



Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging

2024 Annual Report

Author: Walter Leutz, PhD, Connections Evaluator

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About Us

Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging is a coalition of senior activists and agencies that are working to make Waltham an aging-friendly community, as well as a model for community involvement for seniors. The group has its roots in a 2015-6 study led by Brandeis Professor Walter Leutz and his partner, Betsy. Our theme of "Connections" expresses our aim to connect seniors to one another and to a more age-friendly city. Connections has led a number of initiatives to create a more age-friendly and inclusive Waltham. We have focused on social participation, communication, nutrition, physical activity, lifelong learning, and civic participation.

Summary

Waltham Connections completed its eighth year of operations in calendar year 2024. During the year we continued and expanded our recent work in four areas:

- ❖ Providing free computers, training and WiFi to low-income Waltham seniors through the Welcome to the Digital Age (WDA) program.
- ❖ Supporting outreach and inclusion for Ugandan and Spanish-speaking seniors.
- ❖ Organizing intergenerational programs linking Waltham seniors and Bentley students.
- ❖ Improving accessibility in transportation in the form of advocating for benches at more bus stops in the downtown areas of Waltham.

The primary support for these efforts came from grants of federal Title III funds through Springwell, supplemented by discretionary funds from our 2020 grant from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, as well as donated time from Connections volunteers.

Finally, the year started with welcoming a new Director to the CoA – Patrick O'Brien. A former Waltham City Councilor, Patrick was familiar with Connections. He joined the Coordinating Committee and has become a very valuable supporter.

Grants and Funding

Connections has been supported by the Tufts Health Plan Foundation for all of our eight years, the most recent grant being a two-year \$100,000 grant that started in July 2020. Because the pandemic slowed us down and because we found other funding, we still had \$49,000 from the Tufts grant at the start of 2024. Recently we have used the Tufts funds to supplement the \$23,500 in federal Title III grants for outreach and the WDA program. We spent about \$23,000 of Tufts funds in the first 10 months of 2024 – almost all on outreach. That included a \$13,000 payment to Africano Waltham for the year to cover their staff and supply costs for their growing senior program.

When we approached Point32 Healthcare Foundation (the merger of Tufts and Harvard Pilgrim foundations) for new funds, they told us that we needed to spend all remaining funds before we could apply for a new grant. We have budgeted to continue to spend Tufts funds at the current rate, which should allow us to continue current programming through May 2025. As the year ended, we were in conversation with Point32 about a new grant.

Program Areas

Welcome to the Digital Age

We offered two WDA classes in 2024: One for 10 Ugandan seniors in the spring and one for 13 seniors of mixed ethnicity and language in the late summer. Here are some excerpts from the evaluation reports for each course, which can be found on our website.

Spring course for Ugandans

- As with prior WDA sessions, the classes took place at the Waltham Senior Center. There were 9 classes of 2 hours each on Tuesdays from

3-5 PM, including a graduation celebration. To assist participants not fully fluent in English, we recruited and trained a Luganda-speaking assistant teacher.

- In general, the participants were younger, had more schooling, and were working more than prior WDA classes. In terms of experience with communications technology, all had smartphones, half already had a computer in their household, and seven already had internet in their households. With this connectivity, we did not need to provide hotspots to participants.
- The evaluation's Pre/Post survey found that this sequence of WDA was a success in terms of moving the large majority of the class from not being able to use a computer and the internet to the large majority reporting being able to do so.
- Like prior classes, Ugandan seniors were also delighted to be in the Senior Center, to feel welcomed, and to think about participating in the activities they saw there. WDA has been part of a successful increase in use of the Senior Center among Spanish-speaking seniors. Hopefully we can use it to build a similar pathway for Ugandan seniors.

Fall Course

- This was the most diverse WDA class to date. Of the 13 participants, only three were born in the US, one of them in Puerto Rico. Other home countries included Italy, Haiti, China, Kenya, and Guatemala. First and second language combinations included English only, Spanish/English, French Creole/English, Chinese/English, English/Kiswahiu, English/Swahili, and French Creole/Spanish.
- Like prior WDA classes this was an interesting and gratifying class for both instructors and participants. The diversity was remarkable, and there was promise for strong learning given relatively high education

levels. The Pre/Post data show that participants certainly learned a lot, and the great majority will be able to find valuable uses for their computers like browsing the internet, using email and video conferencing.

Summer Refresher Course

We offered a four-week refresher course over the summer for recent graduates of the full course to brush up on their skills. Fourteen WDA graduates signed up and 10 attended all four sessions.

Conclusions

While there was extensive learning in both classes, there were also substantial minorities who learned little in many areas of knowledge and skill. The majority in both classes indicated they wanted more class time. Instructors attributed much of the slow progress to vision problems, severe arthritis, memory loss, and other challenges of aging.

Outreach

The year brought substantial growth to the Latino and Ugandan outreach programs in terms of both number of participants and variety of activities and connections with information and services. Here are some highlights from our report on the work from October 2023 to September 2024, which can be found on our [website](#).



Ugandan Outreach

The Summer 2023 move of Ugandan outreach activities to Africano, Waltham's community center for Ugandans, has been a great success. The goals have been to get seniors out of their homes, to have fun together, and to get them better connected with the larger community. Every Tuesday for 4-5 hours the seniors gather for dancing, exercises for mind and body, sharing of life stories, trips, and ethnic food. The Ugandan outreach worker frequently brings in outside speakers who have presented on finances, caregiving for children (including how to get certifications), Springwell on service access, the Boston Medical Center's Immigrant and Refugee Health Center, and SHINE. The worker also helps individual seniors connect to programs and services. In this she works closely with CoA staff and the Latina outreach worker.

Because the group grew so quickly, in the spring Connections gave Africano \$13,000 (included in the Tufts funds mentioned above) to support more time for the outreach worker, three part-time staff, supplies, and supervision to the work.

By September 2024, more than 100 seniors had received some service or participated in a group meeting since the previous October. A slice of records from May to July show that 57 seniors participated at least once in the three months, and 23 of them attended 7 times or more. The outreach worker's time increased in pace with the program growth: from 5.3 hours a week average in October-December, to 8.6 hours in January-March, to 11.8 hours in April-June 2024.



Ugandan outreach worker with seniors at a Ugandan/Latino luncheon.

Latino Outreach

The Latina outreach worker holds regular hours at her office in the CoA, where she meets seniors to help connect with services and programs. Her records show that the most common areas of help are housing, financial, utilities, medical, and legal.

In February, the worker organized the weekly Hora del Café, a time and place for Latino seniors to socialize and share light food and drink. The worker has networked with community agencies for speakers to come to show the group how to access services, including Springwell, AARP, Charles River Health, and the TRIAD officer. The worker also helped create larger events for the whole community in the CoA auditorium, including celebrating Latino Heritage month, an intergenerational fiesta, a “Holy Guacamole” activity, and a Ugandan/Latino luncheon. Latino seniors report that these activities have helped them feel comfortable and welcomed at the CoA.

The number of Latino seniors reached by the programming increased substantially over the period. Using the worker's encounter records, the evaluation report compared the first and third quarters of the year. The average number of new seniors seen each month rose from 7 in the first quarter to 13 in the third. Encounters with individual seniors per month rose from 9 to 25. By August, the number of seniors on the list who had come to the weekly Hora del Café totaled 45. In line with this growth, the worker's hours have risen in each quarter from 5 hours a week October-December, to 8.6 hours January-March, to 8.8 hours April-June.



Latina outreach worker with seniors on a CoA trip.

Conclusions

By almost any measure the outreach to Latino and Ugandan seniors has been a success. The workers have networked with other agencies to provide information, access to services and benefits, and food pantries. Latinos and Ugandans are coming to the senior center (and Africano), and they feel increasingly comfortable there.

Intergenerational

Soon after Connections' Waltham Healthy Aging Summit in 2022, a group of seniors started meeting to respond to interest at the Summit in having more contact with the younger generation. The seven seniors in the group have met about monthly since then. With funding from Springwell in 2022, we purchased the Sages & Seekers curriculum, which brings seniors (Sages) and young adults (Seekers) together to share their experiences through one-on-one conversations. In 2023, Bentley University's Service Learning and Civic Engagement program agreed to become our partner, and in 2024 we held the third and fourth S&S sessions with Bentley students.

The evaluation of the Spring 2024 class of 14 Sages (available on our website) found unanimous support from seniors. All participants agreed with the following statements (selected written comments regarding each statement in parentheses):

- **The S&S program enhanced my overall well-being.** ("It was wonderful to speak with our new generation and learn that we are in good hands for our country." "It was wonderful to connect on such a deep level with a college student.")
- **S&S was successful in promoting a positive image of aging.** ("I came into this thinking, 'what does anyone want to know about me' and learned immediately how much we have in common with the youth of today and how we can impart our experiences to help them manage the good and bad times in life." "Every Sage presented a positive image of aging.")
- **The S&S program was successful in connecting and engaging.** ("I was surprised at how we connected." "We all seemed deeply connected and engaged.")

- **My Seeker contributed to my life.** (“Very much so. I think I have made a friend for life. I feel appreciated, heard, understood, and cared for.” “Yes, it helped me understand my own past.”)
- **I feel I contributed to the Seeker’s life.** (“It was reflected in the beautiful and rewarding letter I received.” “Yes, I shared information I’ve learned over decades, and she spoke her gratitude.”)

Seekers also expressed satisfaction. All agreed with the following statements:

- I have more interest in meeting older adults now.
- I feel more empathy for older adults and the process of aging.
- I learned something about myself through our conversations.
- I feel like I contributed to my Sage’s life.
- I enjoyed having an hour to speak with someone who listened.
- The S&S program enhanced my quality of life.

Two more sessions of S&S are scheduled for early 2025, including one for Spanish-speaking Sages and Seekers.



Spring 2024 Sages & Seekers cohort.

Benches

At the 2022 Healthy Aging Summit, we identified the need for more benches at Waltham bus stops, particularly in the downtown sections of Main and Moody Streets. After the Summit, Connections senior volunteers and representatives of Brandeis's student-led Disability Working Group explored the extent of the problem and found that only 27% of bus stops had benches, making it difficult for seniors and others with mobility difficulties to use public transport (see full recommendations on our website).

In our 2023 Annual Report, we described our work with Mayor McCarthy and the Waltham Disabilities Services Commission to gain support for the purchase and placement of benches. In early 2024 the Commission asked for \$13,000 for five or six benches and later in the spring, the Mayor put in a request for \$50,000 for benches. In the months that followed we worked with City Councilors to track these requests as they moved to Council committees, agendas and dockets. Unfortunately, as of the end of the year, there was no action on approving the funds or choosing the placement of benches. Finally, in late January 2025 the Economic and Community Development Committee voted to approve the purchase of five benches. Placement of the benches is not yet determined.