

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### MARTHA'S VINEYARD HEALTHY AGING SURVEY REPORT

#### Introduction

The Martha's Vineyard Healthy Aging Task Force (HATF) contracted with researchers at Brandeis University's Heller School to conduct a survey to learn more about older Vineyard residents' wants and needs and support planning for a more aging-friendly Island.

The survey was mailed in October to all 4,762 Island residents age 65 and over, with followup reminder postcards. The survey was anonymous and questions were worded to minimize inadvertent self-identification. Volunteers conducted extensive outreach to encourage maximum response. Surveys were accepted through December 10.

The overall response rate was 49%. Some surveys<sup>1</sup> were excluded from the main analysis in order to focus on those age 65+ who live On-Island more than six months per year. The 2,200 surveys included represent a 46% response rate, still an excellent response, especially for a long survey that was sent out only once, offered no incentives, had a short turnaround period, and was followed by only one reminder.

The survey included 50 questions about the following areas:

- Housing/housing modifications
- Employment/volunteering

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<sup>1</sup> The total received was 2,326. 126 respondents were excluded because they were age 64 or younger (n=20) or live On-Island less than 6 months per year (n=106). An appendix in the report includes responses to key questions for the 106 respondents who live On-Island less than 6 months per year.

- Community features
- Community engagement
- Senior Centers/Councils on Aging
- Transportation
- Health and wellness
- Caregiving
- Demographics

*Most respondents are doing reasonably well*

Although many respondents face serious challenges and have significant concerns, the overall picture of the respondents is reasonably positive (the following percentages are based on all 2200 respondents):

- Most (57%) have annual incomes above \$50,000.
- Most (93%) have the financial resources to meet their daily needs.
- Most (88%) own a single-family home.
- Most (69%) live with someone else.
- Most (82%) have at least some college education.
- Most (69%) use the Internet often.
- Most (88%) are unlikely to want or need to move to a different home On-Island; 88% are unlikely to want or need to move Off-Island in the next year or two.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> However, the overlap between the two groups is small. The number of respondents who are somewhat or very likely to want or need to move **either** On- or Off-Island is 388, or 19% of those answering both questions (n=2,083).

- Most (97%) say that it is very or somewhat important to them to stay on the Vineyard as they age (78% say that it is very important).
- Most report no limitations to mobility (75%), no limitations to ability to work (79%), and no limitations to ability to live independently (93%).
- Most (88%) participate often or occasionally in a range of community activities.
- About half (50%) often or occasionally use programs or services offered by Senior Centers and Councils on Aging.
- Most (85%) have an On-Island primary care physician, and most (67%) have an On-Island dentist.
- Most (85%) have family or friends who could help them in an emergency or on a short-term basis.

These findings are important to keep in mind as needs are explored. The large numbers of older people who are doing well represent a group that has much to contribute to their communities and neighbors – which in turn can benefit the contributors. In addition, since a “healthy aging” approach focuses on promoting and protecting health and well-being, it is encouraging to see a positive foundation on which to build.

### Areas of concern and need

However, substantial subgroups (and in some cases, majorities) of respondents do have concerns and needs and lack resources to age well on the Vineyard. These findings point to considerations for planning for an aging-friendly Island.

- Although most respondents have annual incomes over \$50,000, 43% have incomes under \$50,000, and 25% of respondents have incomes under \$35,000.

(It is also important to consider the Vineyard's relatively high cost of living when thinking about how much income is sufficient to support healthy aging.)

- 34% of all respondents are working full- or part-time; an additional 2% are seeking work. 26% of all respondents (72% of respondents who are working or seeking work) say that they need the income from work to pay for daily needs.
- Although 85% of respondents have an On-Island primary care physician (PCP) and 67% have an On-Island dentist, it is of concern that 2% do not have a PCP and 8% do not have a dentist. The remaining respondents have Off-Island providers (14% have an Off-Island PCP and 25% have an Off-Island dentist). Although there are many legitimate reasons for choosing Off-Island health care, this may be an area to explore. Traveling Off-Island for health care could be challenging for anyone in bad weather, but is especially so for those with mobility limitations or transportation needs.
- A large number of respondents may need financial or other assistance with housing modifications: 932 respondents (45% of all who answered this question (n= 2071)) say that their home needs one or more modifications in the next year or two to improve their ability to remain in their home as they age. 65% of this group needing one or more modifications, or 606 respondents, say that they do not have all the resources they need to make housing modifications.
- Many respondents face serious challenges in an emergency or during a short-term illness, and far more face serious challenges if they need longer-term assistance: 15% do not have, or are not sure they have, family or friends who could help them in an emergency or on a short-term basis; 56% do not have, or are not sure they have, family or friends who could help them on a long-term basis.

- Fewer than half of respondents agree strongly that (1) the Vineyard is a great place to age (47%) and (2) the Vineyard values older adults' opinions and thoughts (37%). These figures suggest that there is some work to do to make the Island a better place to age and to show elders that their thoughts and opinions are valued.
- As noted above, the majority of respondents are not “vulnerable”<sup>3</sup> but hundreds of respondents are nonetheless vulnerable to some extent.
  - 11% of respondents are age 85 or older.
  - 13% have annual incomes under \$25,000; 25% have annual incomes under \$35,000.<sup>4</sup>
  - 25% report limited mobility, 21% limited ability to work, and 7% limited ability to live independently.
  - 28% report that they fell during the past year.
- Although half of respondents use Senior Center and Council on Aging programs and services, this means that half do not. Awareness of **specific** services such as health insurance counseling or information and referral was not high: the overall percentage reporting awareness of specific services ranged from 12% to 49%. Those who participate in Senior Center and Council on Aging programs and services are more aware of specific services than those who do not participate (14% to 61% vs. 9% to 35%) but awareness is still often low. Encouragingly, 73% of respondents said they would turn to Senior

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<sup>3</sup> This study defines a “vulnerable” respondent as one who is 85+ (or, for some analyses, 80+); has an annual income of less than \$25,000 (or, for some analyses, less than \$35,000); lives alone; has limited mobility, ability to work, or ability to live independently; has fallen in the past year; and/or does not have access to emergency or short-term help.

<sup>4</sup> Some descriptions of respondents' annual income are broken out into the five groupings used in the survey (<\$25,000; \$25,001-\$35,000; \$35,001-\$50,000; \$50,001-\$80,000; \$80,001 or more). The income level used is noted in each chart or table.

Centers or Councils on Aging if they, a family member, or a friend needed information about services.

- Although most respondents (66% - 95%, depending on the feature) do not report problems with selected community features,<sup>5</sup> a substantial number do report such problems with some features (especially in the areas of sidewalks, road maintenance, snow removal, and street lighting). Findings regarding problems with community features may help to guide community leaders in making local infrastructure more aging-friendly.
- 388 respondents – a substantial minority – say that it is somewhat or very likely that they will want or need to move within the next two years. The most common reasons for considering such a move **On-Island** (in order) are wanting a less expensive home, a lower cost of living, or a home designed for older adults or people with disabilities. The most common reasons for considering such a move **Off-Island** (in order) are wanting a lower cost of living, to be closer to family, or a less expensive home. The top three reasons for considering such a move **Off-Island and On-Island** (in order) are wanting a lower cost of living, a less expensive home, and to be closer to family.

*Other areas of interest: volunteering and transportation*

*Volunteering.* A high percentage (61%) of respondents report that they do not volunteer at all (and 69% of those who do volunteer do so for five hours per week or less). This suggests a large pool of potential volunteers that could contribute to Island life, including making it more aging-friendly. An analysis of non-volunteers explored the extent to which they might be relatively unavailable due to work or vulnerability. While those who are not volunteering are more likely to be in one

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<sup>5</sup> The features listed were sidewalks, access to public buildings and businesses, access to public beaches, road maintenance, snow removal from public roads and walkways, handicap parking, pedestrian crosswalks, street lighting, and parks or benches for sitting.

or more vulnerability categories, many of them are not, suggesting that recruitment of older volunteers has potential. (Based on the analyses conducted, it is not possible to quantify the number of non-volunteering respondents who might have the capacity to volunteer. In addition, vulnerability as defined for this report may not prevent someone from volunteering - some who are “vulnerable” may well be able to volunteer. This area may be worth further exploration.)

*Transportation.* Adequate transportation is a key element of an aging-friendly community. One question asked respondents about their primary methods of transportation. Respondents overwhelmingly drive themselves or have others drive them:

- Of respondents age 65-84, 94% drive themselves, 26% walk, and 12% have others drive them.
- Of those age 85+, 57% drive themselves, 53% have others drive them, 10% walk, and 10% use the LIFT.
- Very few respondents in either age group indicated public transportation or taxis as a primary method of transportation.

A second question asked about features of the transportation system.<sup>6</sup> While respondents cited concerns (mainly in the areas of taxi service costs and cleanliness/maintenance and of VTA routes and schedules), more than 59% of respondents answered “not applicable” to most or all features. This probably reflects to some extent the overall emphasis on driving – someone who drives or has another person drive them may find features of the transportation system not applicable to them. However, an additional analysis explored the characteristics of respondents who answered “not applicable.” This group is more likely to have

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<sup>6</sup> These features included VTA routes, summer and winter VTA schedules, and boarding of buses; taxi service cost, taxi cleanliness and maintenance, and boarding of taxis; and special transportation for people with disabilities and older adults (such as the LIFT).

some vulnerability characteristics (i.e., lower income, limited mobility, a fall in the past year, and lacking emergency/short-term and long-term help) than those who responded specifically to the question, but the differences are not great and they do not apply across other vulnerability factors. The findings make it difficult to characterize the “not applicable” group as especially vulnerable. This may be an area for further exploration.

### Additional analyses

A number of other analyses were conducted to explore the characteristics of respondents who indicated certain concerns or needs. Overall, the analyses confirm that respondents with one or more vulnerability factors are more likely to have concerns or needs.

- Respondents who have one or more vulnerability factors are more likely to be interested in a call or a visit from a volunteer.
- Respondents who have one or more vulnerability factors are less likely to have short-term and long-term help available.
- Respondents with one vulnerability factor (such as older age or having fallen in the past year) are relatively more likely to have others (such as limited mobility).
- Respondents who have one or more vulnerability factors are more likely to have problems with the community features described earlier (page 3).
- Vulnerable respondents (i.e., those with one or more vulnerability factors) are more likely than those who are not vulnerable to say that they are somewhat or very likely to move On-Island (they want or need to move, but want to stay On-Island).

### Concluding thoughts

Only in combination with other research, local information, and local knowledge can the survey findings guide planning and action (or indicate where more research may be needed). Nonetheless, the findings point to a few areas to consider.

- Overall, the picture of the respondents is positive, but there are also areas of concern. The positives make for a great foundation on which to try to build a more aging-friendly Island.
- Respondents with the most concerns and needs are generally those who are more vulnerable (as defined in footnote 3). Focusing on the vulnerable thus means focusing on those with concerns and needs (and vice versa).
- With 61% of respondents not volunteering at all, and most others volunteering less than five hours weekly, it makes sense to consider ways to increase the number of older people who are volunteering. Although those who aren't volunteering tend to be more vulnerable, the large numbers suggest an opportunity.
- The 45% of respondents reporting at least some need for housing modifications, 65% of whom lack some or all of the resources they need to make modifications, suggests that this could be a worthy area for action, especially given that 19% of respondents say that it is somewhat or very likely that they will want or need to move within two years.
- More research may be needed to explore ways to expand beyond a reliance on driving for convenient transportation.
- With 25% of respondents having an Off-Island dentist, 8% having no dentist, 15% having an Off-Island primary care physician, and 2% having no primary

care physician, strategies to develop more On-Island health care may be a worthwhile area to explore.

- Awareness and use of Senior Center and Council on Aging services and programs was fairly low, although two findings in this area were very encouraging. First, respondents who participate in Senior Center and Council on Aging services and programs generally are more aware of specific services; working to increase the number of participants is one strategy to increase the visibility of the services and programs. Second, the Senior Centers and Councils on Aging were first on the list of resources people would turn to if they needed information about home health services, home delivered meals, physical or speech therapy, medical equipment, or similar services. This is an especially important area for developing an aging-friendly Island, especially given the number of respondents who may not have access to emergency/short-term or long-term help: 15% of respondents do not have, or are not sure they have, someone who could help them in the short term, while 56% of respondents do not have, or are not sure they have, someone who could help them in the long-term.