



Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services

Director's Quarterly Leadership Meeting with Boards, Commissions and Committees

Date: September 30, 2020 (FY21 First Quarter Report)

BCC: Commission on Aging (CoA)

BCC Representative: Jean Dinwiddie, Chair

Montgomery County's Commission on Aging continues to serve as an advocate for the health, safety, and well-being of the County's older residents by identifying significant issues where its voice on the needs of older adults can make a difference. The CoA appreciates the County's efforts to deal with the COVID-19 Pandemic and its resulting health and economic crises. The Commission stands ready to provide services and assistance in any way it can.

In March 2020 all CoA activities were suspended because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It resumed its deliberations in May 2020.

Age-Friendly Montgomery County

The CoA continues active participation in the Age-Friendly Montgomery County initiative. The Commission Chair is a member of the Age-Friendly Advisory Group, a CoA alumnus is the Senior Fellow who staffs the initiative, and individual CoA members participate on the various Committees. All have the ultimate goal of continuing to make the County a community for a lifetime.

Recap of FY20 Activities

During the first quarter of FY20, the Commission concentrated its efforts on setting its budget priorities for FY21. A special meeting was held on July 25 where CoA members discussed strategies for advancing those priorities with Gabriel Albornoz, Member, Montgomery County Council; Dr. Raymond Crowel, Director, Montgomery County Health and Human Services; Richard Madaleno, Director, Montgomery County Office of Management and Budget; and Linda McMillan, Senior Legislative Analyst, Montgomery County Council. Following this discussion – and taking into consideration previous CoA research and recommendations; FY20 priorities that were not funded but where the need continues; input from agency directors; and other information – the Commission adopted the following budget priorities for FY21:

HHS: (1) Expand home delivered Senior Nutrition programs to include weekends; (2) add two social worker positions: one in Adult Protective Services and one in the Public Guardianship program; and (3) increase the subsidy for small group homes and Adult Foster Care.

Recreation: (1) Restore FY20 cuts affecting programs serving older adults; and (2) increase hours of service for senior programs.

Housing: Continue to increase the Housing Initiative Fund to further expand affordable housing options for older adults.

During the second quarter, the CoA met with County Executive Marc Elrich where he discussed his vision and seven goals for the County and explained the position and actions he has taken on such CoA priorities as affordable housing, employment for older adults, and transportation. The CoA also sent a letter to Gabe Albornoz, Chair of the County Council's HHS Committee, outlining the CoA's budget priorities for FY21 as described above. CoA Chair, Jean Dinwiddie, presented these priorities to the Council at its October 10 hearing.

In November, the CoA held its annual Legislative Breakfast where CoA members had the opportunity to meet with Montgomery County's State legislators. About one-third of Montgomery County's State delegation attended. Also in November, at the CoA's regular monthly meeting, Commission members met with County Council Member, Evan Glass, who discussed the *Housing Impact Fairness Act*, and with Rona Kramer, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Aging, who discussed recent initiatives that her Department has instituted.

Also during the second quarter, Chair Dinwiddie and other CoA members met with a number of Montgomery County Department Directors and staff to discuss issues of concern to the CoA. These sessions included meetings with Aseem Nigam, Director of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs and Deputy Director, Frank Demarais; Al Roshdieh, Director of the Department of Transportation; Fred Lees, Chief of Management; Barry Hudson, the new Director of Montgomery County's Office of Public Information; HR Director Berke Atilla; Tiffany Ward, Racial Equity Program Manager in the County Executive's office; and Elaine Bonner Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst for the County Council.

During the third quarter, at its January 2020 meeting, the CoA met with Recreation Department Director, Robin Riley, and Recreation Department staff member, Phil Smakula, who discussed older adult programs and activities at County recreation facilities. At its February meeting the CoA met with a number of County officials including Montgomery County Council Member, Gabe Albornoz; Special Assistant to the County Executive, Chuck Short; Khalid Afzal, Special Projects Manager for the Maryland-National Capitol Park and Planning Commission; Daniel Jones, Partnership Specialist for the Bureau of Census; and Walton Harris, Policy Analyst for Taxicab Regulation and Special Transit Services. CoA members were briefed on initiatives such as the Montgomery County Property Tax Credit for Senior Citizen Volunteers (MC 23-20) and "Thrive Montgomery;" and learned about the County's 2020 U.S. Census efforts and the status of the Transportation Services Improvement Fund.

Also, at the February meeting, CoA members discussed plans for the CoA's annual forum. The theme of the 2020 event was to be "What Can Racial Equity Look Like in an Age-Friendly Community?" Unfortunately, the forum and the March and April CoA meetings were cancelled due to the COVID-19 crisis.

In the fourth quarter, the CoA resumed its deliberations in May by holding meetings by conference and Zoom calls. It will continue to hold virtual meetings for the foreseeable future.

At the May meeting CoA members heard from Lylie Fisher, facilitator of Montgomery County's Caregiver Support Program. In June, the CoA's meeting featured a panel discussion with Sidney Katz, President of the Montgomery County Council, and Rich Madaleno, Director of Montgomery County's Office of Management and Budget. The discussion centered around the County's financial and budget situation and the impact the Pandemic has had on the economy.

FY21 First Quarter Activities

During the first quarter of FY21, the Commission concentrated its efforts on setting its budget priorities for FY22. A special meeting was held on July 9 where CoA members discussed at length a list of possible budget priorities for which the CoA could lobby in the FY22 budget. That draft list included:

Public Guardianship/Adult Protection Services

- 2 new social worker positions

Affordable Housing

- Maintain funding for Housing Initiative Fund
- Funding for legal assistance with evictions

Recreation Budget

- Early stage memory loss/Senior Center Plus
- Senior adult programs

Health and Wellness

- Expand senior nutrition programs
- Increase payment rates for Adult Foster Care program
- Funding for consumer education on hearing loss and hearing tests

Senior Fellows

- Senior Fellow position for diversity
- Restore 2 positions eliminated in FY20 budget

Other

- Employment/training and retraining of older adults
- Campaign to advertise services available for older adults

The CoA members agreed that the items on the list should be prioritized and after the meeting they voted and arrived at the following six budget priorities:

Adult protective services/public guardianship – add two social worker positions
Provide legal information and/or assistance to renters who are at risk of eviction
Expand senior nutrition programs

Develop a campaign to advertise County services for seniors
Maintain the Housing Initiative Fund
Maintain and expand senior adult programs

While the CoA may not be able to advocate for all issues, especially since it is often asked to identify its top two or three budget priorities, the list is important because it provides additional guidance for advocacy moving forward. Some budget items for which the CoA has advocated in the past received some support in the voting process, but they did not rise to the highest level of priority this year. The CoA will continue to advocate for these items as appropriate. Some additional issues – e.g., hearing loss, social isolation, and older adult employment – will be studied further by CoA committees.

At its September meeting the CoA members heard from Tiffany Ward, Montgomery County's Chief Equity Officer, and Betty Lam, Chief of Montgomery County's Office of Community Affairs. Ms. Ward discussed Montgomery County's recent racial equity initiatives and noted that a key goal of the initiative is to close the gap so that race does not predict the outcome of an action, situation, or an individual's achievement level.

Ms. Lam also provided background on the efforts that her department has made regarding the racial equity initiative. She stated that the impetus of the initiative's work is to help staff make tough decisions and to allow them to understand the root causes that continually impact communities and necessitate them to ask for services. The goal is to look at preventing the problems from happening.

Also during the first quarter, two CoA Task Forces were convened to address important issues affecting the community and older adults: the Dementia, Policing and Racial Equity Task Force that is studying the use of a police unit in the County's Silver Alert program; and a Transportation Task Force that is looking at County transportation initiatives. The Transportation Task Force has written CoA letters to County officials regarding two initiatives. The Dementia, Policing and Racial Equity Task Force is in the process of preparing a report with recommendations. A third Task Force is being considered to study the issue of older adults and social isolation.

In addition, CoA members are participating in County workgroups that are studying issues that affect older adults. Chair Jean Dinwiddie is a member of the County Executive's COVID-19 recovery workgroup that is looking at ways to get the County back on its feet from the effects of the COVID Pandemic. Commissioner Eddie Rivas attended meetings of the Racial Equity and Climate Change workgroup, a group whose goal is to minimize greenhouse emissions by 2035.

Finally, because of the Pandemic, the taping of "Seniors Today" has been on hiatus. The show's host and former CoA member, Amy Harbison, has gotten it back on track and production began the week of September 28. The first show featured the head of the County's Board of Elections, and information on food resources. The production was broadcast via Zoom.

Aging in Community

Committee members received a COVID-19 update from County employee Pazit Aviv at its September 20 meeting. Among the topics discussed was meal delivery. The Committee is also considering the issue of social isolation and is looking at possible projects with the Health and Wellness Committee to address it. Earlier in the year the Committee recommended that the County mail postcards to older adults to provide information regarding available services, and, to that end, 4,000 postcards were sent to individuals living in congregate homes.

The Committee also recently heard about housing issues from Lisa Govoni, the Housing Research Planner at the Montgomery County Planning Department. The Planning Department completed two studies in the past year, one on the preservation of affordable housing and another on housing needs, and both rendered much useful data. Ms. Govoni is also working on an affordable housing fact sheet that the CoA could help distribute.

In addition, the Committee is looking at the County's Senior Fellows Program. Members would like to explore it as a fellowship program, and not concentrate on it being simply an employment program; they would like to make it more robust. The Committee will develop a mission statement and determine whether a task force to look at the Program would be appropriate.

Health and Wellness

Over the summer the Committee developed a Hearing Loss Fact Sheet that it is now distributing. Currently, Committee members are considering the issue of social isolation and may join the members of the Aging in Community Committee in a joint project. Health aging and social isolation expert, E.A. Casey, will be addressing the Committee on October 6.

Public Policy

The Public Policy Committee discussed the following at its September meeting:

Voting in nursing homes: Voting is becoming an issue for nursing home residents; they need assistance when voting and there is confusion about how to apply for a mail-in ballot and when the ballot has to be returned. Members suggested that the Department of Health and Human Services send a note to the facilities reminding them that voters will need more help this year. Also, it was learned after the Public Policy Committee meeting that the County's Board of Elections will deliver ballots, in a plastic pouch, to a representative at the participating facilities. Those representatives will assist voters and return voted ballots to the Board of Elections.

Employee leave for eldercare: Committee members discussed the fact that, because of the Pandemic, the County is making provisions for County employees with childcare responsibilities yet there do not appear to be similar provisions for employees with eldercare responsibilities. Members agreed to research Montgomery County's family leave laws and, depending on what is learned and the interest of the CoA, the CoA may want to approach the County Council to suggest amending the County law to add eldercare provisions. The topic will be included on the Public Policy Committee's agenda for October.

Legislative Breakfast: The Public Policy Committee is working to set a date and time for the annual CoA event. It will be a Zoom meeting and could be held any time of day.

Upcoming Activities

In March 2020 all CoA activities were suspended because of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Although the CoA started holding virtual meetings in May, its activities are limited. The CoA will continue to hold virtual meetings throughout the Fall and will submit written and oral FY22 budget priorities to the County Council. Invited guests during the Fall session include County Council member, Will Jawando, who will discuss initiatives he is bringing before the Council; Employee Benefits Research Institute Research Director, Jack VanDerhei, who will discuss the status of the Social Security Trust Funds; and activity updates from County liaisons who regularly attend CoA meetings as well as an update from Sean O'Donnell from the Public Health Office. The Commission is also planning to hold its annual Legislative Breakfast in November or December and will invite Montgomery County's State legislators to participate in a discussion by Zoom call.

Collaboration with Other Boards, Commissions, and Committees

CoA collaborates with other Boards, Commissions, and Committees, as appropriate. CoA also welcomes representatives of other Boards, Commissions and Committees at its standing Committee meetings. These representatives are invited to report on their B/C/or C's activities at CoA's monthly meetings.