

# Center

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## Two levels of need

"There is a tremendous need in this area for adult day services and senior services," said Dr. Lesley Fernow, a geriatrician who has practiced in Dover-Foxcroft for more than 38 years.

In the sparsely settled territory within 30 miles of Dover-Foxcroft, Fernow said, one quarter of the population is 62 or older. Many people are living with chronic disease, disability and dementia in themselves or loved ones, or both. Family caregivers — spouses, adult children and other relatives — find themselves stretched to the limit, emotionally and financially, with few resources to ease the burden.

Fernow described a former patient, an 80-year-old woman with advanced dementia, who lived with her 60-year-old daughter in a battered mobile home on a rural backroad.

"She didn't even know her daughter. She didn't know where she was," Fernow said.

Most days, the confused woman would insist on leaving the house and walking along the shoulder of the road until she became exhausted.

"Her daughter couldn't stop her, so she would get in the car, day after day, and drive very slowly behind her mother with the emergency flashers on until she got tired enough to get in the car and go back home," Fernow said. "That's the kind of heroism we see in family caregivers. They're not sleeping, they can't get a break or even go grocery shopping. And there are people like that all over this region."

For families like that, Fernow said, the new adult day services program will meet an essential need.

The day services program, anticipated to open late next year, will allow family caregivers to leave their loved ones for several hours at a time in the care of professional staff, knowing they will be safe. Meals, medications, personal care, activities and socialization will all be provided as needed. The cost will be covered by MaineCare, Maine's Medicaid program, or

paid out of pocket for those not eligible for MaineCare.

But the Dover-Foxcroft area also has a large population of seniors who are healthy, independent and active, Fernow said. For those people, there is a growing need for exercise programs, arts activities, hobby clubs, computer literacy classes and other programming.

"We need activities that get people engaged with each other, not just sitting around looking at movies. There is a lot of data showing that the mind stays healthy and active longer when people are socially engaged," she said.

For that group, the Maine Highlands Senior Center, also slated to open in 2017, will host a variety of activities and serve as a one-stop referral center for services such as home health care, basic home maintenance, transportation, meal delivery and other measures to help keep aging Mainers safe and healthy in their homes. Fernow established the nonprofit organization in 2011 and serves as its president.

## A new use

The new senior center and the adult day service program will both be housed on the first floor of historic Central Hall in Dover-Foxcroft, the county seat of Piscataquis County. The imposing Main Street building was constructed in 1882 by private citizens who felt the community should have a grand performance space. By 1902, the elegant, balconied auditorium was hosting not only orchestral performances, grand balls and touring theatrical productions but also traveling minstrel shows, popular dances, silent movies, graduations and rollerskating.

Later years saw the addition of a regulation basketball court, an indoor rifle range and, in the lower level, the town's administrative offices. In 1924, the town purchased Central Hall. But the building deteriorated over time; in 1940, the upstairs auditorium was declared unsafe and was closed to the public. Decades of piecemeal repairs and updates failed to override the building's neglect. In 2008, town offices moved to a former school building and Central Hall was left empty, its future uncertain.

"In 2008, the town came to the historical society and asked if there was any interest in saving Central Hall," said Chris Moss, a retiree from the midwest who had moved to town the previous year. A history buff with a passion for old buildings, he had gotten involved right away with the Dover-Foxcroft Historical Society.

A preliminary appeal easily raised \$30,000 from community donors to pay for a year's heat and utilities, Moss said.

Subsequent meetings and surveys have established broad support for saving the building, restoring the grand auditorium and repurposing the downstairs for the senior center and adult day services program, which Moss called, "the highest and best use of the space."

Fundraising since then has raised about \$1.4 million from a variety of private foundations, local businesses and individual donors. Professional contractors have poured a new concrete foundation, installed a new roof and updated plumbing, wiring and insulation. Work crews from the nearby Charleston Correctional Facility have provided additional labor at no charge, from replacing the exterior siding to laying a new hardwood floor in the expansive upstairs auditorium. Now nearing completion, the auditorium is expected to open in March 2017.

Work in the first-floor space for the senior center and day services program has yet to begin in earnest, pending additional fundraising of about \$500,000. Both are expected to open later next year. The entire building, when it's finished, will be handicap accessible.

Organizers will soon launch a search for a director for the senior center. The Charlotte White Center, a nonprofit organization that supports individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities, is exploring the possibility of managing the adult day services program.

The project at Central Hall is the centerpiece of the Piscataquis Thriving in Place Collaborative Project, a regional effort aimed at helping seniors and adults with chronic disease age safely in their own homes and communities. With funding and orga-

nizational support from the Maine Health Access Foundation, the Thriving in Place initiative in Piscataquis County has been working for two years to assess the need for additional services and fill gaps. Maine Health Access Foundation has funded about 10 community-based Thriving in Place projects statewide, each tailored to the needs of its region.

"The feedback we've gotten is that we need more transportation options, more home-based services and more caregiver support," said Meg Callaway, who heads up the Piscataquis project in her capacity as senior services coordinator at the Charlotte White Center.

In addition to the Central Hall renovation, the Piscataquis project is pulling together agencies and area residents to weave a more secure safety net for the aging community. While much progress has been made, Callaway said, area residents — especially volunteers — are key to success going forward. Volunteers are needed at all levels, she said, from socializing with seniors at the day services

program to providing transportation, donating handyman skills and helping out with activities at the senior center when it opens.

For Charlie Buzzell, the opening of the senior center and day services program can't come soon enough. This week, he's been trying to harvest his garlic crop. His tractor needs some tinkering and the lawn needs mowing.

Normally, these are tasks he enjoys. But these days, more and more of his time is spent looking after his wife and tending to the household duties she can no longer handle. Even with some assistance from one of the couple's daughters and occasional paid help, it's more than he can manage.

"I've been spoiled for years," he said. "I am ill-equipped for domestic chores. Dolores not only took care of me and our children and held down a part-time job, but I never once left the house when my clothes weren't selected and set out for me."

In addition, he said, his wife always managed the family finances.

Along with feeling that he just doesn't have the time or the focus to do everything he needs to do now, Charlie Buzzell worries that Dolores Buzzell, normally chatty and outgoing, is socially isolated by living alone with him on the farm.

"She's really withdrawing," he said.

He sees the Central Hall project as offering an appealing alternative that benefits them both.

"She really perked up when I said we were driving over here today," Charlie Buzzell said during a tour of the building.

He was neatly dressed in a dark suit with a lavender shirt and a purple-print necktie.

"I told her I was going to wear dungarees and a sports shirt, and she said, 'Oh, no you're not.' And she laid out my clothes for me," he said.

For more information about the Piscataquis Thriving in Place Collaborative Project, the Maine Highlands Senior Center or the new adult senior services program, call 564-0273.



## Classes Starting September!

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