

# Senior Center, Shelburne Falls MA



# **Community Needs Assessment**

Final: January 9, 2020

#### Overview

#### Introduction

The Philanthropy Resource Group ("Counsel") was asked by the Senior Center in Shelburne Falls to carry out a community needs assessment to determine what the community feels it needs to support its older residents and how various communities view the Center's programs and their impact on seniors throughout the region. Specifically, the assessment focused on how community members currently engage with the Center, what programs are considered the highest priority, whether these programs should be centralized, decentralized or provided through some combination of these, and whether people think that the Center is understood and valued by their particular community.

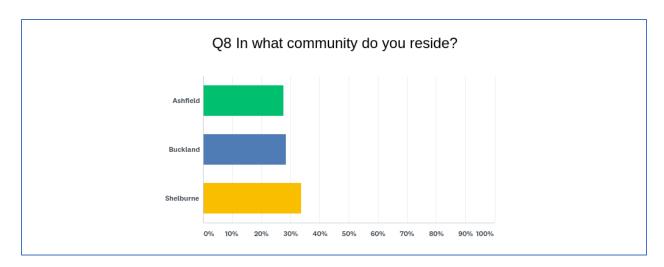
Ultimately, the value of this information is not simply to inform the Center of how people view it, or what programs the community wants, but to build a stronger two-way partnership to ensure that the Center's plans (including facility) reflect what the community wants, and so that the Center can build coalitions of support among a broader array of the region's individual communities. For that reason, the way in which the study was approached was designed both to gather specific, programmatic information, but also to educate and inspire those taking part. It was specifically intended to provide the Center with data that can be used to inform its future plans and to help ensure that those plans are based on what the community says it wants from this valuable resource.

## **Methodology of the Assessment**

Work related to the assessment took place in October, November and December, 2019, and was carried out by Louise Neidle, senior consultant, and Maryann LaCroix Lindberg, CFRE, President of the Philanthropy Resource Group. Input for the assessment was gathered through three primary means: focus groups, online surveys and paper surveys. It should be noted that the population reached through the surveys consisted, by design, of community members, not experts in senior care (although a number of participants do have professional expertise in this area). In other words, the intent was not to research what experts in the field have identified as resources required to meet the needs of older individuals, but instead to ask community members themselves what it is that they want from a senior center in their community.

There were four focus groups held, in which leading community stakeholders were asked to provide candid input to key questions posed by an experienced facilitator, Louise Neidle. These questions, the locations of each focus group and the list of the focus group participants may be found in Appendix A. A total of 20 people participated in the focus group sessions, and the sessions were held in Ashfield, Shelburne Falls (two) and Buckland. Specific responses are not attributed to any individual, as the sessions were to be considered confidential. However, participants understood that responses were to be anonymously shared with Center leadership.

The online and paper surveys were identical, and may be found in Appendix B. A total of 118 surveys were returned. No perceptible difference was found between those who filled the survey out on paper and those who used the online version. The following chart shows the survey respondents by self-identified place of residence:



Because they contain a considerable amount of creative ideas and more in-depth input, the unattributed Focus Group notes are being provided to the Center separately. This report summarizes the overall findings of the assessment, including input from all sources, and is intended to help the Center focus on the areas and issues deemed most critical by the community.

## **Executive Summary**

The Senior Center is perceived to be doing a very good job at delivering activities and programs that are relevant to seniors in the region. Staff is well-thought-of, and the Center is seen as welcoming and caring. The breadth of current programming is considered to be very good, particularly activities, transportation, medical, social service and basic needs programs. As one person put it, "There is a difference between surviving and prospering. The Center helps with both...aging does not have to be all about loss."

Among non-participants, while general feedback was positive, it was also clear that many people were not really aware of the breadth of programs that already exist. However, across the board (and especially through the focus groups), the importance of the Center in helping to address issues of isolation and loneliness through its various programs was strongly expressed. These issues, in turn, provided a lens through which participants saw the value and relevance of many of the Center's activities and programs, e.g. seniors will stay healthier if they can come together and socialize, or if they remain intellectually active, and so on.

The community feels that there are opportunities to further expand programmatic impact through geographically-diversified partnerships and off-site offerings, while maintaining a central location that allows people from throughout the region to engage with each other and create a valuable sense of community. Doing more of the same is felt to be of value, while expanding programs to better serve a younger, more active senior demographic is also seen to be essential. It was understood that additional staff would be needed in order to expand programming at any level, but there were many respondents who indicated that they thought that other resources existed in the region that could help provide programming with only a minimal need for added staff.

Along the lines of the need for programs targeted toward younger seniors, survey and focus group participants felt that a name change should be considered, as the name "Senior" is considered to be off-putting and outdated. Said one respondent, "Senior does not mean 'old',

yet the programming and attitude is for 'old people'. It's hard to get excited about becoming involved or participating or attending things that smack of old people. Include the elders, of course, but give us younger (ones) a reason to show up." This was thought to be a significant barrier to engagement in all communities.

Finally, one of the most critical themes that came out time and time again was the need to significantly increase visibility of the Center throughout the region and to better communicate not only what takes place at the Center's facility and elsewhere, but how its programs impact people throughout the region. A much greater need for communications, marketing and active promotion of the Center was highlighted by many respondents, and should be a high priority for Center leadership moving forward.

## **Community Needs Assessment Report**

## **Center Perceptions, Relevance & Priority**

While the purpose of the assessment was not precisely to determine perceptions of the Center, the picture that emerges from the data helps to show that, overall, respondents feel that the Center is doing an excellent job at providing a wide array of activities and programs. A number of comments were shared that showed that Center staff and volunteers are perceived to be welcoming and caring – in fact, there were virtually no critical comments made about the work currently being carried out. As one respondent said, "What the Senior Center does now, they do very well – create community...they convey caring and welcoming and community. It doesn't happen at all senior centers." This provides a solid base on which to build an even greater level of community impact, and a baseline against which future perceptions of impact may be measured.

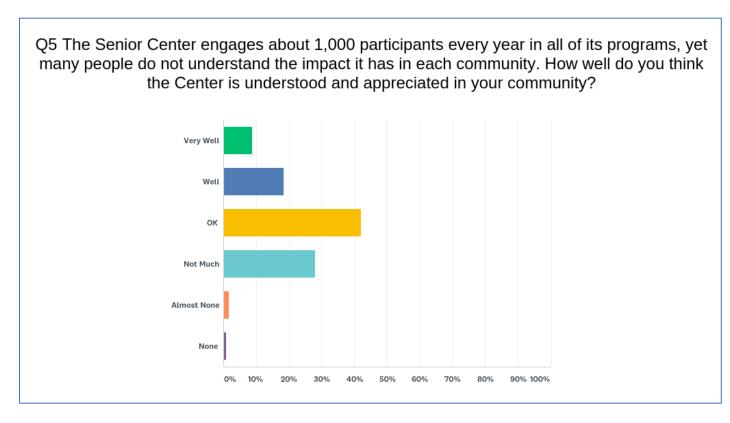
There was, however, a clear theme among both the focus groups and the survey responses that people in the region do not understand everything the Center does. This results in many individuals not taking advantage of existing Center programs that they, in fact, are asking to see offered. Transportation is one example of this, but the issue is much broader. Overall, the community does not fully grasp the impact of the Center's programs. People are simply not aware of all of the programs taking place now (even participants). Furthermore, the information about the Center has not been shared in such a way as to underscore the various ways in which these programs positively affect both individuals and the community as a whole. We believe that this skews some of the responses to some degree. For instance, it is hard for a survey respondent to assess how others in the community view the Center's impact if the respondent herself doesn't really understand it. This is an issue that affects everything from public funding to participation in the Center and its programs, but it also represents an opportunity and a dynamic that the Center can embrace and proactively improve.

Because the focus of the study was primarily on what the community needs from the Center, most people shared their thoughts on how programs might be expanded, how the community might be made more aware of what is offered, and how the Center might better serve diverse populations of seniors both now and in the future. Among users, 82% indicated that the Center is either "important" or a "high priority". Surprisingly, 56% of non-users also stated that it was either "important" or a "high priority" for them – much higher than one might have expected from people who do not currently take part in Center programs. This is a great statement of support for what the Center is accomplishing now, and for what it might accomplish if more of the non-users could be engaged in its programs.

Overall responses were surprisingly consistent across the communities, with only a few variations such as distance and need for transportation separating the respondents. The number of respondents was almost evenly split among the three towns, despite there being fewer actual participants in Center programs from Ashfield. (The Ashfield response rate reflected extra efforts on the part of Center leaders to recruit Ashfield community members to take part in the survey.) 10% of respondents were from towns beyond the three member communities. The distribution of responses is actually very strong, enabling the Center to feel confidence that what they heard truly represents the three member communities as well as some of the rest of the region.

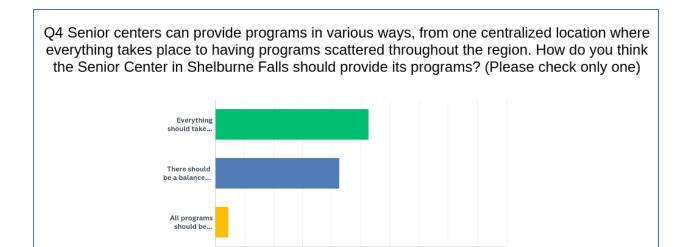
Not surprising was that 85.6% of survey participants have actively participated in the Center within the last three years. In general, surveys such as this are more likely to be filled out by people who already have a vested interest in the organization. However, most of the responses by non-participants mirrored those of active participants. While this is not statistically valid, given the small sample size, it may be extrapolated to some extent to show that a wider sample of non-participants would be likely to align with the responses already received.

Overall understanding of the Center among both participants and the wider community, however, was considered to be less than ideal, as shown through the following graph. The majority felt that there was an "okay" amount of understanding in the community, with "not much" following in second. Among users of the Center, only 30% felt that the community understands its impact "well" or "very well". Among non-users, this drops to a disappointing, but telling, 6.67%. Given that the vast majority of respondents are users of the Center, this shows that there is an opportunity for more education of the participants themselves as to what the impact is, and also an opportunity to further engage participants in serving as ambassadors for the Center in their home communities.



### **Locations for Program Delivery**

One of the areas being researched was how community members thought their needs could best be met -- centrally, de-centrally or a combination of the two. Among respondents, there was an almost even split between centrally and a combination of central location and other sites throughout the region. A graph from the survey results, below, reflects this split:



Virtually no one indicated a preference for total decentralization of programs, reinforcing the stated need for a central place where community members may come together and build a community of peers that helps to minimize isolation and keep people active. This was discussed at length by all of the focus groups, where more nuanced conversations reflected the importance of having both a strong set of centralized opportunities for building community, as well as off-site programs that might engage a broader portion of the region.

30%

40%

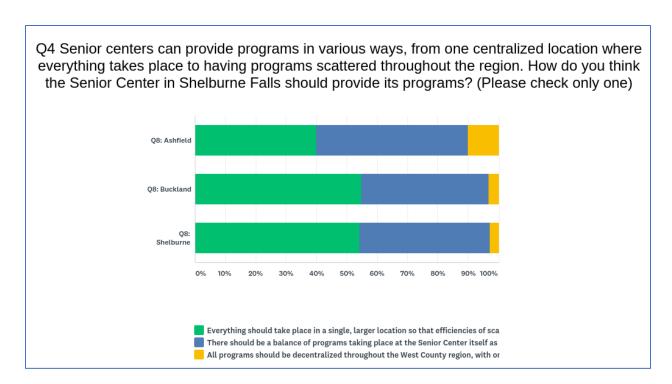
60%

70%

Among all respondents indicating a need for more off-site programs, there appeared to be only minimal understanding of the decentralized programs that already exist. This was true even for current Center participants. This indicates an opportunity for broader community and participant education, as well as additional program offerings.

Looking at this information through the lens of where people reside, it shifts slightly, reflecting the distance from the current Center and the ease of program participation. This, again, shows that there is more opportunity for expanding programs in these communities. However, it was interesting that even those from Ashfield who answered this question indicated their preference for a strong set of centralized, regionwide programs, while indicating interest (as did other towns) for some programs located in their own community. This seemed to run counter to some of the public sentiment that has been expressed in other venues, that Ashfield wants its own center with programs focused on that town. The preference for strong programs predominantly offered in a central location, rather than primarily town-based programs, was also borne out in focus group discussions, including the one that took place in Ashfield.

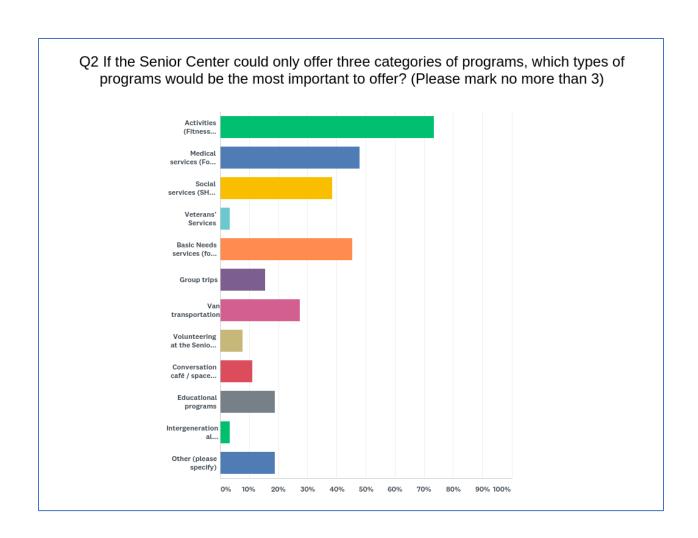
The following chart shows how respondents from each of the three member towns view program location:



## **Program Priorities**

Of the programs deemed to be of the highest priority (when asked to rank only their top three choices), activities came out highest, followed by medical service, basic needs programming and social services. Transportation was also considered very important, especially as it helps mitigate the issue of isolation. However, transportation was also considered increasingly vital because medical services being provided to seniors locally are disappearing; in the future, people will have to travel much further to get their medical care, although new advances in telemedicine may help with this to some degree.

The following graph illustrates the program priorities among survey respondents:



The activity figure is not a surprise, given that most respondents are already participating in activities, but this was also consistent among non-participants. Counsel feels that this is reflective of a theme that came out throughout the group sessions and the survey responses: many older adults seek activities and programs that help them avoid the isolation and loneliness that can come in later years. These programs help create a sense of community they might otherwise lack. This also helps to explain why so many thought that a central location remained important.

### **Opportunities**

A number of opportunities and creative suggestions came out through the assessment; many of these are in the focus group notes being share separately. But there were a couple of key themes that came up over and over, some of which are vital to the Center's future.

**Communications:** Communications about what the Center does and what it has to offer are not currently adequate to engage the level of community members that could potentially take advantage of its programs, nor to educate the wider community about the tremendous impact the Center has on people's lives. Many people do not know what the Center does or how it is relevant to them, and the name "Senior Center" is found to be very off-putting to younger, more active seniors, resulting in fewer of them seeing the Center as critical in their lives. Overall, a

strong initiative to educate and engage more of the region in the Center's plans and programs will result in more public support when funding is in question, more participants in programs and ambassadors out to various communities, and more gifts to help ensure access by everyone who needs what the Center has to offer.

Broadening Center Reach: While there was an expectation of finding some of the surrounding communities less receptive to the Center being considered a priority, in fact quite a number of people indicated that they thought Center programming should be expanded to reach even more people throughout the surrounding areas. Being able to appropriately communicate in these communities how the Center is changing lives is a tremendous opportunity that could potentially increase broad-based support for it and much wider engagement in its programs. There is an additional opportunity to further position the Center as the "go-to resource" for older adults, if communications improve to the degree that people can understand and embrace that.

**Human Resources:** There was wide-spread acknowledgement that increasing the reach of the Center will require not only additional space, both centralized and at off-site locations, but will also require more staff. There is clearly a case to be made for ramping this up in tandem with any change in facility, as people feel very positively about what the current staff has been able to do, yet understand that they are at the limit of what they can do now.

One of the opportunities presented was that many of the local residents, including seniors, have a huge variety of skills, knowledge and abilities that they could be donating in service to the Center. This was brought up in many of the focus groups, as well as through the surveys. This is an excellent observation, because it may bring novel programming to the Center and to the various communities being served. Taking advantage of local resources would also enable the Center to reach out to more of the community, building on the networks that each of these individuals has. From a grassroots standpoint, this would be very helpful in the communications initiative outlined above, as the Center would be able to reach much further into each community than it might otherwise be able to.

**Miscellaneous Opportunities:** Among the other suggestions that people made were a few that seemed to span a wide variety of respondents.

- Increase and improve use of technology, both at the Center itself and as a tool for engaging the community. This can include providing engagement opportunities for shutins, for people who are increasingly fluent in use of digital platforms and for those who might take advantage of additional programming that uses technology in some way. This was also mentioned in the area of communications, as there was thought to be considerable potential for marketing the Center through social media, a greatlyenhanced website and other technology-based means.
- Opportunities to add more cross-generational programs and engage younger adults in the Center and its programs. This was seen both as a value-add for seniors participating in the Center, but also a way to get more people throughout the community engaged and seeing the Center as having broad value to everyone. This, in turn, will improve the participation rates among younger seniors, who will have less reason to hold the perception that the Center only applies to the very old, frail and infirm. Additionally, it might present a revenue opportunity, if younger members of the community find themselves interested in and willing to pay a modest program fee to take part in Center programs. Said one respondent, "If we could change the stigma of "senior", we might attract a larger audience and therefore increase all the support and awareness."

 Expanding programming to evenings and weekends to engage more of the working seniors in the region. Again, this will help to off-set the misperception about the kinds of seniors for whom the Center is relevant, and give younger seniors the opportunity to participate.

### **Additional Information from Surveys & Focus Groups**

While the key findings from the assessment are outlined above, there was additional data that was gathered. Some of the outcomes of these questions follow:

- The top reasons people participate in programs at the Center were that they like being
  around the people they meet, they have fun and enjoy themselves, they learn things and
  it makes them feel that they are a part of the community. This information might be
  useful in sharing impact through public relations communications.
- People believe that the community should support the Center, as reflected by the fact that every potential reason given was selected by at least 63% of participants (Question # 6), with 6 of the 7 reasons chosen by at least 74%. The list of reasons offered clearly provides strong arguments that the Center can use in its communications and public advocacy work. The answer chosen by almost 93% of participants was "Seniors in the community need many forms of support; the Senior Center provides a single point of access to many services". Again, the concept of the Center as a resource point came out in the focus groups as a strong asset upon which the Center can build. The least-chosen option was "Because it is a great, fun resource." This again completely underscores the data gleaned from the rest of the study, which points to the fact that people feel that the most important reasons to support the Center relate to health, well-being and other social issues.
- People were interested in more educational opportunities, ranging from hobbies they
  might not have had time to pursue while working to classes on academic subjects, how
  to use technology more effectively, art trips and many other areas of potential interest.
  This might be a great topic for future, informal surveys, using local presenters to begin
  testing various programs.
- When asked how to leverage partnerships in the area, focus group participants surprisingly did not focus on potential partnerships with other non-profit organizations, but rather on individuals in the community with interesting areas of expertise or backgrounds and on businesses that might provide programming in a particular area (wine tasting, financial planning, making craft beers, etc.) As this came up in more than one group, it is clearly an area where a lot of grassroots involvement in planning and carrying out programs might be possible. This would also, again, help reach further into individual communities, as the programs could be promoted as Senior Center events, but held at off-site locations that could help cross-market.
- There was quite a bit of discussion about the needs of seniors in surrounding communities, and the potential of the Senior Center to serve these individuals as well. Again, there might be a willingness on the part of leaders in some of the communities currently engaged with the Center to brainstorm how to make that happen. As with other aspects of the Center's work, the more community members can be engaged in creating and carrying out programming and activities, the more they will feel invested in ensuring that the funding and resources are available to continue the opportunities. And creating program opportunities in these non-member communities will draw attention to the

Center as a resource and encourage more support for further community engagement and investment.

## Summary

The Senior Center is seen by a majority of respondents as caring, welcoming and important. Its programs are well-thought-of, and have inspired community members to consider other ways in which the Center might provide value to a broader swathe of the region. If the Center can greatly improve its communications to, and education of, the community in terms of its value and relevancy, it is clear that there are people who are invested in seeing it succeed in new ways and through a broader geographic reach. These people could be of tremendous value in connecting with partner organizations and human resources for program provision and volunteered skills and assets. With a comprehensive marketing and communications initiative behind them, they could also be much more active in convincing their neighbors that the Senior Center should be considered a treasure to be invested in and expanded.

## Acknowledgements

The Philanthropy Resource Group would like to thank Cathy Buntin, Nina Laurie, Donna Liebl, Dot Lyman and other staff and volunteers of the Senior Center for their time, patience and ongoing efforts as we reached out into the community to gauge perceptions of the Senior Center. We would also like to thank all those who took time to fill out a survey or participate in one of the focus groups. Your input enabled us to provide this report and accompanying information to the Center, and will be invaluable as the Center's leadership maps out its plans for the next few years. It has been a pleasure to serve the Senior Center, and the Philanthropy Resource Group looks forward to future opportunities when we again may be of service to the West County community.

### **APPENDIX A**

## **Focus Groups**

Focus Groups were held November 18, 20 and 22. Locations were:

- Ashfield, St. John's Corner
- Shelburne Falls, Arms Library
- Buckland Library
- Shelburne Falls, Greenfield Savings Bank

#### **Attendees**

- Sue Craft, Ashfield
- Nancy Dole, Buckland
- Cheryl Dukes, Buckland
- Nancy Eisenstein, Shelburne Falls
- Johnathon George, Shelburne Falls
- Kathy Lytle, Buckland
- Caroline Mack, Buckland
- Millie March, Buckland
- Maureen Moore, Shelburne
- Chris Myers, Shelburne Falls
- Nan Parati, Ashfield
- Cathy Roberts, Shelburne/Buckland
- Sue Roberts, Buckland
- Whit Sanford, Shelburne Falls
- Kate Stevens, Ashfield/Charlemont
- Angela Verilee, Shelburne Falls
- Jane Wagener, Ashfield
- Phoebe Walker, Buckland
- John Walsh, Shelburne
- Richard Warner, Buckland

## **Focus Group Questions**

#### Each Group Took Place Over 1 Hour and 30 minutes

- 1. Aside from basic medical care, what is the most critical need that older adults in your community face? How might the Senior Center help with that need?
- 2. What kinds of activities and specialized needs might aging Baby Boomers and Millennials look for in the community, and how might the Senior Center help with those?
- 3. For older adults still active in their community, how might the Senior Center enhance their quality of life?
- 4. How could the Senior Center take advantage of programs and other resources provided by other organizations in the region?
- 5. Seniors have a wide range of priorities, including:
  - a. remaining as active as possible: physically, mentally and socially

- b. receiving assistance with physical, financial or other needs
- c. being able to stay in their homes

Given the wide range of things needed and wanted by the oldest third of our community, can the Senior Center best meet their needs by:

- combining everything they do in one place
- decentralizing all of their programs throughout the three communities
- looking for some middle ground where some programs are centralized and some are decentralized
- 6. Is there anything else the Senior Center should consider in terms of its future programs and services?

## **APPENDIX B: Online & Paper Survey**

## The Senior Center: Ashfield ◊ Buckland ◊ Shelburne

7 Main St, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370 ◊ (413) 625-2502



## **Programs & Services Survey**

The Senior Center in Shelburne Falls is reviewing its programs and services to determine what to focus on over the next few years and how best to meet the community's needs. To gather data to help inform their decisions, the Senior Center has hired the Philanthropy Resource Group, a non-profit consulting firm, to carry out a confidential survey and set of focus groups in the community. Your answers to this 10-minute survey will help the leadership of the Center understand how best to allocate scarce resources and how to be as responsive as possible to the needs of the community.

<u>Please note</u> that this is <u>NOT</u> about where the Center will be located (a separate set of discussions), but rather what programs and services should be offered and how those can be best carried out. This information about programs needed by the community will then, in turn, help to inform community decisions about the Center's facility needs. Thank you for taking the time to help the Senior Center plan for the future.



If you prefer to fill this survey out online, please go to the following Online Survey Link:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SeniorCenterFeedback

Please complete the survey no later than December 13, 2019. You may return the hard copy surveys to the Senior Center in sealed envelopes marked "Survey" to ensure confidentiality of responses, or scan and email them directly to the Philanthropy Resource Group, at <a href="mailto:info@PhilanthropyResource.org">info@PhilanthropyResource.org</a>. You may also mail them to the Philanthropy Resource Group at 16 Winch Hill Rd., Swanzey NH 03446. All responses will be held in confidence; only a summary report will be shared with the Senior Center.

# **Confidential Questionnaire**

1.	Please list any categories of programs related to the Senior Center in which you have participated in the past 3 years:				
	Activities (Fitness classes, Music, movies, luncheons, games, etc.)				
	Medical services (Foot clinic, Flu clinic, Reflexology, Nursing services, Wellness, etc.)				
	Social services (SHINE medical insurance advising, Home care & caregiver support, etc.)				
	Veterans' Services				
	Basic Needs services (food, fuel assistance, home repair, housing, legal assistance, clothing support, employment assistance, etc.)				
	Group trips				
	Van transportation				
	Volunteering at the Senior Center				
	Conversation café / space for community members to come together and socialize				
	Educational programs				
	Other:				
	I have not engaged in any activities at the Senior Center in the past 3 years				
2.	the Senior Center could only offer three categories of programs, which types of ograms would be the most important to offer? (Please mark no more than 3)				
	Activities (Fitness classes, Music, movies, luncheons, games, etc.)				
	Medical services (Foot clinic, Flu clinic, Reflexology, Nursing services, Wellness, etc.)				
	Social services (SHINE medical insurance advising, Home care & caregiver support, etc.)				
	Veterans' Services				
	Basic Needs services (food, fuel assistance, home repair, housing, legal assistance, clothing support, employment assistance, etc.)				
	Group trips				
	Van transportation				
	Volunteering at the Senior Center				
	Conversation café / space for community members to come together and socialize				
	Educational programs				
	Intergenerational opportunities				

3.	For those who have participated in the past 3 years (if you have not, please skip this question and go on to the next), why do you take part in Center programs? (please check all that apply):				
		I like being around the people I meet at the Center			
		I have fun and enjoy myself			
		I learn things			
		I get help with services I require			
		To improve and maintain my health			
		It makes me feel that I am a part of the community			
		I'm not as lonely as I would be if the Center were not there			
		Other			
4. Senior centers can provide programs in various ways, from one centralized location where everything takes place to having programs scattered through region. How do you think the Senior Center in Shelburne Falls should provide programs? (Please check only one)					
		Everything should take place in a single, larger location so that efficiencies of scale apply, fewer staff are needed and participants get to interact with the greatest number of people and take part in the greatest variety of programs. This may require transportation to the Center for people throughout the region, which can limit access, and the cost to maintain and operate a large facility is more significant.			
		There should be a balance of programs taking place at the Senior Center itself as well as throughout the region. This requires a more modest central facility but many more partner locations, makes it easier for people to get to programs close to their homes and allows for more program partnerships. It does, however, limit the range of people and programs with which participants engage, requires more staff to facilitate multiple program locations and increases logistical complications.			
		All programs should be decentralized throughout the West County region, with only administrative staff offices in one place. This turns the Center into a virtual set of programs, minimizing the expenses of an owned facility but requiring funding to support facilities owned by other entities and increasing logistical costs to the Center. It also requires significantly more staff in order to be visible in each community and to coordinate many programs across many spaces, and reduces the variety of programs available in any particular community.			
5.	pr Ho	e Senior Center engages about 1,000 participants every year in all of its ograms, yet many people do not understand the impact it has in each community well do you think the Center is understood and appreciated in your mmunity?			
		Very well □ Not much			
		Well   Almost none			
		Ok None			

6.	Why do you think people should support the Senior Center, whether through tax dollars, gifts or program engagement? (Please check as many as apply):				
		Seniors in the community need many forms of support; the Senior Center provides a single point of access to many services			
		It provides rich programming to keep seniors intellectually, physically and socially active			
		It helps older adults continue to be a part of, and contribute to, the broader community			
		Because it's a great, fun resource			
		Because many of the services and programs being provided do not exist elsewhere in the community			
		Without a central place where they can go to be with others who share their life experiences, many older adults may become isolated, which may lead to ill health and depression			
		Because supporting our elders is important and the right thing to do			
		Other			
7.	The Senior Center is, for me:				
		A high priority			
		Important			
		Nice to have, but not really critical			
		Not that important			
		Of no relevance to me			
8.	In	what community do you reside?			
		Ashfield			
		Buckland			
		Shelburne			
		Other			
9.		ow else might the Senior Center support the West County community over e next few years?			
	ime Ip e	ensure that duplicate entries are avoided.)			