

—Slug:.....COMM-0852.bratt.Windham\_Aging  
—Contributor.....Joyce Marcel  
—Contributor email.....joyrand@sover.net  
—For section..... News  
—Format..... News - byline and dateline  
—Dateline..... Brattleboro  
—Article Number:..... 43077



**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Nice job, Joyce. Only note I can think of is that Roger spells his name Allbee.



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Is Windham County prepared to get older?

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 The Windham Aging Collaborative — a consortium of  
3 more than 35 organizations — is thinking ahead and finding  
4 ways now to deliver needed services to the rapidly growing ranks  
5 of Vermont seniors

####END SUBHED####

6 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

7 Windham is no county for old men. Or for old women,  
8 either.

9 Windham County's birth rate is the lowest in Vermont,  
10 while its median age is still a relatively young 48. But while data  
11 on aging abounds, what is lacking for our elders as they reach

12 retirement age is housing, transportation, food, medical care,  
13 caretakers, broadband access, social life, and — surprisingly for a  
14 rural population — air uncontaminated by particulate matter.

15         What is not lacking: state, regional and local agencies  
16 and organizations trying to create better situations for elders.

17         So while Windham is no good county for older people  
18 now, things might be better by 2040.

19         The Windham Aging Collaborative, composed of more  
20 than 35 nonprofit, religious, state, and local agencies and  
21 organizations, is working to make the future of aging easier and  
22 better.

23         On Jan. 30, Windham Aging called its collaborators  
24 together at the Retreat Farm for an all-day conference, “Pathway  
25 to 2040: Collectively Preparing for Our Region’s Aging Future,”  
26 with more than 50 people representing 35 organizations.

27         “2040 is our mantra,” shouted Windham Aging’s co-  
28 founder, Dr. Carolyn Taylor-Olson, with a fist bump as she  
29 welcomed people to the conference.

## 30         **‘That’s where it’s at!**

## 31         **Collaboration!’**

32         Windham Aging began in 2021, when the Windham  
33 Regional Commission began to compile and analyze aging data  
34 in Windham County and Vermont. Then it began projecting  
35 where the county might be in 10 and 20 years.

36         Three retired medical professionals — Dr. David  
37 Neumeister, a dentist in Brattleboro; Taylor-Olson, then a  
38 hospitalist at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital; and Roger Allbee,  
39 then the CEO of Grace Cottage Hospital in Townshend — were  
40 all serving at the time on the board of Thompson House, an  
41 assisted living facility in Brattleboro. And they were paying  
42 attention.

43         They noticed trends, started asking questions, and began  
44 organizing. Slowly, their idea picked up steam.

45 “David, Roger, and I talked about this concept of where  
46 are we going to be in 2040,” Taylor-Olson told *The Commons* at  
47 the conference. “We actually had not forecasted that it would  
48 evolve to this level. And I think the key point is that as we talked  
49 about inviting Senior Solutions and Hospice to join our  
50 conversations, we discovered so many other social service  
51 organizations in town were also thinking about this.”

52 Before Windham Aging, every agency was in its own  
53 silo, Taylor-Olson said.

54 “Then Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, with the  
55 Brattleboro Retreat and with Rescue, and some legal aspect,  
56 developed their collaboration for Groundworks,” Taylor-Olson  
57 said. “And we realized, ‘Yeah, that’s where it’s at! Collaboration!  
58 But it was just the three of us. We didn’t really have the  
59 infrastructure.”

60 They created a strategic plan and hired a strong program  
61 coordinator. Windham Aging began to grow.

62 Today, the collaborative consists of organizations ranging  
63 from Rescue Inc. to Windham Regional Commission, from the  
64 Vermont Agency of Transportation to Grace Cottage Family  
65 Health and Hospital, from the Windham & Windsor Housing  
66 Trust to Groundworks Collaborative, from Senior Solutions to the  
67 Vermont Department of Health, from the Leahy Institute for Rural  
68 Partnerships to St. Michael’s Episcopal Church.

## 69 **Isolation and lack of** 70 **socialization**

71 “We need to make Windham County a happy place,”  
72 said co-founder Neumeister, who also spoke at the conference.

73 Ageism is systemic in American culture, according to the  
74 Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent  
75 Living (DAIL). Some of the many problems seniors face are  
76 difficult and take political will, time, and money to solve, such as  
77 building more senior housing and staffing it.

78 But some are as simple as redesigning supermarkets to  
79 assist seniors, adding more accessible parking, grab bars and  
80 lower shelves throughout the store, and wider aisles for  
81 motorized shopping carts.

82 Other help seniors might need? Assistance with  
83 downsizing. Bus or cab transportation that can reach homes in  
84 the backwoods. Financial help. Assistance for those who want to  
85 live with relatives or share their homes with compatible strangers.  
86 Age-specific housing built on one level. More residential care  
87 homes. More skilled nurses and caretakers.

88 According to DAIL, Vermont has the second largest  
89 population of adults 60 or older in the nation — 30%, or  
90 194,000 oldsters. And here in Windham County, 26.1% of the  
91 population is over 65, making it the third-oldest county in  
92 Vermont.

93 “The greatest health concern for seniors is isolation and  
94 the lack of socialization,” said Dr. Rudy Fedrizzi, Brattleboro  
95 Public Health Services district director of the Vermont  
96 Department of Health.

97 “Social isolation and loneliness are significant public  
98 health problems and are clear risks for death, depression, anxiety,  
99 and major cognitive impairment, including dementia,” Fedrizzi  
100 said. “According to a Harvard Study of Adult Development, the  
101 No. 1 factor to happiness is the quality of relationship and social  
102 connection.”

## 103 **The state cares**

104 The Windham Aging Collaborative is leading the way in  
105 Vermont, Angela Smith-Dieng, DAIL deputy commissioner, told  
106 the conference.

107 “Our mission is to make Vermont the best state to grow  
108 old in or to live with a disability, dignity, respect, and  
109 independence,” Smith-Dieng said. “We do that in collaboration  
110 with organizations across the state. We need this type of planning  
111 in every community, in every region of the state, and you are

112 showing the way of how to do this at the local level, in  
113 collaboration, pulling together resources and taking action for  
114 your communities.

115 “We use Windham Aging as an example when we talk in  
116 other parts of the state about what you can do to support aging  
117 well,” she said.

118 Seniors already have some important benefits, Smith-  
119 Dieng said. These include Meals on Wheels, Medicaid, and adult  
120 day care centers, plus some senior housing, case management,  
121 caregiver support, and dementia respite grants.

122 “These are just a few of the services that people are  
123 receiving now and again,” Smith-Dieng said. “It’s really just a  
124 small portion of the need that we see in community.”

125 Many Vermonters want to age in place, she said.

126 “What that means is be able to live in their own home as  
127 long as possible, or live in their community as long as possible,”  
128 Smith-Dieng said. “So we try to ensure that people can receive  
129 services in their own home, if that is their choice.”

130 The problem is there is far too little assistance available.

131 “We have residential care homes and assisted living  
132 residences,” Smith-Dieng said. “And then, if folks need a higher  
133 level of care, then we also have skilled nursing facilities which  
134 are a 24/7 option for people.

135 “We have adult family care options. And at the sort of  
136 highest level of care for those who need a nursing home but also  
137 have really complex needs, like mental health needs and or  
138 substance use needs or significant behaviors, we have a  
139 specialized skilled nursing facility in Bennington.

140 “We are working really hard across the state, with all of  
141 our partners, to build capacity across this continuum of care,” she  
142 said.

143 As of 2025, Vermont had 33 skilled nursing facilities  
144 across the state and 81 residential care and assisted living  
145 facilities that accept Medicaid, Smith-Dieng said.

146 “There are almost 2,900 skilled nursing facility beds  
147 across the state,” she said. “They’re at 88% occupancy, which  
148 means we’ve seen a continual increase since the pandemic. So  
149 we know we need to build capacity in that setting. Nursing  
150 homes, where people can receive care and support, is another  
151 area where we need to build capacity.”

152 The state alone cannot solve all the problems, build all  
153 the necessary housing, and provide all the services that seniors  
154 need, Smith-Dieng said.

155 “It really takes significant collaboration and partnership  
156 to make this work,” she said.

157 “It’s not that state government is leading everything or  
158 is doing all of this work,” Smith-Dieng added. “We really rely on  
159 our community partners, many of whom are here in this room, to  
160 be doing the direct care and direct support of older adults and  
161 the communities that provide services for them across Vermont.”

## 162 **The aging landscape**

163 Fedrizzi said that while Vermont usually scores high in  
164 the health of its citizens, the statistics change when you look at  
165 the data about seniors.

166 “There’s a variety of measures where we’re actually in the  
167 lowest half of all states in the U.S.,” he said — specifically, motor  
168 vehicle deaths, cancer screenings, the number of geriatric  
169 providers, vaccination rates, excessive alcohol drinking, falls,  
170 hospice care, and suicides.

171 “So there’s a lot of work to do,” Fedrizzi said.

172 Seniors also clearly need more financial support.

173 “A significant percentage of Vermonters live at or below  
174 the poverty line, are food insecure and unaware of programs and  
175 services,” Fedrizzi said.

176 Demographics are also against the aged.

177 “A 2030 estimate is that every other population cohort is  
178 losing population, except for the 65 and older in our county,”

179 Fedrizzi said. “And you can see a dramatic increase in the growth  
180 of that age cohort of 65 and older.”

181 What will that mean?

182 “It’ll mean fewer young Windham County residents to be  
183 working, to be paying taxes, to be available for caregiving,”

184 Fedrizzi said. “So it’s a real stressor to our future.”

185 At all levels, there are ways to improve senior’s lives, he  
186 said.

187 “At the individual level, there’s providing wholesome  
188 food and medically tailored meals to individuals,” he said.

189 “There’s things we can do at sort of the family and social level,  
190 like providing support for caregivers.”

191 Fedrizzi also listed “things we can do organizationally,  
192 like turning libraries into hubs of service delivery, things we can  
193 do for the entire community, like the community cares model,  
194 and things we should be doing societally, like improving the laws  
195 and policies that support us.”

196 “We all need to be rowing in the same direction and in  
197 the same boat,” he said.

## 198 **Some help is available**

199 Senior Solutions, the area agency on aging in  
200 southeastern Vermont, has a major role to play in this arena,  
201 retiring Executive Director Mark Boutwell told the conference.

202 “We have a contract with Vermont Legal Aid to provide  
203 legal services,” Boutwell said. “We help provide nutrition  
204 services. The federal government provides funding that we pass  
205 through to senior centers and meal sites to provide nutritional  
206 services. This covers good meals, home-delivered meals, nutrition  
207 education and nutritional counseling.”

208 The organization also offers attention to senior health.

209 “We promote things like Tai Chi,” Boutwell said. “We  
210 have a program that helps caregivers take care of themselves,  
211 which is a home medication reconciliation program.”

212 The agency also provides “critical” services for  
213 caregivers, including education, respite care, and access to  
214 information. Senior Solutions, working with Vermont Legal Aid,  
215 also provides services for prevention of abuse and neglect.”

216 Every three years, the state develops a state plan on  
217 aging, Boutwell said. In conjunction, Senior Solutions develops  
218 its own plan.

219 One of the most critical needs of elders today, and  
220 related to housing, is income.

221 “Vermont has the 10th highest cost of living in the  
222 country,” Boutwell said. “When you think about the population  
223 of older Vermonters who are challenged to live here and meet  
224 their expenses, that’s a heavy lift.”

225 The state is also one of the most rural in the country,  
226 making it “a challenging state to live in and give services to,” he  
227 said.

228 “And, if you think about it, it’s not a very big state  
229 compared to places like Wyoming or Alaska,” Boutwell said.  
230 “This designation of rural means that most of the population lives  
231 outside of municipal centers.”

232 Boutwell observed that from the details of its Meals on  
233 Wheels deliveries, the agency is aware “that so many Vermonters  
234 live out in the hills, out on dirt roads.”

235 “We know it’s a challenge to get into town, especially on  
236 snowy January days,” he said. “So Vermont is because of its rural  
237 nature.”

238 To make things even more difficult, Vermont ranks 18th  
239 highest state in the nation in falling incidents, Boutwell said. “So  
240 we’re above the above the average on fall incidents in Vermont,  
241 also on caregiver support and respite.”

242 In addition, Senior Services provides fraud and scam  
243 prevention. “We hear this more and more every day, about  
244 different ways our seniors are targeted,” he said.

245 Boutwell pointed out that almost 30,000 caregivers live  
246 in Vermont.

247 “And if you do the math in Windham County, that means  
248 there are 2,000 Vermonters in Windham County providing care to  
249 a loved one with dementia or Alzheimer’s disease,” he said.

250 “We need to reach out to those people. We need to  
251 provide services and supports. We all know what a challenge it is  
252 to provide care to a loved one. It’s 24/7. There’s hardly any  
253 respite, and so that’s a huge priority for me and Senior Solutions,  
254 to expand our caregiver services and supports in Windham  
255 County and supports.”

256 Senior Solutions needs to do more outreach, Boutwell  
257 said.

258 “We’ve seen the population figures, and we know that in  
259 Windham County, the poverty rate is about 11%,” he said. “That  
260 means that 1,200 older Vermonters in Windham County are  
261 living at or below federal poverty level.”

262 The federal poverty level for a couple is \$1,600 a month.

263 “That’s less than \$20,000 a year,” Boutwell said. “We  
264 have to reach those people. That’s always been my goal as  
265 executive director, to reach those people who are in need of our  
266 services.”

## 267 **Seniors in trouble**

268 Becky Best, Groundworks Collaborative’s director of  
269 shelters, amplified Boutwell’s remarks about elders falling into  
270 poverty.

271 “From 2020, to 2025, our data demonstrated a really  
272 significant and concerning increase in aging adults over 55 that  
273 are utilizing our drop-in center and overnight shelter services,”  
274 Best said.

275 In 2020, Groundworks served 24 clients in this age  
276 group, which represented 21% of the organization’s total client  
277 population, Best said.

278 By 2025, this number has more than doubled, to 56  
279 clients, now comprising 30% of its total clientele. The most

280 dramatic surge occurred between 2024 and 2025, with a 40%  
281 year over year increase, from 40 to 56 clients.

282 This upward trajectory in desperation may be terrifying  
283 and heartbreaking in itself, but it is also significant because as  
284 these older individuals experience higher levels of medical  
285 needs, substance use challenges, and mental health disorders,  
286 many become unable to maintain stability even within the shelter  
287 environment.

288 “When this occurs, they frequently do transition to  
289 unsheltered homelessness, at which point they require intensive  
290 intervention and support from our street outreach team, EMS  
291 services in Brattleboro, the police department, and Brattleboro  
292 Memorial Hospital,” Best said.

293 She added that the pattern “creates a cascading service  
294 demand, where our growing 55-plus population not only  
295 represents our current clients, but also provides a snapshot of  
296 Windham County’s overall aging population who will need  
297 continued support and care as their various conditions become  
298 increasingly complex.”

299 Groundworks’ street outreach team confirms the worst,  
300 Best said.

301 Their data showed, in 2025, that “we connected with 74  
302 unique individuals over the age of 55 who are experiencing  
303 literal homelessness,” Best said. “Thirty-four of those were living  
304 with chronic conditions such as COPD, arthritis, and diabetes.  
305 Thirty-one suffered from mobility issues ranging from limping to  
306 being wheelchair-bound.

307 “Additionally, 19 individuals reported struggling with  
308 active substance use disorder involving alcohol, drugs, or both,”  
309 she said. “And 46 reported suffering from mental health  
310 disorders. Twenty-two were living with developmental  
311 disabilities.”

312 These overlapping and compounding health challenges  
313 “underscore the critical need for this coordination and

314 collaboration, and we hope to be able to work together," she  
315 said.

316 Drew Hazelton, the chief of operations at Rescue Inc.,  
317 described the mobile integrated health program his organization  
318 runs in conjunction with Brattleboro Memorial Hospital. In this  
319 program, Rescue visits people in their homes after such serious  
320 illnesses that include surgery with congestive heart failure,  
321 COPD, and chronic pulmonary disease.

322 The visits save trips to hospital emergency departments  
323 and is helpful for patients and their families.

324 But the program is not funded, according to the hospital.  
325 It initially had some grant funding, but BMH, already strapped for  
326 cash, has been paying for it since the grant ran out.

327 Hazelton said that his responders, when they visit people  
328 at home, first ask if the patients have advanced directives for end-  
329 of-life care.

330 "In my professional experience, being at the bedside of  
331 patients in their homes who may have an unexpected medical  
332 condition," Hazelton said, "is that the family may not know what  
333 the patient's wishes are, or have conflicting understandings of  
334 what those wishes are. Conversations around advanced directives  
335 are extremely important. We are arriving at your home, but we  
336 are following the wishes of the patient.

337 "It's important that the family understands," Hazelton  
338 continued, noting "near-domestic disputes over whether care  
339 should be withheld or not during some very challenging times."

340 "So our advice is about family planning and discussion  
341 and making sure that your wishes are known," he said. "I think  
342 it's really, really important."

## 343 **For the future**

344 Chris Campany, the executive director of the Windham  
345 Regional Commission, emphasized the need for more planning  
346 for the elderly that includes input from younger people.

347 "I'm 59, and oftentimes when I'm meeting with town  
348 selectboards and planning commissions, I'm still the youngest  
349 person in the room," Company said.

350 "As part of our preparedness, we need to build a larger  
351 kind of can-do coalition between our aging population,  
352 oftentimes engaging with with older people who are decision-  
353 makers," he said.

354 "But then, frankly, we need to bring in younger people  
355 who also have the very same needs, like health care needs,  
356 housing needs, mobility needs, being able to better address the  
357 cost of living," he continued. "These are shared needs."

358 Company urged Windham Aging and its partners to meld  
359 the wisdom and knowledge of the elders with the needs of  
360 younger adults.

361 "When I'm working with different planning commissions  
362 and electors, often I'm hearing that because of the aging  
363 population, all the things that are needed can't be done because  
364 of fixed incomes," he said.

365 "But if we continue to divest and not invest in new things  
366 — just the basic infrastructure support, the basic things that we  
367 need — we're going to continue to lose ground as we continue to  
368 have an aging population," he added.

369 Company framed some questions.

370 "How do we go from talking about things to doing  
371 things? Is there a broader coalition? How can we go beyond  
372 talking about things and doing things by using intergenerational  
373 wisdom?" he said.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

374

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

375      #####BEGIN MAXISSUE#####  
0  
#####END MAXISSUE#####

LINKS:

376      #####BEGIN LINKS#####  
#####END LINKS#####

VIDEO:

377      #####BEGIN VIDEO#####  
#####END VIDEO#####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

378      #####BEGIN LOGLINE#####  
#####END LOGLINE#####