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Maine Voices: Speaker Eves outlines initiative to help seniors age in place

After a lifetime of contributing to their communities, Maine's seniors shouldn't be forced to move far from home to find housing that's affordable.

BY REP. MARK EVES

Maine is the oldest state in the nation. Each day, 50 people turn 65. In just 15 years, one in four Mainers will be over the age of 65.

These numbers must be a call to action for our state.

The aging challenges we face are significant – and personal for all of us. Whether you are a parent with an aging family member or a grandparent struggling to stay in the home or community where you raised your family, so many Mainers are personally affected.

My father will be 91 this November. My six siblings and I often think about how life has changed for my father over his lifetime. He served in World War II in the Army and then 30 more years in the Air Force as a chaplain, counseling service members' families. We are fortunate to be close by to lend a hand, but many Maine seniors are not so fortunate.

As I've traveled across the state, I've heard the same message from older adults and their families: They want to age in place; they want a more secure retirement.

As property taxes or the price of oil rises, they have to choose between putting food on the table or paying for medicine. Many are also concerned about our family caregivers who might have to stop working or juggle schedules to help with care.

We recently heard from a senior in Damariscotta. She'd taught in Maine schools for more than 30 years. She was forced to sell her home – where she raised a generation – and move to North Carolina with her children.

With rising property taxes, limited transportation to get to the doctor and the grocery store, and higher heating bills, she couldn't stay in her home on a fixed income.

She worked hard all her life, and had given back to her community, but she ran out of options.

Stories like these have been the driving force behind a new effort I've launched with the Maine Coalition on Aging to help Maine seniors age in place in their homes in communities.

Last week, we unveiled the KeepMEHome initiative, which will create affordable housing for seniors in each of Maine's 16 counties, boost support for in-home care workers and expand property tax credits for seniors.

Each of these policies is aimed at creating a more secure retirement for Maine seniors where they can live independently or age in place.

The initiative includes three specific policy proposals: a \$65 million general obligation bond to develop 1,000 highly energy-efficient apartments for Maine's seniors in 40 locations across the state in every county; an increase to the state's Property Tax Fairness Credit for older adults; and the first boost in a decade to Medicaid reimbursement rates for direct care workers who provide in-home and personal care services.

Maine has the oldest housing stock in the nation, including many buildings which are unaffordable and hard to heat. Thousands of Maine seniors are on wait lists for affordable housing.

Not only are we the oldest state in the nation, but we also have one of the oldest housing stocks in the country. Maine's housing is poorly matched with our needs: It is too unaffordable, too inaccessible, too inefficient and too remote from the services and resources our seniors need to thrive in their communities.

To address this fundamental mismatch between our housing supply and our housing needs, we are proposing a bold investment in an innovative senior housing bond.

We also know that increasing property tax credits for seniors and boosting pay rates for direct care workers for the first time in a decade will make a huge difference for seniors and those who care for them.

Maine's population is aging rapidly. The demographic reality is a challenge that we can change into an opportunity by ensuring our seniors can live independently in their homes and communities.

The policies outlined above will help our seniors, their families, and our economy by investing in jobs and workers. Transforming how we age in the state is a big task. We must all work together to address this challenge for our state.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rep. Mark Eves of North Berwick is the speaker of the Maine House of Representatives.

— *Special to the Press Herald*

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