



## **Recognizing Older Americans Month – May 2017**

May is recognized each year as Older Americans Month. In May, the Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) and the five Area Agencies on Aging recognize the importance of Older Americans Act programs in keeping older Vermonters healthy and at home as well as honor the older Vermonters in our communities whose hard work, years of experience and energy are helping build momentum for a strong and vibrant Vermont for years to come.

While most everyone has heard talk of Vermont's changing demographics, fewer are aware of the quiet but dedicated network of organizations, community groups and volunteers coordinating and providing essential services to older Vermonters across the state. I am talking about supports like home delivered meals, care coordination, and caregiver support, bringing both skilled experts and neighborhood volunteers to people's homes to support them with everything from good nutrition to quality daily care to family respite. I am talking about countless collaborations in community, such as Memory Cafes for individuals with dementia and their care partners, Tai Chi classes at senior centers promoting lifelong health and wellness, and transportation networks, helping people access activities and engage in their communities even if they no longer drive. DAIL is extremely grateful to the many organizations and individuals across our state whose dedicated efforts are helping us all to stay as healthy and independent as we can while we age.

Older Americans Month is also a time to reflect on how perceptions of aging change over time, both for individuals as we age ourselves, and for the culture and communities around us. While my young children may tell me I'm old, and I admit I may have said the same to my mother when I was their age, I certainly don't feel old. But what is "old"? The fact is, we are all aging every day. Like birth and death, we all have this in common. But how we get older, and how we are able to face both the challenges and opportunities that come with aging, varies not only based on our own perceptions and personal choices, but depends to a large extent on the social systems, supports, and structures that surround us. For example, the experience of aging can be very different between the rural Northeast Kingdom and downtown Burlington. As we become an older state and nation, it is critical that we be proactive in considering what systemic change is needed so that all Vermonters may live long, healthy and happy lives. Do we have enough affordable and accessible housing for people of all incomes, abilities, and ages? Do we have an adequate healthcare workforce and integrated healthcare systems to connect services across the care continuum so that everyone receives high quality care and support in all settings? Do we have communities with thriving businesses employing older workers, robust transportation options, strong volunteer networks, and engaging activities for all ages?

There is much to consider as we envision a Vermont that truly embraces aging at a systems level, and with growing demand amid limited resources, the challenges are very real. But I remain optimistic, because I know that Vermonters are not daunted by challenge. We are a community of problem-solvers. With a willingness to start the conversation and then do the hard work, we can find smart and innovative solutions to create the kind of world we all want to grow older in. Let's start now.

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