

# Senior

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bers have been impressed by the range of fitness activities available at the Y as well as by the offer of space in its historic Isaac Farrar Mansion for social events such as meals and movie nights. The Y has also offered space for gardens and the opportunity for seniors from the center to work with youngsters from the Y's youth programs.

Banfield said some members strongly object to Bernier's decision to sell the center's workout machines in favor of developing a fitness program that promotes free weights, floor exercises and outdoor recreational activities such as hiking.

"A lot of us have made the switch to the Y," Banfield said. "They have really bent over backward to make us feel at home."

Asked if he would return to the senior center if it reopens at the Airport Mall, he said, bluntly, "I doubt it."

Bernier fears the loss of active members such as Banfield will further erode support for the center's future and hopes the Airport Mall site will open before too many make a permanent switch to the Bangor Y.

Diane Dickerson, CEO of the Bangor Y, said it was never her intent to woo members away from the Hammond Street Senior Center.

"I knew if they stopped their health regimen and their social activities, they would take a huge downward turn," she said, explaining her decision to offer the free Y memberships and access to the Farrar facility. "These people have been displaced. It could be July before they have a new facility. We're just trying to help in the interim."

# Isolation

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said. "We've gone back and talked with the officers who made the earlier welfare checks, wondering if we missed something. I don't think so."

The Wells Police Department offers a Good Morning program, like Orono's, that currently serves about 10 seniors.

"We have written permission and a key to get into [participants'] houses," Putnam said. McNulty, however, wasn't a participant in the Good Morning program.

On the other hand, welfare checks, like the first few visits to McNulty's mobile home, typically include a knock on the door, a look in the windows and a look around for any indications of illegal activity or violence. It's rare for police to force their way into a home, Putnam said.

## Choosing solitude: "It is not a crime"

It happens "fairly often" that police go to a private home for a welfare check and find the person has died, said Stephen McCausland, spokesman for the Maine Department of Public Safety. But in the 27 years he has served in his position, he said, "I can't think of a single case" like McNulty's shocking, long-undiscovered death.

But McNulty's life circumstances, McCausland said, are far from unusual. "There are many cases where a person chooses to live a solitary life, by design or for other reasons," he said. "It is not the fault of the police or of any neighbor. It is sad sometimes, but it is not a crime to choose that life."

The choice to live in isolation, whether in rural or urban settings, is driven by many factors, according to Dr. Clifford Singer, a Bangor psychiatrist who specializes in geriatric mental health. Life circumstances such as divorce or widowhood, the absence of nearby family members, poverty and lack of transportation can contribute to social isolation, he said.

In addition, conditions such as chronic pain, low energy and depression can make it hard to summon the will to socialize, while age-related problems such as memory loss, poor hearing and urinary incontinence may cause embarrassment and fear of social settings.

Even when living conditions are far from ideal, Singer said, a solitary lifestyle is not necessarily a sign of mental illness or incompetence. Overall, he said, individuals have the right to choose how to live. Even public agencies such as Adult Protective Services cannot legally force an individual to accept assistance or to relocate against their will, except in the most egregious situations.

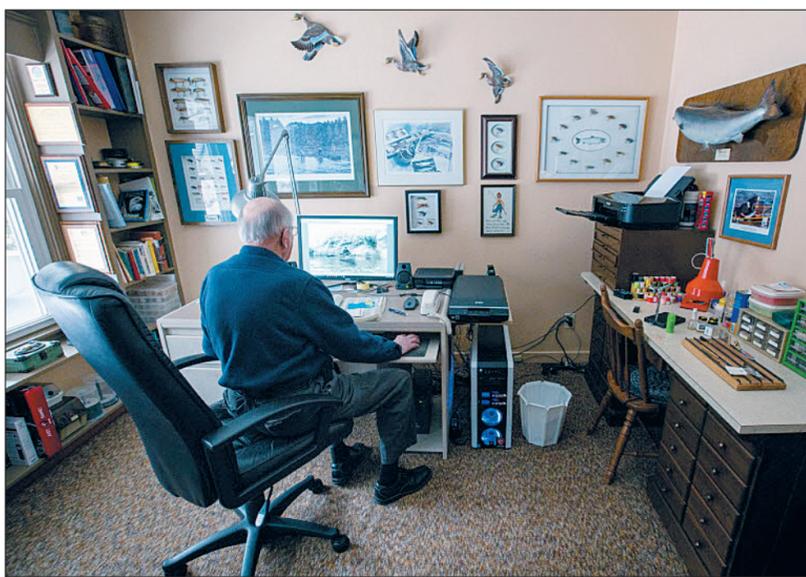
Often, he said, the most effective call can be to the nearest Agency on Aging, which may be able to establish communication and persuade a reclusive individual to accept basic services such as prepared meals, hygiene assistance, pet food or transportation.

## Life on the fringes

At the Eastern Area Agency on Aging in Bangor, executive director Noelle Merrill said the number of elders living on the fringes of safety is rising with changes in our culture, including, for example, changes in the well-known Meals on Wheels program.

"Years ago, we had enough money to deliver a hot meal to your house five days a week," she said.

That meant someone waited at the door until the resident answered. There was an exchange of pleasantries and the opportunity to be sure the resident was safe and functional. Now,



MICKY BEDELL | BDN

Claude Westfall, 87, has been living alone in his Orono home since the death of his wife, Rosemae, in 2012. Although he has grown children and other family in the general area, Westfall takes pride in not having to ask them for help.

she said, budget constraints mean a batch of frozen meals gets dropped off once a week, with many Mainers on a waiting list for the service.

The Area Agencies on Aging offer many other services to support elders in their homes, Merrill said, and community-based services such as the Good Morning programs in Orono and Wells can also be effective at keeping elders connected to safety. Wearable pendants and bracelets, such as those provided through the Lifeline program, have saved many lives, though they aren't inexpensive.

"But people don't realize the link," she said. "Too many Mainers think that if they ask for help, or accept

help, someone's going to call the authorities, take them out of their homes and stick them in a facility."

The challenge to agencies like hers, as well as to state programs, municipalities and individual community members, Merrill said, is reaching the most reclusive individuals who, like McNulty, reject social norms and fall right through the public safety net.

In Orono, the Good Morning program works well to keep older residents safe in their homes, according to police Capt. Scott Scripture.

"We have found a few people who have passed away at home," he said, "or who have fallen or who are sick."

But more, often, he said, the Good Morning callers

get an all-clear and a thank you from program participants who are up and about in the morning. Sometimes, they are asked for help with small tasks, such as changing a lightbulb or a hearing aid battery, and they're happy to oblige if they're not busy with weightier problems. One officer recently brought a newspaper and a carton of orange juice to a senior in the program who confided that she was coming down with a cold.

Scripture isn't worried about the "slippery slope" effect of seniors looking to the police for support in day-to-day domestic activities. Orono is a small town, he said, and keeping it safe for all residents is just part of the job description.

## WHAT IS IT?

Send your answers for this week's What Is It (below) to: Robert Croul, 1095 North Road, Newburgh, Maine 04444. Readers may respond by email to recestate@midmaine.com. Be sure to write "What is it?" in the subject line.



ROBERT CROUL



The Jan. 16 Bangor Daily News "What Is It?" was correctly identified as an antique cast-iron countertop cigar cutter by Erny Levesque of Saint David, Stephen Dickinson of Presque Isle, O.K. Blackstone of Caribou, Raymond Perkins Jr. and Pete Lammert of Thomaston. These were typically found on the counters of general stores.

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