

## BROOKLINE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

### Human Services Subcommittee **Council on Aging FY24 Budget**

Public Hearing held via Zoom on March 1, 2023 at 7 pm

#### **Attendees**

Subcommittee members Susan Granoff (chair), Katherine Florio, Donelle O'Neal, and Mark Penzel; COA Director Ruthann Dobek; COA Chair Yolanda Rodriguez; Betsy Pollock (President, Senior Center Board of Directors); Select Board Member John VanScoyoc; and members of the public Carol Caro, Judith Chasin, Susan Cohen (TMM 7), Marion Freedman-Gurspan (TMM 9), Janet Gelbart, Neil Gordon (TMM 1/AC), Alec Lebovitz (TMM 8), Fran Perler, Arden Reamer (TMM 8), Jill Schiff, Carol Seibert, Diana Spiegel (TMM 8), Charity van Delft, Matthew Weiss, Sonia Wong, and William Wong.

Note that subcommittee member David-Marc Goldstein was absent from the hearing because the chair of the COA is an immediate family member. Note as well that subcommittee chair Susan Granoff participated in the hearing after disclosing as required under state law that she is chair of BrooklineCAN's Livable Community Advocacy Committee, a volunteer group that advocates for Brookline's seniors, and a member of BrooklineCAN's steering committee.

#### **Hearing Recording**

<https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/rec/share/4kaJqyepL3jo-tBJtenLYZSDKZsIPSeKaCSd5Zzo8voPE83RRBIPsXPxDtPOYrIr.HxfP3Kly0CoAkdDg>

Passcode: .CB^4C!5

#### **Recommendation**

The Human Services Subcommittee, by a vote of 4-0-0, unanimously recommends favorable action on the full Council on Aging budget request of \$1,067,722. The subcommittee, by a vote of 4-0-0, unanimously recommends that no cuts be made to this budget should the override fail, and therefore does not approve of the proposed base budget of \$1,063,833, which does not provide funding for a \$3,889 contractual increase in building cleaning services for the Senior Center by the company that the Town contracts with to provide cleaning services.

In addition, the subcommittee unanimously recommends the approval of the COA's current ARPA requests totaling \$180,040.

#### **FY24 Base Budget**

The FY24 Council on Aging (COA) base budget is \$1,063,833 and is essentially level funded. The base budget is 1.8% (\$19,318) more than FY23's budget primarily due to an increase of \$10,980 in the COA's parking lease with 112 Center St for Senior Center staff parking. (This is the first increase under this lease since the Senior Center first opened in 2001.) As a result, the FY24 Services category is 23% more than in FY23. The FY24 Salaries category (\$911,776), which accounts for 86% of the COA's FY24 budget request, is essentially level funded (up by only \$4,120 from FY23's budget request) and the number of FTEs (18.01) is unchanged. Utilities are 7% higher (an increase of \$4,218), and the costs for other expenditure categories – Supplies, Other, and Budgeted Capital – are unchanged from FY23.

	FY22 Actual	FY23 Budget	FY24 Budget	Variance
<b>SALARIES</b>	<b>\$835,445</b>	<b>\$907,656</b>	<b>\$911,776</b>	<b>\$4,120</b>
<b>SERVICES</b>	<b>\$37,926</b>	<b>\$48,418</b>	<b>\$59,398</b>	<b>\$10,980</b>
<b>SUPPLIES</b>	<b>\$16,940</b>	<b>\$18,846</b>	<b>\$18,846</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>OTHER</b>	<b>\$388</b>	<b>\$4,250</b>	<b>\$4,250</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>UTILITIES</b>	<b>\$55,625</b>	<b>\$59,645</b>	<b>\$63,863</b>	<b>\$4,218</b>
<b>BUDGETED CAPITAL</b>	<b>\$4,577</b>	<b>\$5,700</b>	<b>\$5,700</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$950,900</b>	<b>\$1,044,515</b>	<b>\$1,063,833</b>	<b>\$19,318</b>

For further details on the COA FY24 budget, see the Brookline FY-2024 Financial Plan, Section 4Q, pp. 161-168, and the.opengov link: [https://stories.opengov.com/brooklinema/published/BML\\_oZJ0I9](https://stories.opengov.com/brooklinema/published/BML_oZJ0I9)

**Discussion**

The Brookline Council on Aging is responsible for providing comprehensive services for Brookline residents age 60 and over, who currently number over 13,000 and make up more than 20% of Brookline's total population. The COA's FY24 base budget request of \$1,063,833 is one-quarter of 1% of the town's total FY24 base 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 on site at the Senior Center and virtually, with a hybrid option for some meetings, and help to seniors filling out applications for town programs, such as the town's property tax relief programs and its Parking Access for Resident's Caregiver (PARC) program.

Over 30% of the COA's FY23 operating budget is funded by private donations and non-ARPA grants. The FY23 COA operating budget is \$1,494,372. Of this amount, \$449,857 is funded through grants and private fund-raising efforts such as those by the nonprofit Multiservice Senior Center Corporation (the COA's charitable arm), which alone provided \$154,910 to the Senior Center in FY23 for salaries, supplies, and program supports. The town currently provides about 70% of the COA's operating budget. These amounts do not include ARPA funding.

If the override passes, the COA is scheduled to receive an additional \$100,000. This would be used to fully fund a full time geriatric social work position that is currently funded 20 hours by the town and 17.5 hours through grants and to stabilize the COA's subsidized transportation programs, which currently receives no municipal funding and are 100% reliant on grants.

In order to keep its FY24 base budget level funded, the COA will be utilizing a portion of the ARPA funding it has received, which is intended to last through December 2026. To date the COA has

received \$517,792 in local ARPA funding (\$57,968 for technology upgrades to the Senior Center, \$100,000 for programs to combat food insecurity, and \$359,824 for senior transportation programs and services), as well as \$165,000 in state ARPA funding (for transportation, social work, and employment of older adults). The COA's request for \$276,766 in local ARPA funding to provide social services relating to the mental health issues and social isolation of Brookline's older adults was rejected last year. In this final round of local ARPA funding, the COA has requested \$80,000 for an electric vehicle to replace one of its heavily utilized vans for transporting seniors, \$50,000 for outreach to isolated seniors, and \$50,000 for the TRIPPS transportation program.

A broad range of additional topics were discussed at the public hearing. Included among these were the following:

#### Continuing Impact of COVID-19 in Post-Pandemic Times

Covid has deeply affected the work of the COA during the past three years because Brookline's population of older adults has been severely and disproportionately impacted by Covid's detrimental effects. These impacts have included the need for older residents to stay at home extensively, increased social isolation, dealing with loss and grief, increased food insecurity, job losses, new transportation challenges, a greater reliance on technology for staying connected with other people, and a greater need for help in using and obtaining this technology. Older adults, especially those over 75, have experienced the highest levels of mortality from this pandemic.

Even now, in post-pandemic times, the impact of Covid is still being felt among Brookline's older residents. In her presentation to the subcommittee, COA Director Dobek noted that the years of the Covid pandemic were especially traumatic ones for much of Brookline's older population, and the trauma and aftereffects of that time are still being felt today among many Brookline seniors. Social workers at the Senior Center have seen a marked increase among Brookline's senior population in instances of isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, fear, illness, dementia, evictions, and the need for financial assistance. All this has put a premium on the work of Senior Center employees and volunteers. In response, Senior Center social work professionals have continued to provide counseling, case management, and emotional support, and to make referrals to the Brookline Center for Community Mental Health when appropriate. Senior Center staff have provided older adults in financial stress with help in completing applications for fuel assistance, SNAP benefits, Medicare benefits, and other essential financial assistance programs, and have operated food distribution programs to reduce food insecurity. The COA has also created and implemented programs and services to reach vulnerable older adults at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

During the pandemic, the Senior Center made it a priority to work to help and support Brookline's older residents stay connected with other people and to maintain a healthy and engaged life style despite spending so much of their time housebound. They invested in cameras, laptops, and other technology and developed both virtual and prerecorded content so that seniors could connect with other adults and could participate in Senior Center programming remotely. Currently, the Senior Center is fully open and in-person attendance at events is about 70% of pre-Covid attendance, while physical fitness classes are close to 100% attendance. In addition, approximately 200 people participate in Senior Center programming via Zoom each week.

#### Need for Better Ventilation at Senior Center

Quite a few public commentators expressed concerns about the Senior Center's air quality and ventilation system contributing to the spread of Covid, particularly with respect to the fitness center on the second floor and the basement area where there are no windows that fully open. Director Dobek had reached out to Charlie Simmons, Brookline's Director of Public Buildings, who had responded that the HVAC system at the Senior Center was installed when the building was constructed in 2001. "Merv 13 air filters are used and this is the same as in all other buildings." But a number of commentators said that they thought that the Senior Center should have an air filtration system as good as that in Brookline public schools, which mostly use HEPA filters.

On March 31, Director Dobek reported that the School Department has given the COA a HEPA filter that was not being used by the schools. This will now be placed in the Senior Center's fitness center.

#### Need for Revised Middle Management Payment Structure

Last year Director Dobek expressed serious concern that the job descriptions and payment structure for the middle management, non-union professional positions in her department had not been reviewed during the past 20 years. This year she reported that the job descriptions of these positions have been updated during the past year and a study by HR and the town last fall has confirmed that the COA's professional staff is indeed undercompensated in comparison to other communities and to comparable positions in other Brookline town departments. However, no salary adjustments have been made yet, and no time line for next steps has been set. There are no current vacancies in the department, but there are likely to be retirements in the near future.

#### Need for Sustained Funding for Transportation

As older adults age, their transportation needs may change. Some aging adults may not be physically able to make use of public transportation to the extent that they did in the past, some may have more medically-related trips to make, and some may be experiencing vision and other physical changes that make them reluctant to drive cars.

The Senior Center currently provides a variety of transportation services to Brookline residents age 60 and older, including free medical taxicab transportation within Brookline and to select medical facilities elsewhere, four discounted rides per month for Uber/Lyft vehicle use by seniors with limited incomes, and rides to the Senior Center by the elder bus and van. These services are heavily used. In January 2023 alone, the free medical transportation service provided 600 rides to Brookline seniors, while 263 seniors currently receive discounted Lyft rides.

The COA owns three vehicles that are used to transport seniors to and from the Senior Center, as well as for meal and food deliveries, medical transportation, and recreational field trips. The elder bus seats 20. It was purchased by the town in 2012. The senior van was purchased from funds provided by the Brookline Multi-Service Non-Profit ("BMS"). The caravan was purchased in 2021 by funds from MassDot and BMS. One driver's salary is paid by the town; the second driver's salary is paid through grant and BMS funding. All fuel charges are paid from private donations. The Director is seeking \$80,000 in ARPA funding to replace one of the older vehicles with an electric vehicle.

Director Dobek pointed out that most of the funding for these transportation programs does not come from the town directly, but rather from grants or funding sources that must be applied for each year, and, consequently, there currently exists no sustained and reliable source to provide for the

growing transportation needs of Brookline's senior population.

#### Proposal for New Townwide Local Microtransit Transportation Service

Director Dobek is in the process of developing a proposal to explore the potential of creating a townwide, on-demand transportation service to provide safe, affordable, sustainable, and reliable transportation. In addition to benefitting older adults, it would help residents of South Brookline lacking ready access to public transportation, residents of North Brookline without cars who are seeking access to South Brookline recreation areas like Lars Anderson Park, and students without access to a family vehicle who need transportation to afterschool and recreational activities in Brookline. See "Proposal for Transportation Services." The RFP Committee of the COA is currently reviewing proposals, and they expect to make the responses public and issue a recommendation by early May. The intent of the RFP is to provide a transportation program similar to Newton's "NewMo" program.

In 2019, Newton contracted with VIA, a microtransit company, to conduct a pilot program called NewMo, a shared ride service for Newton residents over 60 that was the first program of its type in the state. On November 1, 2021, the NewMo transportation pilot program was extended to any resident age 13 and older for trips within Newton, the time of availability was extended to from 7 am to 6:30 pm weekdays, and the rate per trip was reduced to \$2. Seniors can still sign up for NewMo for Seniors to get rides to medical facilities outside of Newton and for weekend rides.

According to figures provided by Director Dobek last year, the initial cost of NewMo for Seniors was \$477,000-\$500,000 per year. The City of Newton pledged \$275,000 for the program, and the city received a number of grants from MassDOT and other organizations. Currently, with the expanded service for all residents 13 and older, the operating costs are about \$980,000 annually.

The Director hopes to work with Brookline town departments that have expressed interest in this proposal, such as Recreation, ODICR, Health, Veterans, and Schools.

Multiple commentators at the public hearing spoke in favor of beginning such a local transportation program in Brookline and said that they were envious of Newton's residents.

#### Need for Town Funding to Refurbish the Senior Center Interior

The Senior Center needs a paint job and new furniture. The town has not painted the Senior Center interior since it opened in February 2001, except for minor touch ups. The COA has requested CIP funding for painting for the last three years to no avail. In addition, the town has never provided any funding for Senior Center furniture and equipment. All of its furniture and kitchen equipment have been funded by the Brookline Multi-Service Non-Profit.

#### Other Public Hearing Comments

Among the other points made at the public hearing were the following:

- Brookline used to be a leader in providing services for its older population, but now it has fallen behind other municipalities in the state.
- Other municipalities fully fund their Senior Center; why can't we? Other communities are

appalled when they learn that Brookline's Senior Center is not fully funded by the town.

- The needs of Brookline's elderly population should be integrated into all aspects of town planning; for example, when parks are redone, there should be more benches.
- A long-term strategic plan should be developed based on an assessment of the current and future needs of Brookline's age 60 and older population, the fastest growing demographic in Brookline.
- There is a need for a satellite Senior Center that provides parking and is more accessible to older residents who live in South Brookline and Chestnut Hill.
- Every town committee and board should have senior representation on it to convey the perspective and concerns of Brookline's older population.
- Departments that have a small budget like the COA should not be asked to cut their budget by the same percentage as large budget departments because departments with a small budget are already making do with so very little and should not be expected to make additional cuts.

### **Recommendation**

The Human Services Subcommittee, by a vote of 4-0-0, unanimously recommends favorable action on the full Council on Aging budget request of \$1,067,722. The subcommittee, by a vote of 4-0-0, unanimously recommends that no cuts be made to this budget should the override fail, and therefore does not approve of the proposed base budget of \$1,063,833, which does not provide funding for a \$3,889 contractual increase for building cleaning services to the Senior Center by the company that the town contracts with to provide cleaning services.

In addition, the subcommittee unanimously recommends the approval of the COA's current ARPA requests totaling \$180,040.

Finally, the subcommittee unanimously voted that its chair write to the Select Board on its behalf to recommend that the town initiate a study to determine the feasibility of implementation of a local transportation program for Brookline's residents similar to Newton's NewMo program.

### **Questions from the Human Services Subcommittee to the Director of the COA in Advance of March 1, 2023 FY24 Budget Public Hearing**

- One of your FY24 objectives is to maintain a safe environment at the Senior Center in this post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Of course, with people 65 and older accounting for over 90% of recent US deaths from Covid-19, it is still a concern among Brookline seniors, especially those with health factors that make them at high risk of severe Covid illness should they become infected or who have household members at high risk.

What is the Senior Center currently doing to help protect senior visitors from contracting Covid? Are there policies in place to reduce the risk of infection? What else would you do if you had more funding?

We work closely with Brookline Department of Public Health as well as the Executive Office of Elder Affairs and State Department of Public Health to follow guidelines and protocols. We do not need extra funding at this time.

What is the current state of the ventilation system and air quality at the Senior Center? Does it vary from floor to floor, room to room? When was the ventilation system last updated or replaced? Are the Senior Center's ventilation system and use of HEPA filters as up to date and of comparable quality as that found in Brookline Public School buildings?

I passed this question to Charlie Simmons, Director of Brookline Town Buildings. Below is his answers.

The HVAC system at the Senior Center is original to when the building was constructed. Some parts have been replaced over the years- like the boilers. The system supplies the same ventilation air to all the spaces. Merv 13 air filters are used and this is the same as in all other Buildings.

- How do the number of visits to the Senior Center each month compare to numbers in the year prior to Covid? To last year? How many Brookline seniors visit the Senior Center at least once each year? How many participate in Senior Center activities via Zoom each month?

While numbers of day to day participants continue to be below pre-Covid figures, we are seeing usage return to normal levels. For example, a concert that served 90 people pre-Covid will now have 65 participants. The estimate for number of older adults served annually is 3,000. This includes visits to the Senior Center and also contacts in people's homes and other community sites. The number of participants via Zoom is 200.

- How are you trying to deal with the problem of insufficient parking near the Senior Center? In addition to providing daily rides to the Senior Center, we work with the Transportation Board. Hopefully, once Todd Kirrane's replacement is hired. It will be a priority.

- What percentage and dollar amount of your (1) FY22 actual expenses and (2) FY23 budget were funded by grants? By private fund raising and donations?

Our general funding by non-municipal funding is 30 to 32 percent. In FY22, the COA received a total of \$595,092.00 grant money.

- BMS - \$154,910.00
- Formula Grant - \$129,792.00
- State EARMARK - \$100,000.00
- State EARMARK - \$65,000.00
- MassDot - \$65,000.00
- TNC - \$48,898.00
- CDBG - \$31,492.00

A total of \$449,857.00 was received in FY 23.

- BMS - \$180,398.00
- Formula Grant - \$166,692.00
- State EARMARK - \$50,000.00
- CDBG - \$32,767.00
- BCF - \$20,000.00

This does not include ARPA funding.

- What is the total amount to date of ARPA funding that your department has received through the FY23 budget? \$517,792.00 (Technology-\$57,968, Food Insecurity-\$100,000. TRIPPS-\$359,824). Is any ARPA funding reflected in the FY24 budget (which expenses and how much)? None. Which, if any, of your ARPA funding requests were rejected? Addressing mental health of Brookline older adults ARPA request of \$276,776.00 was rejected. What are your current ARPA requests? TRIPPS, \$50,000. Electric vehicle, \$80,000. Friendship Works, \$50,040. The three requests from round one were not fully funded.
- How many vehicles does COA have? For what purposes are they being used? How important are they to the work of the Senior Center? Where did the funding for the purchase of these vehicles come from? What are the expenses associated with their use (driver wages, fuel, maintenance)? In the FY23 budget, what percentage and amount were from Town funds? In the FY24 budget? The COA has 3 vehicles. The elder bus was funded by the Town. It was purchased on 12/2012. The senior van was purchased on 7/2015. It was funded by the Brookline Multi-Service Non-Profit. The Caravan was purchased on 11/2021. It was funded by MassDot and Brookline Multi-Service Non-Profit. Driver's salary \$44,846 is paid by the Town. The second driver's salary is paid through grant and the BMS. All fuel charges are paid from donations. Maintenance and repair are paid by the Town. Vehicles are used for medical transportation, meal and food delivery, trips to Senior Center and recreational field trips.
- Do you have any vacancies in your department? If yes, which positions and for how long have they been vacant? No current vacancy but anticipate retirements. You said last year that providing competitive mid-management professional staff salaries has been a problem. What is being done by the Department of Human Resources, in conjunction with your department, to update COA job descriptions and salaries to bring them into alignment with other Town departments and comparable municipalities? Our job descriptions were updated this year. The study by HR and Town of Brookline confirmed that our professional staff is under compensated when compared to other communities. This issue is a top priority.
- Has your department made any expansion requests this year, and what was the decision of the Town Administrator about them? The only expansion request was due to service contracts expiring. CLEANCO-increase of \$3,889 and Parking Lease-increase of \$10,980. Town administrator supported these increases. However, the building cleaning increase is on the cut list if the override does not pass. .
- If the override passes, the Town Administrator has reported that the COA would get an additional \$100,000 in Town funding to be used to turn a part-time geriatric social worker into a full-time one and for additional senior transportation. Can you elaborate on the importance of these additional expenses? If the override fails, would you be able to get funding for them elsewhere?  
I will provide the response verbally tonight. Please see Draft Report on transportation that was sent Monday.
- Have there been any significant challenges that your department has faced during the past



year that may impact its ability to deliver services in the future or have financial consequences for the Town, either in the coming fiscal year or beyond? Please describe.

- Professional salaries
  - End of ARPA funding
  - Need for increase transportation and geriatric social work services
- 
- Have there been any significant changes in your department's functioning during the past year? If so, what?
- 
- Each department has a list of objectives for FY24 in its budget. Your department has an impressive list of 40. In your view, what are your department's three most important overarching objectives for the coming fiscal year?
    - Professional salaries
    - End of ARPA funding
    - Need for increase transportation and geriatric social work services
- 
- If there were no budgetary constraints, are there two or three things on your department's wish list that you would like to see the town fund? Please describe.
    - Professional salaries
    - End of ARPA funding
    - Need for increase transportation and geriatric social work services
- In additional, I would ask the Town to spend money on upgrading and renovating the Senior Center. The Senior Center needs a paint job as well as new furniture.