a critical stake in the carrying out of this mission. The Center cannot and should not do this alone.

What do we hope to accomplish at the Summit? First of all, we want to share our emerging vision with as many people as possible. In so doing, we hope to inspire people to help make it real. We hope to attract new people to serve on the Board and the Friends. We hope to create an action team that can develop a shared living program that was inspired by our home heating forum in July. Other teams may coalesce around needs such as an alternative transportation network for West County or an adult day center or intergenerational programs.

Finally, we hope that the Summit will initiate a broad based reassessment of the Senior Center itself. In a series of follow-up gatherings to be held through the coming year, we want to address some critical questions. What should our structure and staffing look like? What will our space needs be in the coming years and what are our options? What about our funding sources? What is our relationship to the four towns we serve, as well as the other towns in West County?

Our primary task, however, is to get to know the people we wish to serve and empower. *Personally.* Following the Summit, we will launch our Deep Listening Project. Carefully chosen teams of neighbors and friends will conduct in-home conversations with elders throughout West County. They will then gather to debrief, and to identify and prioritize needs. This will form the basis for reshaping or creating ideal programs that can best serve these needs.

And so we need help - from the business community and the municipalities, from churches and other spiritual groups, from human service and civic organizations, from the schools and the wider educational community. We need help from concerned individuals - artists, people with financial and legal skills, community organizers and activists, dreamers and visionaries, nuts-and-bolts practical folks - who simply want to help in some way.

Something exciting and perhaps a little scary is happening. The ground has been prepared, and the seeds of a new vision planted and nurtured. Harvest time is upon us. It is time to act.

Jamie Godfrey, Director
Shelburne Senior Center

**“Gathering the Harvest”
The West County Summit on Aging**

Friday and Saturday, September 12th & 13th
at the

Shelburne Senior Center, 7 Main Street, Shelburne Falls

Friday Evening, September 12th

5-6 p.m. - Potluck dinner and desert (drinks provided)

6-9 p.m. - Summit: Part I (welcome/presentation/community brainstorming)

Saturday Morning, September 13th

8:30-9:30 a.m. - Breakfast (provided)

9:30-11:30 a.m. - Summit: Part II (action teams/planning/next steps)