

TOWN OF BROOKLINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE
Human Services Subcommittee Report

FY22 Council on Aging Budget

The Human Services Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee held a virtual public hearing on Monday, March 8, 2021, at 7:30 pm to review the FY22 Council on Aging Budget.

In addition to the four Human Services Subcommittee members Kim Smith (Chair and TMM 6), David-Marc Goldstein (TMM 8), Susan Granoff (TMM 7), and Claire Stampfer (TMM 5), there were seventeen other attendees: Ruthann Dobek (Director, Council on Aging), Yolanda Rodriguez (Chair, Council on Aging), Assistant Town Administrator Justin Casanova-Davis, Patricia Ahlin, Carol Caro (Chair, Communications Committee of BrooklineCAN), Susan Cohen (Treasurer, TMMA and TMM 7), MaryLou Crimmins, Marion Freedman-Gurspan, Paula Friedman (TMM 14), Barr Jozwicki (TMM 9 and Treasurer of Brookline Senior Center Board of Directors), Kevin Lang (Brookline Multiservice Senior Center Corporation, the Council on Aging's charitable arm), Betsy Pollock (President, Brookline Senior Center Board of Directors), Kate Poverman (TMM 8), Carol Seibert, Diana Spiegel (TMM 2), Judith Vanderkay (Library Trustee and TMM 9), and Matthew Weiss (Co-Chair, Age-Friendly Cities Committee).

FY22 Budget

The FY22 request for the Council on Aging (COA) budget is \$988,656 and restores all but \$22,000 of the \$94,037 (10%) by which its FY21 budget request was cut last year due to COVID-19 townwide budgetary exigencies. It is 2.26% (\$21,939) higher than the COA's FY20's actual expenditures, but virtually the same as its actual expenditures (\$988,765) in FY19. Salaries (\$851,566), which account for over 86% of the COA's FY22 budget request, increase by \$65,696 (8.36%), but are \$6,460 less than in FY20 Actual and \$14,234 less than in FY19 Actual. Utilities (\$59,876), which are 6% of the budget, decrease by 10.7%. Costs for other expenditure categories – Services, Supplies, Other, and Budgeted Capital – are level funded. (The FY22 operating budget information is found in Part IV, pages 113-16, of the FY-2022 Financial Plan.)

Unfunded expenses include \$22,000 for a part-time geriatric social worker position and \$17,000 for the expansion of a part-time custodial position into a full-time position.

FY 22 Budget: Council on Aging					
	FY20 Actual	FY21 Budget	FY22 Budget	2021-22 Actual vs Budget Variance	2021-22 Actual vs Budget %
Salaries	858,026	785,870	851,566	65,696	8.36%
Services	34,558	48,418	48,418	0	0.00%
Supplies	17,057	18,846	18,846	0	0.00%
Other	1,408	4,250	4,250	0	0.00%
Utilities	50,277	67,042	59,876	-7,165	-10.69%
Budgeted Capital	5,391	5,700	5,700	0	0.00%
TOTAL	966,717	930,126	988,656	58,530	6.29%

Discussion

Brookline's Council on Aging is responsible for providing comprehensive services for Brookline residents age 60 and over, who currently number over 12,000 and make up more than 20% of Brookline's total population. The COA's FY22 budget request of under \$1 million is approximately one-quarter of 1% of the town's total budget.

The COA operates the Brookline Senior Center at 93 Winchester Street, where Brookline residents 60 and older can go for socialization, activity, meals, and services. Its core services include transportation for seniors, geriatric social work, home care, advocacy, legal assistance, employment assistance, information and referral, and volunteer opportunities. It provides extensive cultural, educational, health education, and physical activity programs and classes both onsite at the Senior Center and, during the current pandemic, virtually, while helping seniors to take advantage of town programs to assist seniors, such as the town's property tax relief programs and its Parking Access for Resident's Caregiver (PARC) program.

Need for Increased Funding

There was universal support from the more than a dozen members of the public who spoke at this hearing for increasing the COA's FY22 budget. These requests ranged from \$22,000, which would restore the FY22 budget to its pre-COVID funding, to over \$100,000.

\$22,000 for Part-time Geriatric Social Worker. The COA had its FY21 Budget request slashed by 10% and it, along with Library Services, experienced the highest percentage of COVID budgetary cuts of any other town department. All speakers requested that, at a minimum, the full amount that had been cut from the COA's budget request in FY21 be restored to enable the COA to fund the \$22,000 part-time geriatric social worker position that had been eliminated. There are currently 3.5 clinical social workers on staff at the Senior Center, and all perform critical functions, such as crisis intervention (including finding emergency housing or caretakers)¹, connecting elders to community services and to state and federal programs, and collaborating with the Brookline Police and Health Departments and the Brookline Community Mental Health Center to address elder issues.

\$17,000 for Expansion of Part-time Custodial Position into a Full-time Position. Prior to the COVID-19 shut down, the Senior Center was staffed by one full-time and one part-time custodian, and these positions were essential for the daily operation of the Senior Center. With the rollout of the vaccine, the Senior Center is likely to resume full operation by this fall if not sooner. As Brookline's senior population continues to increase, and as a result of new senior housing near the Senior Center, the COA anticipates increased usage of the Senior Center. This, in combination with new COVID protocols, which require more frequent sanitization and cleaning during and after usage of rooms and more frequent changing of filters, makes additional custodial hours even more necessary. The COA believes that this should be a permanent full-time position with benefits.

¹ For example, in February 2021 a geriatric social worker quickly found emergency housing for a senior who had been discharged from a local hospital on a Friday afternoon only to find that their heating system was not working and would not be able to be repaired for several days. Last spring, a geriatric social worker arranged for help when a senior couple both became ill with COVID-19 and the husband, who was the caregiver to his wife (who had dementia and was legally blind), had to be hospitalized.

30% of the COA's Operating Budget Is Funded by Private Donations and Grants. Some speakers expressed concern that the COA was having to rely on private fundraising and grants to finance some of its core operational costs to a greater extent than do other town departments. The town currently provides only 70% of the COA's operating budget, with the rest (over \$450,000) coming from government grants and private fundraising efforts by the nonprofit Multiservice Senior Center Corporation (the COA's charitable arm), which in FY21 donated \$159,446 to the Senior Center. In FY21, grants enabled the COA to provide Alzheimer's respite care, training in assistive technology to vision impaired seniors, and programs for food insecure seniors, while private donations were used to fund a pilot rideshare transportation program for Brookline seniors and funded all the fuel costs and some of the driver salaries needed to operate the COA's senior van and elder bus.

It was also pointed out that town tax revenue from Uber and Lyft use that had been allocated to the COA in the past to fund select senior transportation programs at the Senior Center may be significantly less this year due to COVID, and yet these programs will still need to be funded.

Need for Satellite Senior Center with Parking

Some of the public commentators strongly advocated for the creation of a satellite senior center with ample parking, preferably on the Welltower West campus recently acquired by the town. The Senior Center's current location on Winchester St. has almost no parking nearby, which means that Brookline seniors who live in South Brookline and many who live in North Brookline are not able to access it easily – or at all. In addition, the senior population of Brookline has increased by more than 35% since the Senior Center first opened in 2001 and is likely to continue to grow during the next decades. In FY20, an average of 175 seniors used the Senior Center each day and an average of 650 seniors used the Senior Center on a weekly basis. As noted above, this anticipated population growth, when combined with new senior housing within blocks of the Senior Center on Winchester St, will make it difficult for the existing building to accommodate the growing demands on its use by seniors.

Impact of COVID-19

The COA has made extraordinary efforts during this past year to continue to provide a high level of services to Brookline seniors throughout the pandemic. The Senior Center suspended all “in person” programming on March 12, 2020, and the building was closed to the public indefinitely starting the following week. But the Senior Center never stopped its work. The building remained open to staff and volunteers and, in time, for a limited number of essential in-person programs.

The Senior Center staff, who had never conducted any kind of virtual “online” programming in the past, launched a small group of online “Zoom” program offerings in March and April. In time they came to include a variety of discussion groups, dance/fitness classes, drawing and art classes, a sewing/quilting program, and mindfulness/meditation sessions. The Senior Center also developed prerecorded content that participants could access online or through the Brookline Interactive Group. The prerecorded content allowed programming to reach seniors who did not have the skills or technology to use the Zoom platform. All of this required the purchase of new equipment, such as laptops and cameras.

As the state's phased reopening was implemented, the Senior Center began working with the Brookline Health Department to develop health and safety protocols for essential “on site” programming. As a result, the Center was able (1) to complete its income tax preparation assistance

program in collaboration with the AARP which helped over 190 seniors, (2) to develop a “grab and go” lunch pick up program in collaboration with Springwell twice a week beginning in June 2020 with a third day added in August, and (3) to resume its monthly food commodity distribution program in collaboration with the Greater Boston Food Bank beginning in June 2020 For those physically unable to get to the Center, home food deliveries were made to them using the Senior Center bus and van.

Once the Senior Center begins to reopen more fully, it is likely that it will need increased technology to permit hybrid meetings and activities.

Recommendation

The Human Services Subcommittee (with one member recusing himself due to a conflict of interest), by a vote of 3-0-0, recommends: (1) approval of the Council on Aging FY22 budget request of \$988,656 plus (2) restoring \$22,000 to the COA FY22 budget to cover the salary of a part-time geriatric social worker position that had been cut from the COA's FY21 budget and (3) adding \$17,000 to expand a part-time custodial position to a full-time position.² Therefore, the Human Services Subcommittee recommends approval of a total FY22 Council on Aging budget of \$1,027,656.

² The change from a part-time to full-time custodial position would also incur approximately \$13,500 in benefits costs, which would impact the Personnel Benefits FY22 budget.