

# What Works...

FEDERAL **STATE** LOCAL

## Massachusetts Senior Benefits Expos

Elevating the importance of senior benefits by engaging community leaders

### Acknowledgements

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### OVERVIEW

Wishing to increase local participation in public benefit programs in a lagging economy, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services pooled resources with local, state, and federal agencies and partnered with community leaders to hold one-stop shopping Senior Benefits Expos where seniors could be screened and apply for an array of government services, including public benefits. This issue brief highlights the strategies used by the Office of Health and Human Services to successfully engage local leaders and related agencies to host well attended and highly regarded Senior Benefits Expos across the Commonwealth.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, with the economy slumping and people's needs increasing, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs sought to bring public benefits to the people through Senior Benefits Expos. Eight Senior Benefits Expos were held across Massachusetts to inform and connect people to the programs and services they need most. The Expos brought together services and programs from the Massachusetts' Executive Office of Elder Affairs, Department of Public Health, Department of Transitional Assistance, Department of Housing and Community Development, Department of Veterans' Services, Commission for the Blind, and the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

The primary goal of the Expos was to inform seniors about various public benefits and provide them with the opportunity for on-the-spot screening and enrollment in the programs. However, what made these Expos unique was the emphasis on engaging local community leaders, which helped in terms of promoting the Expos as well as sharing costs and resources.

## EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS ARE THE KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF A SENIOR BENEFITS EXPO

The intent of the Expos was to create a *one-stop shopping* experience for the consumers and their families. Having all the departments under one roof, it was hoped, would be less stressful and more convenient; moreover, it would give consumers a holistic look at state and local agencies and the public benefits they provide.

The Expos offered partners the opportunity to showcase their services and programs. In a friendly, non-invasive manner, seniors had the opportunity to carefully peruse the individual booths and ask specific questions about the programs and how they related to

one another. The Expos gave seniors the opportunity to access a wealth of information in a single setting. In addition, by having several agencies present under one roof, there was a much more consumer-focused delivery, where agencies worked together to assist consumers to find the particular benefit that they were eligible for.

General topics covered at the Expos included:

**Table 1: Topics Covered**

Employment Assistance	Nutrition
Public Health Benefits	Health & Fitness
Medicare	Medicaid
Medicare Savings Programs	Low Income Subsidy
Personal Safety	Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program
SNAP	Housing
Real Estate Taxes	Tax Abatement Processes

Most importantly, in an effort to make the process more convenient, some partners at the Expos offered not only the opportunity for onsite screening, but also the ability to enroll.

## Logistics

The Office of Elder Affairs served as the lead agency; they developed, coordinated, and oversaw the operations of the Expos, with the support of other agency partners. The Expos took place within a two-and-a-half month window to maximize good weather and daylight hours. Generally, the Expos were scheduled for the morning and included breakfast. At some locations they concluded in time for lunch if the Expo was at a congregate meal site. Most Expos were at senior centers, a location familiar to participants.

Participants set up shop in one or more large rooms, with tables for each agency and service. Blood pressure and other screening programs were also made available to participants. At each Expo there were representatives on hand to discuss the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—formerly known as Food Stamps) and low-income heating subsidy programs; senior property tax abatements; nutrition; the Prescription Advantage Program (Massachusetts’ state pharmaceutical assistance program); local Aging Services Access Points (ASAPs); Serving Health Insurance Needs of Elders (SHINE—Massachusetts’ state health insurance assistance program); Veterans’ Services; fire and police safety; smoking cessation; falls prevention programs; and the Massachusetts Commissions for the Blind and for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. People were encouraged to walk around and stop at any and all tables.

### Partnerships

The Office of Elder Affairs worked diligently to create seamless, coordinated partnerships at the local, state and federal level. Working together, the partners leveraged resources in sponsoring the Expos. At the state level, the Office of Elder Affairs partnered with the following state agencies:

Either a staff member from the state agency or a local representative participated in every Expo. Each agency offered information, referrals or signed up people for services.

At the local level, the Office of Elder Affairs partnered with Councils on Aging and senior centers, the local area agencies on aging (AAAs), and various community organizations. Local partners were integral in planning logistics, often providing or helping to identify the site for the actual Expo. By partnering with local community organizations, it allowed consumers the opportunity to build a relationship with local organizations and try firsthand the services provided in the community, such as a meal from the area meal site.

Engaging local organizations also helped promote the Expos and diversify their partnerships. Also, while the focus of the Expos was on screening and enrolling seniors in public benefit programs, it offered an avenue to present a holistic view of the variety of home and community based supports and services available to seniors. For example, at some Expos, seniors were introduced to their local tax assessor, who would provide information about local tax procedures and abatement programs for older adults.

**Table 2: Partner Agencies**

Department of Public Health	Department of Veterans’ Services	Department of Transitional Assistance	Department of Mental Health
Department of Housing & Community Development	Department of Revenue	Department of Developmental Services	Commission for the Blind
Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing	Department of Energy Resources	Department of Labor and Workforce Development	Rehabilitation Commission



In addition, in an effort to educate seniors about emergency personnel and procedures, first responders such as police officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical technicians were often on hand to answer any questions about emergency services.

### Promotion

The agencies undertook a coordinated marketing campaign to boost participation at the Expos. Consulting with local participants, such as Councils on Aging and AAAs, each Expo had a tailored promotional campaign based on the specific needs of the community. Expos were advertised in local newspapers, and flyers were posted around the community. In an attempt to engage each locality, Elder Affairs asked local partners to work with their community to modify a general flyer template so that it better reflected the tastes and preferences of the region.

### Engaging community leaders

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the Massachusetts Expo Model was its engagement of community leaders. Local mayors and elected officials, state representatives, state senators, elected municipal leaders, and town officials were on hand to welcome Expo attendees.

Inviting community leaders—and including that as part of the publicity for the event—validated the importance of the Expos and increased community participation. Moreover, the Expo format allowed community figures direct connection to their constituents, giving them an opportunity to engage and connect with individuals. The Expos were also typically covered by local news outlets, giving both Expo sponsors and community leaders an opportunity for good exposure.

## RESULTS

The Expos proved to be very well attended. According to Sue Thomson, Chief of Staff at the Executive Office of Elder Services: “More than 4,000 people attended the eight Expos. In Boston alone, nearly 1,000 people came to City Hall for the Expo.” The greatest lesson learned from the experience is that “bringing services to the people is an excellent way to maximize the benefits of state government,” said Martina Jackson, Director of Communications and Outreach at Elder Affairs. “We held the Expos in large and small cities, to guarantee geographic and demographic access; people really enjoyed the ‘one-stop shopping’ approach.”

Massachusetts and its state departments have been hit hard by the nation’s economic crisis. Although there are no plans for more state-sponsored Expos, two state senators and one state representative have since hosted similar events in their districts; at one such event, more than 1,000 people attended. As testimony to the success of the Expos, the state legislators sponsoring these events invited the Executive Office of Health and Human Services and its partners to present at their events. The legislators’ invitation further extends the reach of the Expo format and helps ensure its viability by leveraging the necessary resources to hold the event.



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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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The National Center for Benefits Outreach and Enrollment ([www.CenterforBenefits.org](http://www.CenterforBenefits.org)) helps organizations enroll seniors and younger adults with disabilities with limited means into the benefits programs for which they are eligible so that they can remain healthy and improve the quality of their lives. The Center is funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging and operated by the National Council on Aging, a non-profit service and advocacy organization that works with thousands of organizations across the country to help seniors find jobs and benefits, improve their health, live independently and remain active in their communities.

The National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA), founded in 1964, represents the nation's 56 officially designated state and territorial agencies on aging. The Association's principal mission is to support visionary state leadership, advance state systems innovation and articulate a national policy on elder rights and home and community based services for older adults and individuals with disabilities and their families.

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