



Waltham Connections
for Healthy Aging

**Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging
2023 Annual Report**

Summary

Waltham Connections completed its seventh year of operations in calendar year 2023.¹ We continued and expanded our recent work in four areas:

- Providing free computers, training and wifi to low-income Waltham seniors through the Welcome to the Digital Age (WDA) program,
- Supporting outreach to Ugandan and Spanish-speaking seniors,
- Organizing inter-generational programs linking Waltham seniors to high school and college youth, and
- Improving accessibility in transportation in the form of adding benches to bus stops in the downtown areas of Waltham.

The primary support for these efforts came from grants of federal Title III funds from Springwell, supplemented by discretionary funds from our 2020 grant from the Tufts Health Plan Foundation, as well as donated time from Connections volunteers.

Late in the year we learned of the resignation of Marybeth Duffy (effective early January 2024), the long-time Director of the Waltham Council on Aging. Marybeth has been a strong and invaluable supporter of Connections since our founding and has served since then on our Coordinating Committee. Her wisdom, experience, commitment, and humor will be missed.

Grants/funding

Connections has been supported by Tufts Health Plan Foundation for all of our seven years, the most recent a two-year \$100,000 grant starting in July 2020. When the pandemic hit in that spring Tufts allowed us to spend the funds based on our own assessment of needs. In 2023 we continued to use the funds to supplement other grants as well as to support activities not otherwise funded. We have been successful enough with other funding to allow us to start 2023 with about \$63,000 in Tufts funds in the bank. We spent about \$14,000 and ended 2023 with about \$49,000.

¹ See our website: [Walthamconnections.org](https://walthamconnections.org)

Grants of federal Title III funds through Springwell continued to be Connections' major recent source of funding, including:

- For WDA - \$10,000 for 10/1/22-9/30/23 and a new grant for \$8,500 for 10/1/23-9/30/24. We budgeted for an additional \$2,363 in matching funds and volunteer in-kind for the first period and \$4,265 for the second period. We also received 20 Chromebook computers at no cost from Tech Goes Home for the second period.
- For outreach - \$8,500 for 10/1/22-9/30/23 and a new grant of \$15,000 for 10/1/23-9/30/24. We budgeted \$24,618 in Tufts matching funds and volunteer in-kind in the first period and \$18,086 in the second period. The outreach workers put in fewer hours than budgeted so we did not spend all of the budgeted matching funds.
- Special summer grant – In the spring of 2023 Springwell informed us that they could provide \$14,253 of American Rescue Act funds to be spent by 9/30/23 to support outreach to Ugandan and Latino seniors in Waltham. We used it to pay for outreach workers, outreach events, establishment of the Ugandan outreach worker at African Cultural Services of Waltham (Africano), purchase of a Sages and Seekers curriculum (intergenerational work), purchase of Chromebooks for a Ugandan WDA class, and time for the Connections Program Manager.
- Totaling the portions of Springwell grants allocated to the 2023 calendar year, we received \$36,503 for Connections programs.

Program areas

- Welcome to the Digital Age

We offered three WDA classes in 2023: two “refresher” courses in the spring for prior graduates and a regular course for 10 new students in the fall. The refresher course was created because we learned that many graduates wanted more help with both basics and more advanced skills. Of the 27 graduates who were reached to offer the course, 24 said they would like to participate. Twenty did in two separate cohorts in March and May consisting of 5 classes (10 hours).

We conducted an evaluation of the refresher course consisting of qualitative interviews of 8 participants in the first-round classes (Attachment 1). We found that five were using their Chromebooks only “a little” before the refresher and that they reported satisfaction from the class in reaching their goals to learn applications and use the internet for shopping and information. Here’s how one Spanish-speaking participant put it:

“I want to say how grateful I am for giving me the opportunity to learn. There is no age for learning. We didn’t know where to go to get the knowledge. Now we know.

Browsing the Internet, computing, is great for an older person. It is my wish to learn English and with this computer I have found programs to do that.”

The evaluation also found that the classes had the added benefit of making them feel more comfortable at the Senior Center.

Finally, we also prepared the way for a WDA class for Ugandan seniors. Prior classes had only one Ugandan participant, despite efforts to reach out to Ugandans through Africano. When we hired and placed the new outreach worker at Africano in June we soon gained insight into how to create a targeted class, including coordinating the class time with the Tuesday “salon” meetings of Ugandan seniors, offering transportation by Africano from Africano to the Senior Center, and finding an assistant instructor who speaks Luganda, the language in which Ugandan seniors feel most comfortable. We used funds from the Springwell summer grant to purchase ten Chromebooks. In the fall we found and began training a Ugandan instructor. In December we enrolled ten seniors and will begin the class at the Senior Center in February 2024.

- Outreach

Latin outreach: We had important transitions in our outreach efforts in 2023. First, Laura San Juan, the long-time Connections volunteer who became the paid outreach worker in 2022 had to pull back in spring of 2023. In June we found and hired Maria Carvalho to replace her. Maria brings experience as a medical social worker and also a SHINE counselor. She speaks English, Spanish and Portuguese. Laura has continued to provide active volunteer support with Latinos, as well as serving on the Connections Coordinating Committee.

The success of outreach efforts to Spanish speakers became manifest in 2023. One leg of the stool has been the WDA classes, where more than half the students have been Spanish speakers. Word of mouth has helped build the WDA enrollment and also increased use of the Senior Center. Maria’s social work skills have shown in the help she has provided to individuals. Our internal report on her 4th quarter 2023 activities provides examples:

- Assisting seniors who need legal advice and support (meetings with the Waltham TRIAD Officer, helping seniors to draft notes to bring to legal hearings, being with them when the hearings happen).
- Assisting and referring seniors who need advice on Immigration matters to "A Right to Citizenship.
- Providing or arranging rides when the CoA shuttles are not available.
- Helping seniors draft their resumes when looking for employment.
- Calling doctors’ offices to make sure they will have interpreters available when their appointments take place.
- Advice on health insurance (her SHINE role).

The worker was also active in outreach to agencies, including St. Mary's Church, Springwell, Waltham Housing, and WATCH.

Another part of the outreach work that brings seniors to the Senior Center is events. Fall events included a celebration of Latino Heritage Month, presentations in Spanish by the Alzheimer's Association (about dementia) and 2Life Communities (to help enter the lottery for the affordable housing being built next to the Senior Center), an intergenerational holiday event, and the creation of a weekly coffee hour at CoA for Spanish speakers.

Future plans include offering Spanish movies, excursions, forming a group of volunteers, English classes, craft classes, dancing lessons, and teaming up with a group of Anglo seniors who are involved in Spanish conversational classes at the Senior Center.

Ugandan outreach: The second outreach transition in 2023 was the hiring in June of a new Ugandan outreach worker, Jolly Kabatoro, to replace the prior worker who resigned in the spring. We decided to base Jolly at Africano Cultural Services Waltham (Africano) rather than the CoA to take advantage of Africano's ties with and service to the large Ugandan community in the Waltham area. Africano is a long-time agency partner of Connections (Walter Leutz, the Connections co-founder, is a former Africano Board President, and Maria DiMaggio, who manages the Healthy Waltham food pantry, is current Board President).

Jolly brings experience as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) and volunteer at the Boston Medical Center's Immigrant & Refugee Health Center. We used funds from the Springwell "summer grant" to help Africano staff take on the role of hosting Connections outreach work, including establishing closer ties to CoA staff and services and reaching out to Ugandan seniors to bring them together to talk about their needs and interests and how to serve them.

Our internal reports on 3rd and 4th quarter activities found that outreach efforts revolved around establishing the "salon" for Ugandan seniors. It initially was set at a beauty salon serving Ugandans, meeting every Tuesday for several hours (without the requirement to use salon services). It is mostly a social gathering, but it also includes education and connections with services, e.g., they hosted a speaker about childcare (a family obligation of many Ugandan seniors) as well as the Director of the Waltham CoA. Communication with the group is through WhatsApp (widely used by local Ugandans) and there were more than 35 in the "Golden Years" WhatsApp group by the end of the summer.

By the fall the group was too large to meet at the actual salon, so weekly Tuesday meetings (from about 10AM-2PM) were moved to Africano. Activities include exercise; traditional crafts, singing, dancing and food; trips and outside speakers. There are also two intergenerational activities going on in collaboration with two local colleges (see below under Intergen).

Jolly also assists individuals to access health care, legal help, housing, etc. Some individuals are helped directly (e.g., taking them to the BMC immigrant health center and helping with interpretation), while others are connected to Senior Center staff. She also

worked to convince members of the Golden Years group that they could enroll and be successful in the Ugandan WDA class. Jolly is taking the class herself along with 9 other seniors. It will meet at the CoA starting in February on Tuesdays after the regular gathering. Transportation will be provided in the Africano van. Africano identified a Luganda-speaking graduate student to be an assistant instructor for the class. Ugandan seniors generally speak English, but they are much more comfortable in Luganda.

Jolly and other Africano staff and volunteers also assist Ugandan seniors to access food through the semi-weekly Africano food pantry (held at Africano in collaboration with Healthy Waltham's large pantry). Africano publicizes the pantry and assists seniors with transportation if they cannot carry food home by themselves. Jolly also brings pantry food to seniors who cannot make it to the pantry at all.

Finally, the Ugandan outreach effort is reaching seniors who live in nearby communities as well as seniors from Waltham. Waltham is the center of the region's Ugandan religious, commercial, and cultural life (it is called "little Kampala"), and Ugandans of all ages come to Africano from surrounding towns. Jolly includes them in the Salon and her individual services and WDA, but the Waltham CoA cannot provide them with individual social work or case management. Jolly (who lives in Belmont) has ties to the senior center there and refers Ugandan seniors for help. We are working on creating similar ties with other area senior centers to facilitate successful referrals.

- Intergenerational

Connections learned of Waltham seniors' interest in intergenerational activities at our 2022 Waltham Healthy Aging Summit. Attendees cited benefits for youth, older adults, and the community. Since the Summit, Connections facilitated the creating of an intergen planning group of seniors, which meets monthly. The group learned about the Sages and Seekers program that connects seniors and high school youth, and in the spring of 2023 the Rivers School in Weston invited seven Waltham seniors to join their Sages and Seekers program. Participants on both sides enjoyed the experience, although arranging travel to Weston was a challenge for some participants.

The intergen planning group recommended that we use funds from the Springwell "summer grant" to purchase the Sages and Seekers curriculum so that the program could be based in Waltham. They also committed to use the curriculum to find ways to extend intergen activities to Spanish-speaking and Ugandan communities.

A direct implementation of the Sages and Seekers program has been developed with Bentley University's Service Learning program. In February and March 2023, 14 Waltham sages (older adults) will link weekly with Bentley University students (seekers) at the Waltham CoA. Pilot intergenerational programming for Latino and Ugandan seniors is also underway in the form of intergenerational "pop-ups," including the intergenerational holiday party for Latinos mentioned under Outreach above.

Intergenerational activities with Ugandan seniors developed independently at Africano during the year in the form of two university partnerships. One was an 11-week partnership with a Brandeis professor from Ivory coast collecting “stories we carry in our suitcases.” Seniors told their stories to Brandeis students, who recorded the stories and gave them back. Another was funded by Northeastern called “trained in reckonings.” The University works with a community organization that wants to tell its story. Africano helped organize eight groups of grandparents (jaja’s), parents, and high school students. Northeastern students interviewed and wrote up the stories.

- Benches

At the 2022 Healthy Aging Summit, we identified the need for more benches at Waltham bus stops, particularly in the downtown sections of Main and Moody Streets. After the Summit, Connections senior volunteers and representatives of the Brandeis students with disabilities group explored the extent of the problem and found that only 27% of bus stops had benches, making it difficult for seniors and others with mobility difficulties to use public transport. We sent a request for more benches to the Waltham Department of Public Works, and cc’d Mayor McCarthy, who suggested we present the case to the Waltham Disabilities Services Commission. We did so several times in late 2022 and early 2023, resulting in a recommendation from the Commission in February 2023 to re-install 6 benches that were found in DPW storage and to add 5 benches to be paid for from Commission funds.

In order to make specific recommendations, the Connections group surveyed the downtown bus routes and identified many instances where MBTA maps of stops did not match actual stops in terms of signs on poles and in the street, particularly along Main Street. We met with the head of the Traffic Engineering Department in the summer and learned that the MBTA was in the process of relocating many Main Street stops, a task that would be completed by September.

Given the timing we decided to go forward with our recommendations for placing the 11 available benches on the Moody/Crescent line as well as at staggered spots on the sometimes-closed commercial section of Moody, where buses no longer run. We submitted the recommendations to the Commission in the fall and cc’d the Mayor. She responded in October that the City would contact the MBTA to learn their plans for stops and that there should be “a minimum of one bench per bus stop.” The proposal went to a City Council Committee. As of late February the Mayor was checking on the status of the proposal.



Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging

Report on Welcome to the Digital Age (WDA) Refresher Course Interviews Waltham Connections for Healthy Aging July 2023

Overview

Since early 2021 Waltham Connections has offered a free Chromebook computer, internet connection, and training to use both to Waltham older adults who cannot not afford them. The program is called Welcome to the Digital Age (WDA) and has been offered in collaboration with Tech Goes Home and with support from grants from McLean Hospital, Springwell, and Tufts Health Plan Foundation. Fifty-five Waltham seniors have graduated in four offerings of the class between spring 2021 and fall 2022. In early 2023 the WDA team decided to offer a “refresher” course to past graduates.

Of the 27 graduates who were reached for the refresher course, 24 said they would like to take it (One said No and two said Maybe). Ten started the five-session (10 hour) class in March, and another 10 took the course in May-June. Most of the refresher participants were from the first WDA class, which presented significant challenges for instructors and students, since initial instruction was on zoom – before many of the students had learned to use their computers, including most importantly being able to access the internet and sign into zoom. Toward the middle of the course, in-person workarounds were developed (instructors’ going to students’ homes, a small class in a common room at a senior housing site), but the class ended before some of the students were competent.

This report is based on qualitative interviews with 8 of the first-round participants. Getting only 8 was a function of low attendance on the days of the interviews and also a couple who did not want to be interviewed. The largely open-ended interview tool (attached) asked about participants’ use of their Chromebooks prior to the refresher class, their expectations for the refresher course, whether the course was meeting their expectations, whether WDA had changed their relationship with the Waltham senior center, and best things and final thoughts about the class so far.

Throughout the WDA classes, about half of the participants have been Spanish speakers. The classes have been conducted in English with simultaneous translation of instruction, printed translation of materials, and individual assistance in Spanish and English. The interviews with Spanish speakers were conducted in Spanish with translation into English question by question.

Findings

The table below summarizes the participants and their answers to some of the top-level questions.

Gender, age, nationality	Use of Chromebook before refresher class	Main goal for the class	Have you learned what you wanted?
Male, 77, El Salvador and Honduras	A lot	Learn zoom	Yes – and using it
Female, 63, Guatemala	A little	Learn applications	Yes
Female, 71, Guatemala	A little	Use it for more things	Yes
Male, 72, Guatemala	A little	Use the internet to do things	Yes and wants to learn more
Female, 65, US	A little	Learn more about computers	Yes – typing, letter writing
Female, 88, US	A little	Learn more and use it more	Use Google, translate to Italian
Female, 65, US	Some	Get more skilled	Yes - Icons, bullets, moving text
Female, 75, Venezuela	A lot	Get more skills	Yes – using colored letters, etc.

Respondent characteristics

Five of the eight respondents were Spanish-speaking immigrants from South and Central America and three were US-born. Six were female and two male. Ages ranged from 63 to 88, with most in their 70's. Two of the class members on the days of the interviews chose not to be interviewed.

Chromebook use prior to the refresher class and hopes for the class

Two of the respondents was using his Chromebook “a lot” before the refresher class, one was using it “some,” while five were using theirs only “a little.” Clearly it was a good idea to offer the class.

A man who was using his computer “a lot” reported that he had no knowledge of computers before the class and that the class seemed “experimental” (he took the first class in the pandemic.) Nevertheless, he learned enough to be using his computer “for medical things - like find addresses when my doctor sends me to the clinic - where to go for things. I look for news about my countries.” He took the refresher to learn to use zoom.

The woman who was using the computer “some” said: “It’s my companion from when I wake up and I keep it next to me when I sleep.” She took class “to get to know my Chromebook even better.”

At least one of the five using their computers “a little” was affected by the pandemic raging in the first round of classes, e.g., “I was a pandemic student but didn’t learn enough. I tried to practice on my own, but I couldn’t even get to the page where I could choose the applications.” Another simply reported, “I didn’t know how to use it.” Reasons for taking the course among those using their computers “a little” included “I hadn’t learned enough” - “to learn more and use it more” - “to learn how to do my banking and bills.”

Did they learn what they wanted and “best parts”

All 8 responded that they “learned what they wanted.” The third column of the table shows that what they wanted included learning skills, how to use the internet, about their computer, and applications. The last column of the table gives some more specific items. Here are some quotes from the interviews:

Here are quotes from two Spanish-speaking women who learned only a little first round:

- “I want to say how grateful I am for giving me the opportunity to learn. There is no age for learning. We didn’t know where to go to get the knowledge. Now we know. Browsing the Internet, computing, is great for an older person. It is my wish to learn English and with this computer I have found programs to do that.”
- Her favorite part of the class: “There’s a quiz at the end and I want to do well. (Instructor comments: “She does very well.”) I feel good. Because when I was back in my country I didn’t like school. I just got to 4th grade and was punished because of my poor performance. I really enjoy doing well in this class..... Thanks. To the senior center and instructors who helped us so much.”

Here’s one from a native English speaker:

- “I brag to my friends, I can use Google to find information and “go” anywhere in the world and to translate to Italian. I also want to learn how to save info from a thumb drive on my computer. I just got a new TV – it’s a smart TV. I want to learn about apps.”

Relationship to the Senior Center

At the end of the interviews we asked participants whether taking the classes had changed their relationship with the Waltham Senior Center. Nearly everyone said yes and in a positive way.

Here are quotes from three Spanish-speaking seniors:

- “Yes. I found out about services I didn’t know about. Food & nutrition. Transportation to my doctor... I’ve met many people from this organization who have been very kind. I haven’t used all the services yet but I know they’re there.
- She feels “more comfortable.... In 20 years I never knew about this place. Everyone we’ve met here has been very kind.”
- “Yes. At least we know there is hope that there are people who will help us.”

And two English-speaking seniors:

- “It has! I never came for anything. Now I check the newsletter.”
- “YES – I’ve gotten shots here, the senior center van takes me to the doctor. Everyone is so nice. I love coming here and I tell people that. I moved here because I got into housing here in Waltham. I’m not from Waltham and I didn’t know anyone here, but I love it here. Everyone I meet is so kind and friendly.”

Summary

Twenty of 55 seniors who took first-round WDA classes were interested in and took the refresher class. Five of the 8 that we interviewed were using their Chromebooks only “a little” before the refresher, where they hoped to learn more about using their computers, the internet, applications like zoom, how to search for information, shopping, and bill paying. The respondents reported satisfaction in reaching these kinds of goals.

Another benefit of the class was helping these seniors learn more about and feel comfortable in the Waltham senior center. Improving connections with the CoA is especially significant for the Spanish-speaking seniors, who reported in focus groups conducted by Connections in 2015 and 2017 that not having Spanish-speaking staff or materials was a barrier. That barrier has been addressed by Connections initiatives in 2019 to translate the monthly CoA newsletter into Spanish, and the hiring of Spanish outreach workers for the last two years. A Spanish focus group we conducted in 2022 found better CoA connections in the group than in earlier focus groups, showing perhaps the results of outreach efforts. We knew from seeing WDA graduates access other senior center services that the program was helping with outreach. It’s good to hear participants describe it in their own words.

Attachment: Interview questions

WDA Review class series
Interview questions (asked prior to class 4 of 5)
May 2023

Thanks for participating in this brief evaluation of the WDA program. We will use what we learn to improve and promote the program. Please know that we will not use your name in anything we write or say. Your answers are confidential. Is it OK to go ahead?

1. Before these classes, would you say you were using your Chromebook?
 - a. A lot
 - b. Some
 - c. A little
 - d. Not at all
 - If a little or not at all, why?
 - If a lot or some, what were you using it for?
2. Why did you want to take this class series?
3. Have you learned what you wanted to learn?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to learn about before this class series ends (2 more classes to go)?
5. What has been the best part about this class series?
6. Has this changed your relationship with the senior center, e.g., do you know more about it? Feel more comfortable?
7. Do you have anything else to add?