**Governor’s Council to Address Aging in Massachusetts**

**Monday, May 17th, 2021**

**1:00 PM – 3:00 PM**

**\*\*The meeting was held via Zoom\*\***

**In attendance:** Co-Chairs Secretary Marylou Sudders and Eileen Connors, Bill Caplin, Secretary Elizabeth Chen, Rosanne DiStefano, Beth Dugan, Assistant Secretary Kate Fichter, Tom Grape, Steven Kaufman, Undersecretary Jennifer Maddox, Nora Moreno Cargie, Ruth Moy, Alicia Munnell, Brian O’Grady, Alice Sweeney, and Amy Schectman.

**Not present:** Joe Coughlin, Kevin Dumas, and Tom Riley.

**Council Staff:** Deputy Secretary Robin Lipson, Emily Cooper, Pam MacLeod, Amanda Bernardo, Kathryn Downes, Molly Evans, and William Travascio.

**Other Presenters:** Ben Stone, Director of Public Housing – DHCD

**Documents:** May 17th, 2021 meeting agenda, draft minutes from the November 9th, 2020 meeting, and the May 17th, 2021 meeting deck.

The meeting was called to order at 2:00 PM by Co-Chairs Secretary Sudders and Eileen Connors, who welcomed all Council members and visitors. The Council members approved the November 9th, 2020 meeting minutes by all those in attendance.

Secretary Sudders noted that it has been an extraordinary 15 months. To date at least 89% of Massachusetts residents 75 and older have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, which far exceeds the national average and is a credit to the work of many people. For residents 80 and older the vaccination rate is 92%. 99% of those who get a first dose go back to get their second dose, this is also the highest rate in the country. We expect to reach 4.1 million fully vaccinated people by early June. Massachusetts consistently ranks first or second in many of the national measures around vaccine administration. The Secretary then detailed upcoming changes to the State of Emergency and public health measures. Secretary Sudders also provided an update on the *Trust the Facts, Get the Vax* campaign. She acknowledged that the state has identified the 20 most at-risk communities and is working with them to reduce vaccine hesitancy. Updated data is available every week through the Department of Public Health.

Deputy Secretary Robin Lipson thanked Secretary Sudders for her remarks and acknowledged that it was four years ago when the Council first came together. Much has happened during that time, but we continue to work within the framework that the Council adopted approximately two and a half years ago. The work has deepened, and the partnerships and linkages have expanded. The state’s next Age-Friendly report is set to be submitted to AARP soon, and one of the highlights is that even in the midst of a pandemic this work is thriving and having a meaningful impact. We have new communities that have made the commitment to become age- and/or dementia-friendly. We have deepened existing partnerships, like with Babson College and the Massachusetts Caregiver Coalition, and added new partners, including the Registry of Motor Vehicles. Efforts have been made by communities to hold programming for older adults in different ways. People volunteered to help their neighbors, dropping off groceries and calling for a friendly chat. Enormous efforts locally were made to mitigate the isolation and loneliness older adults experienced over the past year. Every May is Older Americans Month and this year’s theme is Communities of Strength. The strength of our communities will shape our recovery as we move forward.

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) Undersecretary Jennifer Maddox mentioned that over the course of the pandemic the agency has partnered with EOEA, DPH, and MEMA in a variety of ways including organizing vaccine clinics in local housing authorities. The initiative provided over 110,000 doses to support clinics in over 220 communities. Staff worked tirelessly to ensure that vulnerable residents and housing authority staff had access to the vaccine. The collaboration saved lives.

Ben Stone, DHCD Director of Public Housing, noted that since March 2020, DHCD has been issuing guidance for the operation of local housing authorities. These local agencies operate 30,000 units of state aided housing and 15,000 HUD-funded senior and non-elder disabled housing. During the pandemic, DHCD recommended mask-wearing for staff and residents when they are outside of their units. Frequent cleanings were conducted, common areas were limited, and non-emergency work was halted at the height of the pandemic. Since then, housing authorities that follow proper public health guidelines have been advised to resume regular operations.

Ben went on to note that during the pandemic, DHCD partnered with EOHHS agencies and MEMA to distribute 2 million masks to local housing authorities, and an additional one million masks to shelters. Furthermore, it was through these partnerships that approximately 60,000 local housing authority residents were vaccinated.

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Assistant Secretary and Council Member Kate Fichter spoke about the Shared Streets and Spaces grant program offered by MassDOT. The program was started in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the objective to empower communities to use roads for something else in addition to motor vehicles. The program is currently in its fourth iteration and has been a bright spot for MassDOT during the pandemic. It started out with $5 million and by the end of this year will have grown to $30 million. Examples of funded projects include communities using streets to facilitate outdoor activities, such as dining; promoting bike and scooter lanes, and spaces for people to walk; creating dedicated bus lanes and establishing new facilities for buses. Some projects are assigned “bonus points” for including criteria like improving access to routes or facilities that serve older adults.

One result of the program is that many ADA-compliant ramps have been built throughout the Commonwealth. Some communities have used the funds to better link senior centers to downtown areas or to other areas frequented by older adults like parks and trails. The program is ongoing, with applications still being accepted. Assistant Secretary Fichter noted that internal processes were changed so that money could be distributed faster, and MassDOT has been contacted by their peer agencies in other states and in some cases internationally to share best practices.

Amy Schectman mentioned a collaboration between the MIT AgeLab and The Boston Globe that created the Longevity Hub, an ongoing series of opinion pieces and live events tied to technology and growing older that will continue to publish new pieces every 6-weeks. Beth Dugan added that the purpose of this series is to prompt people to think more about aging as an opportunity for ourselves and our communities. Members of the Council have already authored or will be writing pieces. Deputy Secretary Lipson added that this series helps normalize the conversation about aging.

EOEA Secretary Chen asked members of the Council what they would like to see as we emerge from the pandemic and into a new normal. One concern that the Secretary shared is about cognitive and physical decline as the result of isolation. Roseanne DiStefano said that she is concerned about the volume of scam calls during COVID-19. Social isolation makes those calls more dangerous. She cited the number of older adults without access to the internet as a concern. Rosanne suggested that a hotline be created to field questions from people about scam calls. Bill Caplin talked about his rewarding experience as a part-time substitute Meals On Wheels driver during the pandemic. He noted that the East Longmeadow Senior Center will be opening again in June and the importance of getting people back together again to socialize. He felt social isolation is a hugely important issue and the role of the Meals On Wheels driver is important so that those living alone know someone is looking out for them.

Assistant Secretary Kate Fichter spoke about the experience of her 83-year-old father and the difficulty of socializing during times of physical distancing when technology was the only option. She is concerned about cognitive decline that older adults are facing because their routines were disrupted. She is concerned about the willingness of older adults who had been isolated to reengage in in-person activities again.

Alicia Munnell mentioned that the pandemic has highlighted issues that existed pre-pandemic. She is thinking about renewing efforts around property tax deferral.

Nora Moreno Cargie expressed that there still needs to be work done to address structural racism. As we think about equity, access, and diversity, we need to be mindful that we do not create a wider gap and should listen to communities to hear what they think are the solutions. Amy Schectman added that housing is the biggest source of intergenerational wealth transfer. Not all older adults have the ability to mortgage their homes to pay for services. Alicia Munnell went on to note that just before the pandemic, Auto-IRA programs launched in California, Oregon, and Illinois. Even at the onset of the pandemic, those who invested did not take their money out.

Alicia Munnell inquired about the reliability of the state’s broadband network. Secretary Chen responded that it is variable across different parts of the state. However, there are now ways in which individuals can get assistance paying for or accessing it. She added that it is not just about broadband or device access, but also developing the competency to troubleshoot technology. Brian O’Grady said that the Williamstown Senior Center assisted the Town of Hancock when it came time to register online for COVID-19 vaccines because of internet access issues in the area. Assistant Secretary Kate Fichter added that this is something they are taking note of for the Shared Streets program in case the program can be expanded. Beth Dugan cited the Healthy Aging Data Report, which found that 70% of older adults have access to the internet.

Eileen Connors closed the meeting by thanking the presenters and the Council members for attending and announcing the next meeting will take place on October 25th, 2021.

The meeting adjourned at 3:30 PM.