

Testimony presented before the
United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

**Aging With Community:
Building Connections that Last a Lifetime Hearing**

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Good afternoon. Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. My name is Meg Callaway, and I direct the Thriving in Place Collaborative in Piscataquis County, Maine.

Piscataquis has Maine's second oldest population and it is the state's most rural region. It is one of only two frontier territories remaining east of the Mississippi River, with fewer than six people per square mile and a land mass the size of Connecticut. It is home to 17,000 people and 27,000 moose.

The Piscataquis Thriving in Place Collaborative is one of nine aging-in-community projects funded through the Maine Health Access Foundation's Thriving in Place (TiP) initiative. These grant-funded projects convene partners including municipal leaders, social service providers, healthcare professionals, local businesses, and volunteers to assess the regional needs of older and medically vulnerable adults and to implement strategies that help them to stay at home and engaged in their communities.

These projects serve rural communities, increasing access to such critical resources as housing, food, healthcare, transportation, socialization, and caregiver support. They accomplish this by building relationships and facilitating communication between community agencies and organizations to improve the coordination of existing community services and supports. Older

adult volunteers are engaged in all projects to ensure that their experiences and priorities shape the direction of TiP efforts.

While TiP projects share the goal of helping seniors remain engaged in their communities, their approaches vary. The situational needs of older adults on the rocky coast can be different from those of seniors living in the deep woods of Maine. The resources available to them can also be quite different. The success of the Thriving in Place initiative is largely due to the flexible funding the grants provide for communities to build on their own strengths and focus on the unique needs of their senior populations.

In Piscataquis County, a local farm provides fresh meals for seniors recovering from extended illness. Renovations are underway of an historic building that will house a senior center for independent older adults, and an adult day services program for seniors needing greater support. We now have a central phone number that anyone can call for help with locating senior services. When callers have complex medical needs, we offer them a home nursing visit to develop a plan of care. We have stocked local libraries with books and DVDs about aging and caregiving resources. Volunteers provide social connection and fresh produce to homebound seniors through our local Senior Companion and Senior FarmShare programs. Family caregivers receive respite services from our local hospice volunteers. In their down time, local emergency medical technicians check in on frail older patients.

The Aroostook County TiP, in rural northern Maine, has partnered with their nursing school and hospital, engaging nursing students to provide home-based assessments and post-discharge follow up. They visit to review discharge instructions and medications as well as deliver a supply of pre-made meals to assist seniors following a hospital stay. This collaborative program is yielding significant reductions in hospital readmissions.

TiP Downeast has established an in-home volunteer visiting program on the Blue Hill Peninsula and is working to bring evidence-based health programs deeper into rural, coastal areas. Both strategies aim to reduce hospital admissions and institutionalization.

Several TiP programs are educating their communities about the importance care transitions and completing advance care directives. As TiP aligns and promotes these essential resources, new more efficient ideas for engaging older adults and reducing isolation continue to emerge. These programs are actively demonstrating the power of community to keep seniors healthy, connected to their communities, and truly thriving in the place they call home.