

**Identifying and Addressing the Needs of Morris Township's Seniors:
A Report on the Findings of a 2023 Needs Survey and Focus Group Event
Conducted by Morris Township's Senior Citizens Advisory Committee (SCAC)**

**Written by Cathy Wilson, SCAC Chair
December 15, 2023**

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Acknowledgements

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- SCAC's 2023 Members
- Facilitators, Scribes, and Other Volunteers Who Helped with the Focus Group Event
- Survey Respondents and Focus Group Participants

A Report on the Findings of SCAC's 2023 Needs Survey and Focus Group Event

Introduction

Per its founding [Ordinance](#), SCAC was formed to “make recommendations to the Township Committee regarding the needs of senior citizens and assist in fulfilling those needs - especially in the areas of transportation, housing, medical care, and related issues affecting seniors.”

Since its first meeting in April 2022, SCAC has been focused on fulfilling that mission. Over the past two years, SCAC members have spent countless hours researching information from a wide variety of sources (in-house, other towns, all levels of government – county/state/federal, universities, and many community organizations).

In 2023, a centerpiece of SCAC's work was to gather direct input from seniors who live in Morris Township. SCAC chose to gather this input in two main ways: by conducting a Needs Survey and a Focus Group Event.

This report:

- Explains how the Needs Survey and Focus Group Event were developed and conducted.
- Provides links to the raw data from both.
- Identifies and clarifies the needs that emerge from analyzing the Survey and Focus Groups results.
- Outlines advisory recommendations for addressing the needs of Morris Township's seniors.

Needs Survey: Background and Results

As a first step in developing a survey for use with our residents, SCAC established a sub-committee led by Noel Robinson. This Survey Committee worked offline (through meetings, emails, and calls) to gather information about survey-development options.

After much deliberation, SCAC decided to create a “hybrid” survey of its own. Beginning with a recent survey utilized by Morris County, SCAC tweaked that survey; incorporated input from our Health Department and our Parks & Rec Department; and mixed those suggestions with additional input from SCAC's own members.

Thanks to the “tech magic” work of Virginia Murphy, SCAC's newly developed Needs Survey was posted electronically in early February 2023. Several Messenger emails were sent highlighting the purpose and availability of the survey. Articles were also shared in the press. In addition, SCAC members distributed hard copies of the survey at several in-person gatherings – including at Morris Mews, the Seniors Club, and several seniors' classes.

When the Survey closed at the beginning of April, responses had come in from 589 seniors who live in Morris Township. SCAC was pleased with this result. Their goal was to obtain 500 responses (which is the response number Morris County obtained after distributing its survey county-wide.)

The survey results are posted on SCAC's section of the Township's website. To view those results, click [HERE](#).

Key findings are found in the responses to the final question. That question asked respondents to identify “Which of the following topics/services are most important to you?” The top five responses to that question (and the number of people who selected it) include:

- Exercise Programs (312)

- Repairs (minor) and Handyman Help (298)
- Social & Recreational Activities (283)
- Trips for Seniors (199)
- Volunteer Opportunities (194)

The responses to this final question were particularly helpful to SCAC as they worked to craft their approach to organizing the Focus Group Event.

Focus Group Event: Background and Results

SCAC was committed from the outset to the importance of supplementing the survey results with input obtained through focus group discussions. They knew that from a resident-perspective, answering written survey questions is a very different input-experience than discussing your thoughts with others in a small group setting. SCAC wanted to ensure that our residents had access to both options. SCAC itself also wanted access to both types of input as they worked to accomplish their mission of crafting well-informed advisory recommendations.

As with the survey, Noel Robinson led a sub-group that spent a great deal of time working offline from SCAC's regular meetings to develop plans for making SCAC's Focus Group Event come to life.

An important planning resource for SCAC was the prior experience of Morris Township's Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC). In 2022, EDAC had great success gathering input from the community by using a similar approach (written survey followed by a focus group event). EDAC's experience was an invaluable source of guidance for SCAC.

As compared to EDAC's model, an important difference in SCAC's approach was that, because so many seniors are tech-challenged and reluctant to drive at night, SCAC wanted to hold its Focus Group Event in person and during daytime hours. Creating space during business hours for multiple numbers of people to meet in small group settings raised many logistical challenges. Business Administrator, Tim Quinn, was very helpful in resolving these issues.

One of the most challenging aspects of planning the Focus Group Event was deciding how to structure the questions. Which topics to focus on? How many questions? How to phrase them? How to connect the focus group questions with the survey results?

Related challenges included: how to enlist volunteers to assist with facilitating the small group discussions and recording the results? How to train these volunteers?

The Focus Group Committee spent many hours planning and addressing every issue that needed attention.

In the end, 41 residents came to Town Hall on the afternoon of October 10, 2023, and discussed in small groups of 8-10 people their thoughts in response to the following questions:

1. Think about some factors (services, opportunities, community characteristics) that contribute to a positive quality of life for older adults in our Township. What suggestions do you have for actions,

programs or services that would better address the needs and interests of Morris Township's seniors?

2. What are the strengths of the social/recreational and educational activities in the Township? What would you suggest be added or changed?
3. If the Township provided transportation for seniors, for what would you use it? In five years do you see yourself needing transportation to live in Morris Township?
4. What additional topics would you like to bring to SCAC's attention that better address the needs and interests of Morris Township Seniors?

On the day of the event, after brief opening remarks, participants broke into five small groups, each of which was led by volunteers who had agreed to serve as facilitators and scribes. Facilitators led the discussions. Scribes recorded the results. Afterwards, when everyone reconvened in the big meeting room, each scribe shared their group's responses to these questions. Donna Guariglia recorded the combined results of all groups on a whiteboard that everyone could see.

The notes from each of the five scribes along with Donna's "whiteboard summary" (all of which are posted on SCAC's portion of the Township's website) can be viewed [HERE](#). These notes were shared with SCAC members as well as the facilitators and scribes.

SCAC's Review of the Survey and Focus Group Results

On November 27, 2023, SCAC held its last meeting of the year. A key focus of that meeting was for SCAC members to begin the work of converting the large volume of input they had gathered into advisory recommendations.

Given that the facilitators and scribes had played such a key role in collecting and recording that data, they were invited to join SCAC's 11/27 discussion as well.

To assist in this effort, SCAC Chair, Cathy Wilson, wrote and shared a draft of this report with SCAC members as well as facilitators and scribes prior to SCAC's 11/27 meeting.

Identifying and Clarifying the Needs of Morris Township's Seniors

A review of the Survey and the Focus Group data leads to several "big picture" observations about the needs and interests of Morris Township's seniors:

1) Widespread Lack of Awareness of Resources that Already Exist

- Throughout discussions of many different topics, a common pattern emerged: repeated instances of seniors expressing needs or making suggestions for resources, information, or activities that ALREADY EXIST, but they do not know about. Examples include:

→ Many seniors who attended the Focus Group Event were unaware of the Township's email system (the Municipal Messenger). None were aware of SCAC's newly established presence on the Township's Website (which includes links to numerous resources frequently cited by seniors as topics of interest.)

- Many focus group participants suggested activities such as cards, Mahjong, book groups, and exercise classes that would be of interest to them. They were not aware that many of these activities are already offered now or have been offered in the past.
- “Trips for Seniors” ranked among the top five topics of interest to Survey respondents and was also brought up as a topic of interest at the Focus Group Event. Many seniors are not aware of the impressive assortment of trip options that are led by members of the Morris Township Seniors Club and are open to any senior who lives in Morris Township.

2) **Problems with Communication and Technology**

- Communication was energetically cited as the TOP CONCERN of all focus groups. Many people said they feel like they don’t know what’s going on. They feel out of touch. They want more information, but they don’t know how to get it. Widespread awareness of the overlap between communication and technology.
- Many cited technology as a major source of personal difficulty and frustration.
 - Many expressed a need for basic tech help (especially with computers and phones.)
 - Many expressed an interest in finding ways to put tech-savvy kids in touch with tech-needy seniors.
 - * Many suggested the idea that perhaps high school kids could earn community service credit for helping seniors with their tech needs (and perhaps in other ways as well).
- Many comments noting a continuing preference among seniors (especially those most challenged and frustrated by technology) for communication that includes hard copy, snail mail, and phone calls.
- The Township’s website was a common source of frequently expressed communication needs.
 - Even among more “tech literate” seniors, many expressed frustrations with trying to locate information on the Township’s website: they struggle to find what they’re looking for; many experience the Township’s website as voluminous, confusing, and difficult to navigate.
 - Many expressed interest in learning more about how the website is organized and how to use it to meet their information needs.

3) **Widespread Interest in Educational Activities (Lifelong Learning)**

- LOTS of interest in educational activities such as classes, lectures, workshops.
- Many suggestions for topic ideas: art, health, estate planning, local history, artificial intelligence, scams
- Many educational opportunities already exist (some of which are not well known) – for example, through adult learning schools, universities, the library, the County, the Morris Museum etc.
- SCAC’s website includes links to many opportunities for lifelong learning. Click [HERE](#) to access.

4) **Many Volunteer-Related Suggestions**

- Many suggestions for ways that volunteers could be helpful if only there were mechanisms in place to connect seniors with interested volunteers. In addition to the widely expressed suggestion to pair seniors and kids for tech help, other suggestions included:
 - Find ways to enlist volunteers to help with such tasks as snow shoveling and leaf raking.
 - Pair interested senior volunteers with other seniors who may need various types of assistance (a ride, an errand, a check-in call) – i.e. develop a “Seniors Helping Seniors” volunteer list or database.

5) **Many “Partnership-Building” Suggestions**

Many suggestions about the benefits of building “partnership relationships” with such groups and organizations as:

- Morris School District
- Morristown/Morris Township Library
- Morris Museum

6) Transportation Concerns

- Many concerns expressed about a range of transportation needs:
 - Seniors who (for various reasons) can’t drive at all – some temporarily, some long-term
 - Limited info re: the number of people experiencing this need, who they are, and what kind of assistance they’re looking for
 - Seniors who have difficulty driving at night
 - Seniors who can drive but would welcome additional options
- Many expressed concern about how they will be able to handle their own transportation needs in the future.
- Many suggested that Morris Township should consider re-joining Colonial Coach.
- Many expressed concern that Morris Township does very little to assist seniors with transportation, but no consensus on best way(s) to address existing concerns.
- Transportation is a widespread concern, but more information is needed to clarify needs and plan options for addressing them.

7) Need for Assistance with Household Repairs and Services

- LOTS of interest among seniors in finding help with household work, services, and repairs.
- For some jobs (such as snow shoveling and leaf raking) – volunteer help would be useful and welcome.
- Widespread consensus among Survey and Focus Group respondents re: need for “tradespeople” who are competent, senior-friendly, and reasonably priced (handyman, painters, plumbers etc.)
- Suggestions from many to find ways to compile a list of trusted service providers.
- Note from Cathy:
 - For many reasons, it is not possible for the Township to be involved in compiling such a list.
 - Seniors interested in developing such a list will need to find other ways of doing so.
 - There are a few organizations that may be helpful as starting points. Click [HERE](#) to find the Home Maintenance information SCAC has posted on its website.

- 8) **Senior Center** - many comments about the need for seniors to have a larger meeting space than what is currently available at the Municipal Building. GREAT LATE-BREAKING NEWS: major progress toward accomplishing this longstanding wish!

[-Mayor Gyorfy, Senator Bucco Announce Township’s Purchase of State Property to Convert into Morris Township’s First Community Center](#)

[-Morris Township Will Buy Vacant School from State to Establish Community Center](#)

While dozens of other specific suggestions were shared by Survey and Focus Group respondents, these were the most common broad categories for which needs were expressed and solution suggestions were offered.

Recommendations

With this information about the needs of Morris Township's seniors as background, following are advisory recommendations for addressing these needs:

Communication and Technology

- Work with the school system to develop a "tech-buddy tutoring program" that matches tech-savvy students with tech-needy older adults.
 - Look for ways for students to earn "community service" credit for doing this.
- Provide various tech-training workshops. Examples:
 - Township Website 101: Basic Training for Seniors
 - SCAC's Website: One-Stop Access to "All Things Seniors"
- Create a "one-page doc" of top suggestions for utilizing Morris Township's existing communication resources.
- Consider creating an "All Things Seniors Newsletter" that is sent once a year by regular mail to all seniors in Morris Township. Also consider creating a quarterly newsletter that is shared electronically.
- Explore other creative, low-cost ways that info could be shared with seniors by mail/hard copy.
 - Examples: include information in tax bills, sewer bills, other?
- Consider possibilities for establishing an "All Things Seniors phone number" that seniors could call with questions or suggestions:
 - Consider enlisting volunteers to handle the calls or respond to voicemail messages.
 - Prior training would be needed.

Educational and Learning Opportunities

- Develop ways to promote awareness of the huge number of educational and lifelong learning opportunities that already exist in our community.
 - SCAC's webpage is a great starting point for exploring these resources.
 - Click [HERE](#) to visit the Lifelong Learning section of SCAC's website.
- Consider developing new learning opportunities that SCAC may want to add to this mix. Examples:
 - Current Events Discussion Group
 - Guest Speaker Series (eg: art, estate planning, local history)

Recreational Activities

- Work with the Township's Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) to create a **Walking Group** for Seniors
- **Trips**
 - Work with the Seniors Club to develop ways of promoting awareness of existing trip opportunities
 - Post a descriptor of trip offerings and registration information on SCAC's section of the Township's website.

Match Seniors with Volunteers

- Explore ways to put seniors in touch with volunteers from the community who are willing to help with such jobs as:
 - Shoveling snow
 - Raking leaves
- Consider establishing a “Seniors Helping Seniors List” (or database) to put seniors in touch with other seniors who are willing to help in such ways as:
 - Visit someone who’s homebound
 - Pick up something from the store
 - Provide a ride to an activity of shared interest
- Promote awareness of the vast number of additional volunteer opportunities that already exist.
 - SCAC’s webpage provides a great starting point for exploring these possibilities.
 - Click [HERE](#) to visit the Volunteer Opportunities section of SCAC’s webpage.

Shared-Interest Partnership Activities

- Look for ways to expand communication and collaboration with organizations and groups in ways that build “shared interest” partnership opportunities.
- Consider establishing SCAC Liaison positions to build partnership opportunities with:
 - Morris School District
 - Morristown/Morris Township Library
 - TAC

Transportation

Continue to Research Potential Transportation Options Morris Township Could Offer for Seniors

- Conduct further research into transportation options that other towns offer that may be helpful to seniors (and may be open to other residents as well).
 - For example: some towns offer their own Dial-a-Ride (Hanover), their own shuttle service (LBI), discounted Uber programs for seniors (Madison, Chatham, Montclair), and their own van service (Morris Plains).
- Compile a report that summarizes how various programs work and how much they cost. Using this information as a basis, develop next-step advisory recommendations for Morris Township to consider.
- As part of conducting this research:
 - Consider ways to collaborate with Morris Township’s Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC).
 - Consider ways to partner with other towns (as well as the County) who may have an interest in working together to develop NEW regional transportation opportunities.
 - Include updated information about the Colonial Coach program.

More Information is Needed re: Seniors Who Have Limited Ability to Drive on their Own

- Work to gather additional information about the seniors who live in Morris Township who have limited ability to drive on their own.
 - Reasons may include: no car, inability to drive, limited access to family/friends who can help.
 - Work to determine how many Twp seniors fit this category and develop a list of who they are.
 - Confer with as many of these people as possible to better understand their needs and their suggestions for support possibilities that would help them.
 - Compile a report of findings and recommendations.

Residents of Morris Mews Have Transportation Needs that Merit Specialized Attention

- Explore possibilities for re-instating transportation options that used to be available to Morris Mews residents (van, Colonial Coach).
- Continue outreach with NJ Transit: it would be helpful to residents of Morris Mews if the NJ Transit bus that runs by Hanover Ave. and Ketch Road could include a stop in the driveway of Morris Mews.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The Needs Survey and Focus Groups that SCAC conducted this year captured direct input and suggestions from hundreds of Morris Township’s seniors.

SCAC is well positioned to address many of the needs and recommendations outlined in this report. These findings can be viewed as a “road map” for guiding SCAC’s work in the year ahead – and beyond.

SCAC has long been aware of the need to build awareness of resources that already exist. This has been a major goal of the work SCAC has already done in building its web presence on the Township’s website.

[SCAC's Website](#) should be continuously promoted as a key point of reference for accessing resources that are already available to meet seniors’ needs in many different areas.

Communication and technology are key areas where new training opportunities and new ways of sharing information are needed. In developing these plans, it’s important to balance seniors’ needs for additional tech training (eg. workshops and tutoring opportunities) with a need to honor an ongoing preference among many seniors to receive information in more traditional ways (hard copy, snail mail, and by phone).

Special attention is merited in finding ways to establish programs that bring seniors in touch with volunteers who are willing to help with various jobs (such as tech training and snow shoveling).

Developing ways to partner with the school system and to connect seniors with students who need community service credit for their volunteer work is a promising option that merits further exploration.

Transportation is an area that needs more thorough investigation before well-informed advisory recommendations can be made. SCAC should consider establishing an exploratory committee to conduct further research in this area. Finding ways to partner with Morris Township’s Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) to address shared interests is another promising option that merits further exploration.

The year’s Needs Survey and Focus Group Event provided limited input on seniors’ needs in two important areas: housing and health/medical. To fulfill the mission of its founding ordinance, SCAC will need to devote further attention to these areas as part of its work in the years ahead.

SCAC has made great progress this year in identifying and addressing the needs of Morris Township’s seniors. In looking to next year and beyond, SCAC will continue to work collaboratively with residents and with other groups and organizations in our community to make quality of life for seniors who live in Morris Township the best it can be.

Acknowledgements

- **Thank you to the following staff members for their assistance in supporting SCAC’s work:**

Staff Members

Tim Quinn – Township Administrator - Administration Department
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Sam Pagano
Noel Robinson
Barbara Sebiri
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Cathy Wilson
Donna Guariglia – Honorary Member

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- **Finally, thank you to the 589 residents who responded to the Needs Survey and the 41 residents who participated in the Focus Group Event.** Your input was the basis of this report!