

New center gives seniors room to stretch: Hundreds turn out for grand opening

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Esther Budgar, center foreground, and Florence Dmytryk, both of Northampton, view the exhibit "Neighbor to Neighbor - Life After 60" by photographer Michael Jacobson-Hardy in the hallway of the Northampton Senior Center during its grand opening Sunday. At left is a portrait of Elizabeth Tudryn working at Stop & Shop.

NORTHAMPTON - In 1996, a group of 10 decided to find out what it would take to replace their small, overcrowded, inefficient senior center. Eleven years later, Dorothy Newman, a member of that group, stood next to Northampton's oldest resident, Rosina Rogers, 102, as Rogers cut the blue ribbon that marked Sunday's grand opening of the Northampton Senior Center.

Group members took trips to other senior centers to see what they wanted. They visited centers in Pittsfield, Hadley, Chicopee and Holyoke.

'Everybody had more than we had, that's for sure,' Newman said. 'It was a matter of putting what we saw into what we wanted. Now, we're on top.'

Nearly 1,300 people came out for the grand opening, according to Sandra Pickett, Elder Vision editor for the Northampton Council on Aging.

'It's unbelievable that we're finally here,' said Newman, 77. 'We had no room in the old hall. It was just a center to meet seniors' needs - it wasn't a center for socializing.'

The event started with a flag-raising ceremony that 120 people attended. The flag pole and flag are a gift from Jane and Leo Goyette.

'The first sign of a new building is the flag raising,' said Patricia Shaughnessy, director of the Northampton Council on Aging.

The new building is 18,500 square feet; the old center was about 5,000 square feet, according to Shaughnessy.

'We were basically a department within a building,' Shaughnessy said. 'We came from a place smaller than our new lobby.'

Northampton has nearly 5,000 seniors, 2,200 of whom are active participants in the center, Shaughnessy said.

'We expect that number to really increase now,' Shaughnessy said.

The old senior center had six offices, three computers, five parking spaces and a small conference room.

'Parking kept people away,' Newman said. 'And there wasn't enough room for the sewing group, so they did a lot of their work at home.'

The new senior center has a lobby, social day care, dining room, kitchen, eight offices, games room, library, classroom, fitness center, medical center, two multipurpose rooms, five storage rooms, six bathrooms, 15 computers in the computer lab, 73 parking spaces and a coffee shop, which is giving out free coffee today.

'Having a public building like this doesn't get much better,' said Emmett H. Schmarsow, program manager for Massachusetts Councils of Aging and Senior Centers. 'The old building was like trying to put 10 pounds of flour into a one-pound package.'

The building is designed with glass walls and yellow, pink and green decor.

'This has more open space than any other senior center I've ever been in,' Schmarsow said. 'The see-through walls are good because you want people to see other people. That's why they come here.'

He has visited nearly all the 300 senior centers that serve Massachusetts seniors, a population expected to double by 2030, Schmarsow noted.

'My observation is that senior centers are opportunity centers,' Schmarsow said. 'Age is a perception. It has everything to do with how and what we do.'

Speakers at the welcoming ceremony included City Council president Michael Bardsley, Senior Center Building Committee co-chairs Marilyn Richards and Michael Ahearn, Northampton Housing Authority Chairman Joseph DeFazio, Northampton Council on Aging director Patricia Shaughnessy, Senior Center Building project manager Michael Owens, and Mayor Clare Higgins, who always said 'I told you I'm behind you,' according to Ahearn.

Nearly \$325,000 was raised for the project, said Shaughnessy, who was handed a number of additional checks Sunday.

'We can't wait to use this building to our fullest,' Shaughnessy said.