

My small state of Maine, which juts out of the northeast corner of the United States, bordering Canada and bending toward Europe, is known for its unrivaled natural beauty and unmatched quality of life. Our pristine lakes, mighty rivers, rocky coast, working forests, fertile farmland, and picturesque downtowns draw millions of visitors every year.

But Maine also shines in ways visitors may not see when they first come to “Vacationland.” As a lifelong Mainer, I can tell you that our people are independent, strong willed, and, most of all, big hearted. We look out for one another — and we care deeply about our families and our communities.

Maine has the oldest population in the nation. If you, like some, react to that fact with sympathy for our graying state, I invite you instead to see it as we do: a unique opportunity.

In the dead of winter, when our days are shortest and temperatures coldest, when the roads are covered with snow and our streets are quiet, 67-year-old volunteer Candy Eaton abandons the warmth of home to drive her neighbors in the town of Sullivan to their doctors’ appointments. She also leads a sand-bucket brigade to make icy walkways safe for walking.

Like Candy, older adults across Maine spend much of their time taking care of others, contributing to their communities, and building our state. In Maine, people over age 50 start the largest percentage of new businesses and donate more to charities; they share their decades of experience with students searching for successful careers and, in exchange, they receive millennials’ guidance on navigating new technology.

Our older adults are valuable assets — key to diversifying our economy, strengthening our



Gov. Janet T. Mills signs executive order to fight elder abuse.

Maine has the oldest population in the nation. If you, like some, react to that fact with sympathy for our graying state, I invite you instead to see it as we do: a unique opportunity.

workforce, and creating a brighter future for our state. But we must overcome obstacles that stand in the way of their success.

Every day some struggle to steer wheelchairs through narrow hallways or climb steep stairs with aching knees. Some are breaking pills into smaller doses to stretch the medicine they need or putting on another sweater to avoid turning up the heat. Some are losing their savings to sweet-talking scammers.

Maine's people are big hearted, but it takes more than compassionate volunteers to address the barriers that prevent older residents from living safely in the homes and communities they love.

Under my administration, Maine is taking steps to knock those barriers down.

We released \$15 million in voter-approved bonds to build new affordable homes for older adults and to modify, repair, and weatherize existing homes. We provided direct property tax relief for hundreds of thousands of Maine residents and enacted the Maine Affordable Housing Tax Credit program to double the construction rate of new affordable housing. Thirty percent of that credit is directed toward senior housing.

We established the Elder Justice Coordinating Partnership to combat abuse of older adults. We restored a program to make prescription medications affordable for older Mainers and enacted laws to allow the wholesale importation of prescription medicine, create a prescription drug affordability board, increase drug price transparency, and better regulate pharmacy benefit managers.

With the help of AARP Maine, we are taking a novel approach to how people grow older in our rural state — one that finds its roots in AARP's Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities.

It is a story that dates back to 2014, when Portland and Ellsworth, two beautiful coastal cities, became the first communities in Maine to join this network. It did not take long for that participation to ignite interest across our state. By the end of 2016, Maine celebrated 22 communities in the network. That number doubled by the end of 2017, and by the end of 2019, Maine boasted 70 communities in the network.

Although that number is remarkable, what is truly noteworthy is the dedication of volunteers like Candy Eaton, community leaders, state

agencies, local businesses, and town officials — often individuals who themselves are 50 and older — that made that achievement possible.

It was as a direct result of their efforts that I stood with AARP last year as it welcomed the entire state of Maine into the Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities. This designation unlocks critical data and technical advice as well as new resources and organizing tools to help us serve every generation. We can learn from other communities and other states. As Candy herself said recently, “We don’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

The Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities designation also recognizes our state’s commitment to developing a statewide action plan to create communities with walkable streets, safe and affordable housing, appropriate transportation, and access to important services.

Now my administration — from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Department of Public Safety and others — is collaborating with AARP to begin deploying that plan by the end of 2021.

The Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities is also helping new age-friendly initiatives in Maine take root through the AARP Community Challenge Grant Program. The program supports Maine towns as they adopt and implement innovative programs that benefit not only older Mainers but Mainers of all ages, through such improvements as the installation of new road signs for the safety of pedestrians; the building of community table gardens set at different heights so people of any age, ability, or height can grow vegetables; or the availability of special mats so that residents who use scooters or wheelchairs can enjoy our beautiful beaches.



Joined by AARP Maine, Governor Mills announces Maine’s official designation as an Age-Friendly State.



Gov. Janet T. Mills signs senior housing bond in 2019.

Our older adults are valuable assets — key to diversifying our economy, strengthening our workforce, and creating a brighter future for our state. But we must overcome obstacles that stand in the way of their success.

These measures may be small, but they can make an enormous difference in the lives of both young and older Mainers.

There is more to do. For older adults living in far-flung communities across a rural state, isolation can be challenging. Older adults who are isolated are more likely to miss medical appointments and less likely to reach out for services they qualify for, such as Meals on Wheels. They are also more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The cure for isolation is human connection. Expanding access to high-speed Internet will allow older Mainers, no matter how remote, to stay connected to their loved ones and their health care providers. I have asked members of our legislature to provide at least \$15 million to kick-start that expansion, and I hope they will approve that bond.

Thanks to AARP and the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities, we are addressing challenges and building on our successes to create an age-friendly state, a state that greets people of all ages at its borders with a sign that reads “Welcome Home.” After all, Maine is worth more than just a visit: we are worth a lifetime. ●



Janet T. Mills
Governor
State of Maine
United States