

# Community Heart & Soul®

— Guided by what matters most —

## CHELSEA, MAINE

POPULATION:  
2,719

CHALLENGE:  
Increase resident  
involvement in  
Town plans.

FOCUS: Civic  
Engagement &  
Participation

KEY TOOL:  
Adaptability,  
Network

Chelsea, Maine is a small town on the eastern bank of the Kennebec River. It was incorporated in 1851, separating from a portion of Hallowell. Today it is well known as the home of Togus Veteran's Hospital, founded in 1867 after the town ceded land to the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from the Civil War. Chelsea is called the "Gateway to the Capital" because of its geographic proximity to Augusta, Maine. The town is primarily residential with two major highways running along the east and western boundaries. These transportation corridors serve as the primary location for business development in the town. The interior remains a mixture of agricultural and residential use. When the town asked for community input to shape revised ordinances and future planning, only a few residents participated. Town leaders recognized the need to try something different to foster genuine community engagement and began Community Heart & Soul in 2019.

### Chelsea "by the numbers":

- 166.5 volunteer hours spent gathering stories.
- 106 individuals participated in story gathering events.
- Five Heart & Soul Statements were drafted and adopted by resolution by the Town's Select Board.
- 1243 Heart & Soul questionnaires were mailed with the town's tax bill to all property owners.

### Local conditions:

Chelsea recognized that authentic input would not be found in hosting a meeting at Town Hall or in a survey addressing specific issues. In the fall of 2019, with the collaboration of a group of interested residents, they began Community Heart & Soul. A logo contest kicked off their resident engagement and generated positive publicity. In 2020, just as the project was getting off the ground Covid caused a major revision of all of the team's plans. Rather than using community events to gather stories and speak with residents, the team pivoted their strategy. They began a community-wide newsletter with the financial support of the town, conducted interviews safely using outdoor interviews, zoom meetings, and other channels and platforms. Volunteers were able to discover and master new communications and online tools during the Covid lockdown. As the pandemic slowed, volunteers emerged and started more in-person activities.

### Volunteer and Community Response:

Local officials endorsed Community Heart & Soul throughout the process. The Town's Select Board passed a resolution of unanimous support for the project in 2019, and budgeted funds for the project coordinator position. Initial meetings garnered a variety of interest from different parts of the community. Volunteers emerged from Togus, Chelsea Elementary School, The PTA, Girl Scouts, and other local organizations. Even with the challenge of the pandemic, new people participated to help gather stories and host events.

## Heart & Soul Outcomes:

**Access to Food:** The Chelsea Town Office donated space in their parking lot for a community garden. Volunteers built raised wooden beds for growing vegetables. Local organizations sponsored the beds and the food was picked by residents in need and used for Age-Friendly potlucks.

**Access to Nature:** Many residents were unaware of the town-owned parcel Butternut Park, on the banks of the Kennebec River. Grant funds helped provide a new bench and picnic area for the park.

**Collaboration:** Chelsea Heart & Soul volunteers helped connect veterans at Togus to the age-friendly group and went out of their way to include voices from the veteran community in the project.

**Communication:** Residents expressed a need for more communication about local news, events, and occurrences in Chelsea. The town sponsored a quarterly newsletter that began in the summer of 2020. It began as a volunteer-written e-newsletter but thanks to funding from the Town and AARP, a mailed version is available for all residents.

Chelsea now has a Community Calendar for all local organizations and town meetings.

**Connection:** Age-Friendly Chelsea Maine began as an offshoot of Community Heart & Soul. Older adults in town wanted social activities and ways to foster connections among residents. Volunteers began weekly outdoor, socially distanced walking groups during the height of Covid. These continue today without the restrictions and Age Friendly Chelsea has picked up many of the ideas that were generated from Heart & Soul, including potluck suppers at the local Grange Hall.

**Planning:** Chelsea will use the data from Heart & Soul to help inform a Comprehensive Planning process in the future. The town has never had a plan but this information will be a good place to start initial efforts.

