

Commission on Aging Budget Priorities FY22

The Commission on Aging (CoA) appreciates that the FY22 recommended budget includes approximately \$40 million in tax-supported resources identified for older adults, including funds for community organizations that augment County services. In addition, we also appreciate that the budget includes \$17 million in non-tax supported resources for older adults. We are happy to see that many of the CoA's top priorities made it into the County Executive's budget and we urge the Council Members to vote in favor of these items.

During the summer of 2020, the CoA developed a list of priorities that we would like to see included in the County's FY22 budget. Those priorities include:

- **Establish two additional social worker positions in HHS, one in Adult Protective Services and one in the Public Guardianship Program.**

We very much appreciate that the County Executive's budget includes an increase in staff in the Department of Health and Human Services to investigate complaints of abuse and neglect against older adults, secure resources, and provide surrogate decision-making for adults adjudicated through the courts. The Commission has been advocating for these positions for at least five years. Hopefully, these staff will also conduct investigations of financial exploitation resulting from new mandatory reporting requirements for banks.

In addition to the hiring of the additional staff in Adult Protective Services, we would also like to see the County add another Public Guardianship staff position. This will help to ensure that older individuals who are no longer able to look after themselves are protected.

- **Provide legal assistance for older renters to avoid eviction from their homes**

Over 65% of senior renters age 65+ are rent-burdened in the County versus 56% in the state of Maryland and 55% in the US. Furthermore, while average rent has increased in recent years by 14.8%, average median household income has only risen by 6.49%. Rent-burdened older adults face job losses that can lead to eviction, or experience other events such as needing to buy medicine rather than pay rent. Evictions can result in homelessness. In the FY22 budget, the CoA would appreciate that the County create a stable program to provide legal assistance to older adult renters in eviction proceedings.

- **Address food insecurity by expanding senior nutrition programs**

We appreciate the County's ongoing efforts to address food insecurity with such efforts as:

- Offering individuals over the age of 60 access to meals, nutrition education, and the opportunity for socialization at community and senior centers and senior apartment buildings.

- Providing home-delivered meals to address the nutritional needs of the County's most frail and vulnerable older adults who are home-bound due to illness or disability and cannot get out or prepare healthful meals on their own.
- Operating a Senior Nutrition Program at eight facilities in cooperation with the Department of HHS.

- **Raise awareness of older adult services**

The County offers many services for its older adults yet those individuals are not aware of what is available to them. The CoA would like to see the County engage in more efforts – such as a public information campaign – to alert older adults of those services.

- **Increase the Housing Initiative Fund**

The COA urges the County Council to support the County Executive’s FY 22 budget request of \$89.1 million for the Housing Initiative Fund (HIF).

The CoA has for several years advocated increasing affordable housing options for older renters, including through the Housing Initiative Fund (HIF). We especially appreciate the County’s efforts to expand and preserve affordable rental housing and to increase rental assistance for renters falling behind on their rents due to the pandemic.

The COA is gratified that the County Executive’s FY22 budget proposed increases in the HIF will allow the County to initiate new projects to preserve and produce affordable housing, including three senior projects which have been identified, but not yet funded.

- **Maintain and expand older adult programs**

Again, we appreciate the County’s ongoing efforts to maintain and expand older adult programs through such actions as:

- Operating seven Senior Centers.
- Operating a Senior Transportation Service providing limited range age-friendly access to six Senior Centers.
- Operating Active Adult Centers for those 55 and older, where seniors gather for educational programs, friendship, entertainment, sports, and other activities.
- Working with other agencies, departments, hospitals, and non-profits to provide a variety of programs, classes, and services identified as community needs to the residents age 55+ of Montgomery County.

In addition, the CoA would like to see the County enhance the application and use of innovative transportation services for older adults. Dependable, available, and accessible transportation services are at the heart of many Montgomery County programs for older adults, especially the senior center and community recreation center programs. New and innovative programs that expand opportunities for older adults, of all income and racial backgrounds, encourage engagement in our community and help to prevent problems like

social isolation and food insecurity. Programs such as FLEX, an innovative on-demand, curb-to-curb and door-to-door application-based scheduled service utilizing small buses, and FLASH, an innovative corridor-based express bus service, represent significant new opportunities for older adults to be engaged in the community. The CoA urges the expansion and enhancement of these programs as well as the training that customers may need to use them.

Finally, the CoA would like to express its concern regarding nursing facility surveys and inspections, and ultimately care of residents, in nursing facilities in Montgomery County. The Memorandum of Understanding between Montgomery County and the State of Maryland, which had been in effect for decades and allowed ten County surveyors to inspect and survey the 34 nursing homes in Montgomery County, will not be renewed by the State. It is our understanding that the ten current Montgomery County nursing facility surveyors will be replaced by only seven new surveyors at the Office of Health Care Quality, but only four of those will be nursing facility surveyors and we have received no assurances that these four will be solely dedicated to Montgomery County.

The Commission on Aging requests that the 10 MC nursing facility surveyors who will no longer be employed under the MoU remain in the nursing facility arena where they are sorely needed. In addition, we respectfully request that the County Council immediately begin work on a plan to ensure that our nursing facility residents will be safe if this transition from County Surveyors to State Surveyors takes place this July. We note that when the County surveyors no longer conduct surveys for the State, they will not be able to conduct their concurrent County inspections. What happens to the requirements regarding County certifications? The County must have a plan to ensure that our nursing facility residents will be safe if this transition from County Surveyors to State Surveyors takes place this July.