

## Supporting Our Seniors

by Ed Schwing

Every municipality is empowered to provide help, support and special services to its senior citizens. The extent of those services varies from town to town, but generally includes the services of a municipal agent and a place for seniors to socialize and pursue activities they could not otherwise.

### **Municipal Agent for the Elderly**

By State Statute every Connecticut town is required to have a Municipal Agent for the Elderly to assist town residents ages 60 and over by providing information and referrals to local, state, and federal services and benefit programs. They are appointed by the Board of Selectmen for a two year term.

Municipal Agents are familiar with programs and benefits such as Medicare, Medicaid, SNAP (Food Stamps), Social Security, protective services, legal services, adult day care, housing, transportation, and local senior and community groups. Many also help seniors fill out application forms for benefits.

In Haddam, **Louise Chambers** has served as our Municipal Agent for many years and has such as witnessed many of the needs of the Haddam senior community.

“It is all a question of funding and priorities” said Chambers who is only paid for eight hours of work each week. “There is only so much one part time person can do.”

Chambers pointed out that bigger towns or cities have full time senior services departments coordinating programs, grants, funding requests, to better serve their senior population.

The Town of Madison, for example, has a Department of Senior Services with a full time staff, under the direction of the Senior Services Commission. The commission continuously

assesses the needs of seniors and provides direction in the development and implementation of programs and services for seniors, in collaboration with the community, regional and state agencies.

Another critical senior element that has been overlooked in Haddam according to Chambers is affordable senior housing.

“When you are on a fixed income living by yourself, owning a house takes a big chunk of your income,” said Chambers. “There should be affordable units available to older residents who want to stay in town and cannot afford the upscale retirement or assisted living communities.”

### **Senior Center**

Located at the Olde School House on Rt. 154, the Haddam Senior Center is open three days a week Monday, Wednesday and Friday, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

While in other towns senior centers are usually open all week long, Director **Fran Oktavec** noted that this was the way it had been originally set up in 2001. Asked if there were plans to have the center open every day, for longer hours, or expand the programs, Oktavec said this was not her decision to make and referred us to Louise Chambers.

Chambers indicated that bringing new programs or extending hours was not a simple proposition.

“Again it depends on town support, and what seniors want,” said Chambers. “State grants are still available for many programs, even in this downturn, but why have someone do all the work if in the end only one or two people will sign up for that program?”

Indeed attendance at the center has been dwindling over the years.

The fact that the center has only one common room compounds the problem, as it does not always allow for multiple activities to occur at the same time. Some seniors think that the town could do more to provide them with a center more responsive to their needs.

Rather than having their own senior center, some neighboring towns like Chester, Essex, Deep River and Killingworth have joined the Estuary Council of Seniors, with all programs and activities held in one location in Old Saybrook at the Regional Senior Center. Programs and activities run from 8 a.m. until after noon Monday through Saturday. Free transportation is provided.

In Haddam, according to the latest data, there are 2,752 residents 50 years of age and older and of those, 804 are 65 years and over. Caring for our seniors and giving them the resources, services and recreational opportunities to maintain a high quality of life should certainly be one of our priorities.

*What do you think? Let us know.*