

Harpswell Communications Mapping Project

In August 2015, Harpswell Aging at Home (HAH) launched a community survey to understand how older adults are aging in Harpswell, how they get information and what they identify as top needs. Even before the survey was concluded, initial findings were consistent with what is generally known about how older adults get their information about resources – they read the newspaper and they rely on word of mouth from family, friends, neighbors and church.

As the HAH Steering Committee wanted to get started on some piece of the work while we were conducting the assessment, we agreed that “mapping” both the formal and informal lines of communication in Harpswell would be a productive endeavor. Our goal was two-fold: we wanted to understand the social network that already supports folks in Harpswell and to discover if our informal networks could provide an effective communication channel for HAH.

As a Steering Committee of 17, we brainstormed every community group we knew and provided two volunteers with primary contact information for each group. We also checked the town website which maintains a list of community groups. Individually, in between Steering Committee meetings, we spoke to our friends and neighbors about other groups and added to the list at the next meeting.

Once the list was relatively complete, two volunteers made calls to the primary contact of each group, introduced HAH, asked about the group (how often did they meet, how often did they communicate and how, what they did, who was in charge, etc.) and asked if the group would be willing to use their contact lists to send info from HAH to their members.

The project took several months to complete because we were fully engaged in the assessment process at the same time. In the end, we identified 35 formal and informal community organizations that were willing to help us get information out into the community through their communications channels. And, we learned a lot about what resources people had to share, identified new opportunities and gained several volunteers along the way!

The formal lines of communication include our local public access television station, radio station and newspaper. The organizational lines of communications included all three of our volunteer fire departments, all of our churches, our two libraries, our land trust, our historical society, and two town-based committees. Because of our early connection to the television station and newspaper, upon release of our report, we were able to do a TV spot highlighting the findings so the entire community could hear the results and learn of our plans. The same is true for the paper.

The informal lines of communications we mapped includes three knitting and/or quilting groups, three book clubs, two exercise groups, a garden club, three card-playing groups, a yacht club, a breakfast club, a local issue group, and a few mission-based groups. We’ve already begun using these informal lines to recruit volunteer drivers and share information about a free volunteer driver program available to our residents. We will continue to update our list as we find new informal groups willing to help us spread the word.

This was a super-easy no-cost project that yielded great results that will help us long into the future!