Helping the older population helps the community

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NEW BEDFORD — Per the 2010 U.S. Census, the city had 18,291 residents over 60, the fifth highest among cities in Massachusetts.

It’s no surprise that that number is only growing which is why community partners have been putting their heads together since at least 2015 when New Bedford started moving toward the Age-Friendly Community designation.

At Grizzle’s legislative breakfast held at Buttonwood Park Zoo Friday morning, Nora Morone Carpie, president of the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, got to the nitty gritty and said she realized how old she is, noting “that’s a good thing.”

When communities work for older people, they work for younger people, she said.

A panel including city councilors, state representatives Antonia D. Cabral, Paul Schmolz, and Chris Hanshick, district Attorney Thomas Quinn III, Police Chief Joseph Corleo and other community members heard some of the progress and highlights of the Age-Friendly Initiative in New Bedford.

HEALTH

Cheryl Bartlett, chief executive officer of the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center said the center serves about 35 percent of the population in New Bedford and about 10 percent of those people are over the age of 65.

After a quick look through the center’s electronic health records, Bartlett found the top three diagnoses for people over 65 are hypertension, high cholesterol and vitamin D deficiency, and said:

The majority of that aging population the center serves has hypertension — high blood pressure — but Bartlett said, "a silent disease" often causing a lot of damage to the heart and kidneys that can have terrible long-term consequences to someone’s health. She recommends people get their blood pressure checked as often as they can.

Joyce Dupont, wellness director said the health center has held dementia trainings for first responders, nurses, local businesses and community health workers. The center is also working on expanding availability of evidence-based programs to help seniors live at home alone as long as possible.

They’re also planning annual cancer screenings, which is why it’s the number one topic consistently among their senior population.

PARKS

Mary Rapoza, director of Parks, Recreation and Beaches in the city said the department has been working closely with Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District to improve the Buttonwood Park and Hazelwood Park, many specifically around accessibility into the park such as walkways, she said.

Plus, this spring, the city will offer bowling on the greens which was very popular at one time, she said, and was a gentleman’s sport. It can be played by all ages and abilities, she said.

TRANSPORTATION

Angela Constantino, senior transportation planner at KRPEPD, or Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, said they’re working closely with Southeastern Regional Transit Authority.

They’re planning an outreach event at Buttonwood Senior Center in May which will include the ability to sign up for senior Charlie Cards and education on how to ride the bus, how to find schedules and learn about safety measures. This event could be replicated at other senior centers in New Bedford.

They plan to bring a bus to the senior center, she said, so seniors can see how to board the bus and get off and on the late bus.

With proper documentation, seniors can get half off a bus trip.

Constantino said they’re creating a web-based interactive map showing senior housing locations, public and private, and SEATA bus routes and stops. They’re working on templates for individualized and location-based schedules with specific times in large print. They’re also working on real-time information on where the bus is.

“This is going to make riding the bus safer for everyone,” she said.

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