

**AGING IN COMMUNITY COMMITTEE
OF THE
COMMISSION ON AGING**

Date: February 8, 2022
9:30am-11:30 am

“Food Insecurity in Montgomery County”

In Attendance: Mary Sweeney (co-chair, AIC), Wayne Berman (co-chair, AIC), Barbara Selter, Nanine Meiklejohn, Richard Jourdenais, Marsha Weber, Laurie Pross, Mona Grieser, Sibö Ncube, Joyce Dubow, Eddie Rivas, Karon Phillips, Betsy Carrier.

Staff: Pazit Aviv, MoCo; Marcia Pruzan, Age-Friendly Montgomery; Tamiko Caffey, HOC

Guests: Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder, MOCO Food Council; Allisson Schnitzer, MOCO Food Council; JD Robinson, MD Hunger Solutions; and Sara Fought, Jewish Council for the Aging;

Opening Remarks from the Co-Chairs: Wayne and Mary welcomed everyone. Everyone had a chance to introduce themselves. Wayne and May then reviewed the agenda with the featured topic on “Food Insecurity in Montgomery County,” arranged by Joyce Dubow and Karon Phillips.

Approval of the Minutes: The minutes of the January 11 2022 meeting were approved.

PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS: “Food Insecurity in Montgomery County”.

Joyce and Karon started the session and introduced the three featured presenters, all of whom are engaged in this issue in the county: Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder, MOCO Food Council; Allisson Schnitzer, MOCO Food Council; and JD Robinson, MD Hunger Solutions.

Annmarie Hart-Bookbinder, Food Security Programs Manager of the MOCO Food Council described the purpose of the organization-as building “food resilience”. They work with a range of partners in the food system to accomplish this goal. She described the 5-year Food Security Strategic Plan developed by the county in January 2017 and overseen by DHHS. A member of the COA participated in its development. Older adults, children, people with disabilities and those who are foreign-born are in greatest need. Almost 7 percent of seniors in MOCO are estimated to live below the poverty level, and around 20-30,000 live below the self-sufficiency standard. Food insecurity issues are exacerbated by the fact that many are aging in place and in isolation, have limited access to transportation and technology, limited English proficiency, physical and mental disabilities and medical dietary restrictions. A Food Access Survey fielded in 2021 found that the greatest need is among those in the Spanish-speaking senior community whose members often do not know how to access benefits and other forms of assistance. Several food resources geared to older adults available through the Senior Nutrition Program were identified. Meals are available to County residents aged 60 and over (for a voluntary donation), and their spouse of any age (spouses younger than 60 pay full price).

- Congregate Meals - Available at many county senior and community centers (Kosher, Chinese, Korean, Latino, and Vietnamese meals at select sites)
- Meals on Wheels- Hot lunch and cold supper delivered to the home; Special diets available; frozen meals available for weekends/holidays/inclement weather
- Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program- Distributed to low-income seniors at senior centers and senior housing

There are multiple not-for-profit food resources within the county of which MANNA is the largest. The Capital Area Food Bank maintains an interactive map that permits users to locate food resources. Callers dialing the county 311 number are generally referred to MANNA, although some callers may also be referred to the Food Access Call center where they can receive information tailored to their personal needs and preferences.

Allison Schnitzer, Food Access and Program Manager of the MOCO Food Council discussed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program- SNAP—a federal entitlement program. Her work is focused on maximizing SNAP enrollment in MOCO for all eligible residents. As of Sept 2021, 80,998 Montgomery County residents received SNAP benefits, up from a Pre-pandemic enrollment of 55,000 residents. Montgomery County has a “SNAP gap” of 64 percent, the highest in Maryland. It is estimated that about 16,000 older adults in the county receive SNAP benefits.

Recent efforts are underway to simplify SNAP enrollment via the Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP)

- ESAP seeks to increase participation among the elderly low-income population by streamlining the application and certification process
 - Limited to elderly households with no earned income
 - Waives the recertification interview requirement
 - Makes use of data matches to reduce the amount of client-provided verification
 - Extends the certification period to 36 months
 - Uses a simplified shortened application

In addition, there are efforts to broaden the food venues that accept SNAP benefits, most notably restaurants. Several farmers markets accept SNAP benefits, some of which have generous matching programs that supplements the SNAP benefit.

JD Robinson, anti-hunger coordinator for MD Hunger Solutions (which is part of Food Action Network, a national program,) focuses on policy that helps people to qualify for benefits. Since COVID, much of the assistance is provided via a toll free-hotline. The need for food assistance has increased enormously since the onset of the pandemic. He noted that due to the pandemic, recipients have received an emergency allotment (increases for a household of 1 from \$20 to \$250.) However, this allotment (available from the federal government to states applying for a waiver) expires in March of 2022 when benefits will revert to pre-pandemic levels. Thus, many recipients will shortly see significant benefit decreases.

As noted, SNAP is a federal program. Currently, several legislative proposals are pending, although no action is expected until the reauthorization of the Farm bill in 2023.

There are several areas of involvement in SNAP at the state level. These include:

- DHS Administration and Oversight
- MDTHINK and Eligibility & Enrollment System
- Current SNAP Programs
 - MSNAP
 - Online SNAP (for older adults who receive SSI benefits)
 - Heat & Eat Program (for those whose rent includes utilities- affords an automatic increase in SNAP benefit)
 - Restaurant Meals Program
 - Elderly Simplified Application Project
 - Older Adult State Supplemental Benefit

In addition, a bill has been introduced in the 2022 MD General Assembly- HB456- that would lower the age of eligibility for SNAP from 62 to age 60 and increase the minimum benefit from \$30 to \$45.

Finally, it was noted that several technical changes have been made to the application process that are expected to be very confusing to applicants, probably further exacerbating the low SNAP enrollment in MOCO. Advocacy groups are working with the state to improve the electronic portal.

Copies of the full presentation will be sent to the AIC. Please feel free to contact Wayne (wayneb4me@aol.com) if you need to receive an additional copy.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION: Following the formal presentations, AIC participants asked questions of the speakers. Several ideas emerged.

- There needs to be emphasis on the FOOD ACCESS CENTER in public communications to ensure that individuals receive personalized, tailored information about food access. 311 operators should get refresher training so that they direct callers to the Food Access Center. Access to this center is by appointment.
- The SNAP program establishes its benefit levels based on the a “thrifty food plan” that is unrealistically low because it is based on pricing of food to feed a family of 4 without taking into account inflation and rising food costs.
- The bulk of food/nutrition education via SNAPEd- occurs at food assistance sites. Older adults can be educated at food assistance sites-- MANNA offers training, tip sheets, recipes, etc., as do some farmers markets.
- A SNAP workgroup consisting of those working in the food assistance area meet to share best practices, ideas on how to communicate information to the public. The MOCO Food Council does not offer assistance with strategic planning. (It is a convener and network of food service providers.)

IDEAS PROPOSED BY SPEAKERS FOR COA ACTION:

- Promote and facilitate access to resources; refer people to community-based organizations; encourage people to apply for SNAP benefits.
- Consider transportation ease in accessing food assistance;

- Solicit feedback re: food—is it acceptable, prep issues, dietary issues?
- Enhance tech-training directed at older adults to facilitate application process and access to information about resources
- Ask the Communication Committee to add SNAP PSAs during 50+ Montgomery shows.

OTHER COMMITTEE BUSINESS

- Wayne and Mary handed out a draft sheet to track the interests and activities of the nine County Council members. The idea of tracking the County Council members was proposed at our November 2021 meeting as a way to help the AIC better follow the activity in five key topic areas: Housing, Food Insecurity, Technology, and Transportation, and Design for Life. It was proposed that member of the AIC select and Council Member to follow, get on their website, track issues they raise, and report back to the AIC. There was general approval of the proposal and the Committee members were asked to consider who they might want to follow and announce it at our March meeting. Eddie suggested that this tracking sheet be coordinated with public policy committee. The idea was proposed by AIC chairs to inform the work of the topical working groups. They emphasized that it was not intended to be information gathering and not necessarily the basis of a letter writing campaign.
- The Committee also reviewed future meeting assignments. All monthly meeting through June are on track. All working groups reported on their activities too.

UPCOMING MEETING: The next AIC meeting will be held on Tuesday, March 8, 2022 at 9:30 am. The focus of the meeting will be on “Design for Life.” This meeting will be facilitated by Betsy Carrier and Mona Grieser.

MEETING ADJOURNED: 11:25 am