

Westerly Forms New Village

By Laurie Meisner



Left photo: Barbara Seith, Stevie Champion, Doug Champion of the Westerly Steering Committee. Right photo: Westerly residents gather for the launch of the Westerly Village. Photos by Phil West.

Many seniors in Westerly, like seniors everywhere, face increasing challenges staying in their own home and neighborhoods as they age. Many also feel isolation. The isolation was exacerbated by the recent pandemic, which virtually eliminated personal and social connections for a time. As life changes, friends, neighbors, and relatives relocate or pass away; many seniors find their home support and social connections change drastically. Our residents find themselves needing some help and a sense of purpose.

We know this not just instinctively, but from studies done of this area (via the 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment by the Hospital Association of RI) from which the Age-Friendly Westerly Initiative arose. Laurel Holmes, Westerly Hospital Director of Community Partnerships and Population Health, helped our Westerly Village Steering Committee understand the findings of this research. (She also is on the Board of the Village Common of Rhode Island). This research was reaffirmed in a supplemental follow-up study. The Westerly data shows:

- 24% of our seniors are widowed
- Another 13% live alone
- 24-38% reported (pre-pandemic, in 2018) feeling “somewhat, mostly or completely anxious,” with many of those saying they receive little or no social support.
- Transportation is a problem for many, followed by social isolation. Discussions with prospective members showed the need for some tech support and help with household chores.

All of this told us the village concept of seniors helping seniors here in Westerly was a really good idea. The challenge was to take that idea and turn it into reality. Outreach sessions were conducted by Sarah Cote, Sue Ogle, and Laurie Meisner, and The Westerly Village Steering Committee was formed. It is comprised of ten dedicated Westerly resident volunteers, as well as mentors Laurel Holmes, Sarah Cote, Suzanne Francis, and Nicole Woodward.

So far, we have recruited 34 volunteers and 25 members, and began services on July 1. On the July 25th, we had an in-person “launch party” to celebrate the opening of the Westerly Village!