

Age Strong Commission Budget Questions

Councilor Kenzie Bok, Chair, asked:

- **What is the plan for using ARP funding to support and expand AgeStrong efforts, and what is the plan for avoiding the cliff effect after the ARP funding and other federal grants cease?**

We expect to get ARP funds for our Title III programs. We are still waiting to hear the amount of funding, the timeline for using the funds, and the guidelines around the funds. Since they are Older Americans Act funds, we will have very specific things that we can use these funds for and process for documentation of the usage of the funds. We currently have a network of 24 organizations that we fund, in addition to keeping some of the funds in house to support our programs. Once we have a better sense of funding, we plan to host some listening sessions to get input from our partners, other community organizations and older adults. We will pair this with our recently completed needs assessment to identify some currently funded areas for further expansion, and new opportunities. These funds do present a challenge because they are shorter term, but we are lucky we have our regular Title III funds that will continue. The hope is that we will at least be able to use them over a period of a couple years.

What is the current status of the taxi coupon program while a study is conducted? I know several of the residents at Amy Lowell have asked about the disappearance of the program.

We plan to get the taxi coupon program back up and running as soon as possible in more limited sites with COVID safety measures. We are in the final stages of approval from the City Operations team to move forward pending our use of the online appointment system which we are working to set up with DoIT. The new structure will be based on a partnership - we will be selling coupons by appointment at City Hall and at some locations across the city, and we will work with partners who will also be able to sell coupons. The hope is that we can get this program running again by the beginning of June.

- **Please explain the 13.7% reduction in the programs and partnerships budget.**

We merely reallocated certain funds from Programs and Partnership to Administration for the Operating portion of our budget.

Does AgeStrong do any intentional outreach to Native and Indigenous individuals, or partner with NAICOB? I am concerned that Boston is a hub for the indigenous community to gather and receive services, but not necessarily where they're domiciled, and so this community is easily overlooked.

We have not done outreach to NAICOB, but can certainly add that to our list for this year. Even if folks don't live in Boston there are aging services across the state, our Aging Service Access Point (ASAP) and Council on Aging (COA) partners, and we can connect people to the programs in the areas where they live.

- **Please elaborate on the Events budget increase and FY22 investments under contracted services.**

We received an additional \$250,000 for events for which we will request to include one staff position. We want to pay particular attention this year to reducing social isolation. Social isolation has the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We know that increased isolation impacted our older residents during COVID. Older adults are experiencing increased rates of depression and anxiety, cognitive decline, and physical decline. This slate of new programs is designed to encourage connection and activity. Programs include:

- Additional investment in our Senior First Night event due to increased costs (we lost the Seaport World Trade Center as a partner due to construction)
- Investment in senior engagement to reduce social isolation including:
 - Luncheons at local restaurants with some activity such as painting, comedy, or music (supporting engagement and local restaurants)
 - Walking groups
 - Afternoon tea and storytelling groups
 - Cultural Exchange - A series of cultural events across the City highlighting the rich diversity of Boston

In addition, we received an investment of \$220,000 for a hoarding program (details are below) that is a collaborative program between a number of city

departments and marks the first comprehensive approach to hoarding we've taken as a city.

Finally, we received a \$100,000 investment in our taxi coupon program which will allow us to take the next steps towards modernization of the program with the development of a program design and implementation of an RFP process. An additional investment will be needed in FY23 to complete the modernization.

- **The phone banking outreach to older adults at the height of COVID seemed like an excellent approach to contact those who may not know about AgeStrong's resources. Has the outreach continued to older adults who may be isolated? (In other words, elders who are not a part of a housing community or community center community, folks that may not call, etc.) Have we checked in on the folks we called initially? What have we learned from phone banking and what are the plans to continue to reach out to older adults who may be isolated?**

Through the years, we have coordinated different efforts to reach some of the more isolated older adults in the community. These have included phone banks, door knocks, etc. Understanding the impact of COVID on older adults, we put additional emphasis on reaching out to seniors this past year. We coordinated numerous multi lingual robo calls with the Mayor, we mailed out our Seniority magazine to thousands of households with critical COVID information which was translated in 7 languages, we coordinated volunteers to call thousands of seniors who we then connected to different programs and resources, and we partnered with community organizations to promote our programs and refer those in need to us. We are in the process of coordinating a more sustainable outreach effort with the emphasis on reaching a more diverse and linguistically isolated population, building upon the many connections we built through our food and vaccine access work during COVID. In the next couple of weeks, with the COVID emergency food delivery program coming to an end, we will be calling through a list of more than 1500 older adults who are still receiving weekly door-to-door deliveries from us as well as sending out a flyer in the mail to them and to another 1000 or so older adults who are receiving those same boxes through our bulk delivery program. Additionally, this year, we became an official SNAP outreach center and with that, we have gained access to a database of seniors in Boston who are eligible for SNAP but are not enrolled in the

program. We will be reaching out directly to those seniors and our staff will be assisting the ones interested in signing up for SNAP benefits and engage them in our other programs.

- **How many calls do you get that are housing-related? What would you say are the most frequent calls you get? Does the city have the housing or other resources to meet the needs of folks calling? Are there specific elder-focused housing resources you connect people with or do you send them to OHS? Can you provide detail on the call volume and a breakdown of the types of call?**

We get a significant number of housing calls ranging from home repair, housing search and applications, mediation, court advocacy, hoarding and other safety concerns, etc. Between April 2020 until present, we completed over 1600 housing intakes requiring follow up from our staff. Most of our calls are for housing search and applications. We work directly with older adults who reach out to us for assistance and collaborate with OHS when needed. We work closely with City and community partners to try and help older adults meet their housing needs as much as possible. In addition, with our Older Americans Act Title III funds we fund ESAC and the Elders Living at Home Program at Boston Medical Center for housing search, ESAC for senior home repair, HEARTH for activities within their housing buildings, and Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS) to work with older residents. The GBLS work is often focused on housing, utilities, and benefits. DND also funds a number of community partners to help older adults with housing search and stabilization.

- **Does Age Strong do wellness/health checks on older residents/reach out to residents that neighbors are concerned about? If so, are there ways Age Strong could be better supported in this?**

Our Constituent Services staff do conduct wellness checks when appropriate (paused during COVID), but we also work closely with BPD to conduct wellness checks. We respond to all of our calls and do our best to directly assist older adults. If someone is in need of a service we don't directly provide (homecare, meals on wheels, etc.), we work with our many community partners to ensure we address any issues that are brought to our attention. City Council could help by encouraging folks to call if they're worried about someone. If they think it is an emergency situation they

should call the police, but if it is just someone they think might need a call to see how they are and if they need any assistance or services, they should call our office and we can help. We also work collaboratively with Adult Protective Services, housed for the Boston area at Central Boston Elder Services, for cases of suspected elder abuse, neglect or financial exploitation. Any older adult who is competent has the right to refuse services from us, our ASAP partners, or Protective Services.

- **Please provide additional information on the new supports to help elders with hoarding challenges.**

We are very excited about this new investment. It will be the first time that the City has had a comprehensive hoarding program. This budget proposal was a collaboration between our office, ISD, DND, BHA, the Fire Department, and BPHC. The program is modeled after one on the North Shore and will include:

- Hoarding education for providers and housing staff
- Consultation on hoarding cases
- Hoarding support groups
- Ongoing peer led groups
- Crisis case management
- Individual and family counseling
- Clean out assistance

We will be putting out an RFP to engage a clinical partner with hoarding expertise around this effort.

- **Please provide additional detail regarding how your budget increase was spent last year, what new funding will be used for this year, and changes in FTE.**

In FY21 we used our funds for:

- Financial security - we added three advocacy representative positions (they help with benefits enrollment) and created and implemented a year long benefits outreach campaign.
- Digital Equity - we were able to invest \$150,000 in digital equity grants
- Partnership with UMASS around elder economic security and did focus groups targeting underserved communities
- Partnership with BHA to support resident engagement
- Partnership with VietAid and Wah Lum Kung Fu to support self defense classes with a mental health and wellness component.

- In addition, we are working to create two new staff positions that we hope to have on board by the end of FY21 to focus on mental health and technology.

In FY22 our new funds will be used for:

- Hoarding investment (detailed above)
- Events/Programming investment - we want to pay particular attention this year to reducing social isolation. This slate of new programs will help us do that.
 - Hiring a Programming Coordinator to help support the roll out of new programs
 - Additional investment in our Senior First Night event due to increased costs (we lost the Seaport World Trade Center as a partner due to construction)
 - Investment in senior engagement to reduce social isolation including:
 - Luncheons at local restaurants (supporting engagement and local restaurants)
 - Walking groups
 - Afternoon tea and storytelling groups
 - Cultural Exchange - A series of cultural events across the City highlighting the rich diversity of Boston
- Taxi coupon program - the taxi coupon program is currently a cash/coupon program that is in need of an update. That has been particularly apparent over the past year. This budget investment is an initial investment in modernizing the taxi coupon program focused on development of program design and facilitating the RFP process. Additional investment will be needed in the FY23 budget.

Councilor Ed Flynn asked:

- **Age Strong has been great about providing connection for seniors, both prior to and throughout the pandemic. Can you speak to outreach programs to check in on seniors regularly and connect them to resources as we recover from pandemic?**

We are in the process of coordinating a recovery effort with the emphasis on reaching a more diverse and linguistically isolated population, building upon

the many connections we built through our food and vaccine access work during COVID. In the next couple of weeks, with the COVID emergency food delivery program coming to an end, we will be calling through a list of more than 1500 older adults who are still receiving weekly door-to-door deliveries from us as well as sending out a flyer in the mail to them and to another 1000 or so older adults who are receiving those same boxes through our bulk delivery program. Additionally, this year, we became an official SNAP outreach center and with that, we have gained access to a database of seniors in Boston who are eligible for SNAP but are not enrolled in the program. We will be reaching out directly to those seniors and our staff will be assisting the ones interested sign up for SNAP benefits and engage them in our other programs. We used CARES Act dollars to make additional investments this year in our grantees specifically focused on social isolation, Friendship Works and Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly. We will be able to continue supporting them for expanded work over the next fiscal year. Finally, the most popular volunteer assignment for our AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers is companionship. They have been providing much of this virtually via provided tablets and by phone over the past year, connecting regularly with older adults who are more isolated and need support.

- **In coordination with LCA, what outreach is done to reach seniors who speak languages other than English?**

During the pandemic we coordinated numerous multi-lingual robo calls with the Mayor with calls translated into 11 languages and we mailed out our Seniority magazine to thousands of households with critical COVID information which was translated in 7 languages. In addition we coordinated volunteers to call thousands of seniors who we then connected to different programs and resources, and we partnered with community organizations to promote our programs and refer those in need to us. All of this was done in the preferred language of the older adult we were reaching. We use bilingual staff, the language line, and have many partner organizations serving older adults from diverse cultural backgrounds. We are also partnering with UMASS Boston and a network of community organizations this spring and summer on some specific work to learn about the best communication channels to target more underserved populations. We are excited about this and the opportunity to reach even more people.

Councilor Julia Mejia asked:

- **Can you speak to how outreach has been conducted/adjusted for harder to reach senior populations in the era of COVID, especially as more and more services have been moving online?**

During the pandemic we coordinated numerous multi-lingual robo calls with the Mayor with calls translated into 11 languages and we mailed out our Seniority magazine to thousands of households with critical COVID information which was translated in 7 languages. In addition we coordinated volunteers to call thousands of seniors who we then connected to different programs and resources, and we partnered with community organizations to promote our programs and refer those in need to us. We also used local and ethnic newspapers to promote benefit programs that older adults can access. With our food and vaccine work we found that we received many calls from people who heard about us from their friends and family, so word of mouth is also an important tool we use. We always ask the folks we connect to to connect to others that they know and tell them about the programs and services we can provide. We will also be relaunching the in print version of our Seniority magazine this Spring, which touches about 20,000 people throughout the city. But the basic answer to this question is that we always have to communicate in different ways - print, online, social media, multiple languages, cable TV, radio, telephone, through on the ground partner organizations, and anything else we can think of. This is the only way to continue to reach new people and make sure they know about all they can access whether it is through our office, other city departments, or our aging services network partners.

- **How are you working with organizations like LGBTQ Senior Housing to ensure LGBTQ seniors have access to affordable housing, and services?**

We are excited that there will be LGBT Friendly housing in Hyde Park. I recently saw the plans and the site will be beautiful. They will have a service component and activity onsite. In addition to the LGBTQ Senior Housing group, we also work closely with the LGBT Aging Project, LGBT Elders of Color, and a number of other groups. We partner with our nutrition grantee Ethos to host 4 LGBT friendly dining sites across the city as part of the congregate meal program, and also to host a Senior Pride event during Pride week. Finally, our entire staff went through training last year focused on LGBT older adults to be sure that we could meet the needs of the population in a culturally sensitive and respectful way.

Councilor Lydia Edwards asked:

- **The biggest issue I hear in my district is about cab coupons having been eliminated. Why did this happen? It would seem that this popular program would be a good place to spend some of the increase in funding.**

The taxi coupon program has been down for COVID safety reasons. We have been in an approval process to get the program up and running again. We are now working with DoIT to get set up on the appointment scheduling software and with our partners to train them on the sales process. We believe we will have the program running by the beginning of June.

- **I'd like to request a shuttle for seniors in the North End and Charlestown to help them get to grocery stores.**

Older adults can call our shuttle at 617-635-3000 to book a ride to the grocery store. Right now we have limited capacity because the COVID precautions we have in place limit the vans to one rider. But as this loosens up we will have more capacity to do more rides. Our new scheduling software that we implemented last year will also help us to be more efficient in our routing so that we can do more rides.

Please provide an update on the East Boston senior center. Please speak to the choice of vendor and concerns that were raised about the vendor's wage theft violations.

The East Boston Senior Center is really coming along nicely - it is going to be beautiful! GVW won the public bid that was held through the Public Facilities Department. GVW is DCAM certified to perform public work as a general contractor (& as a filed sub) for Ch. 149 work. All Public Facilities Department General Contractors are required to submit certified payroll with each payment request. This process includes a compliance check. GVW is doing a good job and in compliance with all project requirements.

- **How much is spent on contracting altogether? Can you address concerns about the procurement process following an issue with a contract for home delivery of meals where a non-MWBE vendor came in above cost but won the contract?**

Contracted Services:

Operating: \$570K (includes \$300K for nutrition)

Grants: \$6,628K

(Total Budget is \$15.7M, we are a pass-through for 53% and we retain 43%)

The procurement process referred to above was run through our office, but the funds were out of additional city money that was not in our budget. In that case, we followed the proper procurement process and chose the vendor most advantageous to the city and the program.

For our procurement process with our operating dollars, we now follow all equitable procurement procedures and processes and work hand in hand with the City's Purchasing Department. This year like all other departments we developed an equitable procurement plan and will be working with Chief Barrios-Millner and her team on the implementation.

With our grant dollars, we do an RFP process and have multiple people read and score the grants and then make grant awards. We advertise the RFP in multiple places, including minority outreach newspapers, promote the opportunity through our networks, and hold a bidders conference where we are able to answer questions. We also use the time in between RFP processes to meet with people interested in running programs and provide guidance and technical assistance in preparation for the next RFP process. Our grant dollars are all federal dollars, are cost reimbursement grants, are awarded to about 24 nonprofits and require alignment with state and federal guidelines for the use of funds, documentation, and reporting.

Councilor Michael Flaherty asked:

- **Older adults are among our fastest growing population. What investments are we making in terms of digital literacy for older adults? What programs are being promoted? Any partnerships? Will any of the federal relief funding be spent on this issue?**

This year:

- We were able to partner with DoIT to distribute 550 tablets to older adults with internet connections.
- Through an AT&T partnership and funding, we were able to work with Tech Goes Home and Rounding the Bases to engage 40 older adults in the Tech Goes Home program where they received technology classes, a laptop and mouse, tech support, and an internet connection.
- We are currently in a grant process for the digital equity fund. We joined the digital equity fund grant process contributing \$150,000 for

grants targeting older adults. Applications were due April 30th and are currently being evaluated, but we anticipate grant funds going out before the end of June.

- The Technology Coordinator position we are creating will also be able to provide training and support to older residents working to access technology.

We do anticipate additional money being spent on digital literacy with our federal dollars. There is clearly a need for this in our community.

Councilor Ricardo Arroyo asked:

- **Can Age Strong talk about the decrease in some of its external funds, including the Mobility Assistance Program, MCOA Respite, and the Elderly Universal Fund? What did these grants fund and how will the department make up for these decreases?**

The Mobility Assistance Program was a MassDot grant we received for our scheduling software. That software is now fully implemented. The MCOA Respite grant was a grant we received as a subcontractor for a three year grant the Mass Councils on Aging received from the Administration on Community Living. As part of the work of this grant, we built a program for 55+ volunteers to receive training and provide respite for people with dementia. While this grant has ended, we've incorporated this work into our Senior Companion Program, one of the volunteer programs we operate through AmeriCorps. The Elderly Universal fund is where we put sponsorships that we raise from events. With reduced event costs and virtual events over the past year, there was a decrease in this funding source. We expect to have this increase again as we move back to more regular events and programs.

- **Why is Age Strong's Programs & Partnerships and Transportation line items being reduced in FY22?**

We reallocated some funds from Programs and Partnership to Administration for the Operating portion of our budget. The decrease in Transportation was due to reduction in price per gallon for fuel.

- **What specifically did Age Strong do with its increased investment last year from reallocated BPD OT?**

In FY21 we used our funds for:

- Financial security - we added an advocacy representative position to help older adults with benefits enrollment.
- Digital Equity - we were able to invest funds in digital equity grants for community organizations helping older adults access devices, internet connections, and/or training.
- Partnership with UMASS around elder economic security and completed focus groups targeting underserved communities.
- Partnership with BHA to support resident engagement.
- Partnership with VietAid and Wah Lum Kung Fu to support a self defense class with mental health and wellness.
- In addition, we are working to create two new staff positions that we hope to have on board by the end of FY21 focused on mental health and technology.
- Finally, we engaged Jewish Family and Children's Services to provide training and support to both our staff, the network of senior centers, and the network of senior housing staff so that we all could then better support the older residents of Boston. We had budgeted to pay them for this work, but they then received some unexpected state funding, so they were able to do the work for us through that funding source. We were then able to invest an additional amount into digital equity.

Councilor Liz Breadon asked:

- **We have one senior center in District 9 – Veronica Smith Senior Center run by a volunteer board and staffed by Age Strong. Can we get them:**
 - **Technical assistance for grant writing**
 - **Financial support for technology programming and equipment. Computer classes and tablets.**
 - **Property Management – the center needs a security system/camera so that visitors can be buzzed in.**

We are glad to have the Veronica B Smith Senior Center (VBS) as part of our programs at the City. The Age Strong Commission funds the two center staff members, and all technology (computers, telephones, copier, internet). The Property Management Department funds the custodian and all major building repairs. The non-profit historically has funded the programming. Given the flexibility we have with additional federal funds and our goals of enhancing senior programming across the city, we plan to support the

Veronica B Smith programming thereby reducing the need for the non-profit to raise money and increasing the number of programs the center can provide.

We were able to provide VBS with free hotspots and tablets throughout the pandemic and are excited to work with them over the next year to increase technology usage and training for the older adults in the Allston-Brighton area. We will be bringing on a Technology Coordinator who can help to support this work at the senior center.

Thank you for raising the issue around the doorbell and buzzer. We will follow up on this with Property Management.