



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

Office for Aging

Jason T. Garnar, County Executive · Mary E. Whitcombe, Director

Broome County Office for Aging Advisory Council Meeting Minutes February 7, 2022 Via Zoom

Present: Carolyn Price, Rene Conklin, Sally Hoffman, Linda Mackenzie, Amy Pessarchick, Sue Thrasher, Kathy Bunnell, Suzanne Sullivan, Dr. Youjung Lee, Dr. John Kang

OFA Staff: Mary Whitcombe, Director; Lucia Esposito, Program Manager III; Andrea Sollitto, Secretary

Welcome and Introductions

- Chairperson Carolyn Price welcomed everyone to the meeting
- Attendees introduced themselves and shared their profession or community involvement

Approval of Meeting Minutes

- The minutes from the December 6th 2021 meeting were approved. Linda Mackenzie made the motion to approve and 2nd by Rene Conklin. Carolyn thanked Andrea for preparing and distributing the minutes.

Director's Report

- Mary asked for any questions on the report and offered to discuss the topics in more detail.
- **Social Isolation Prevention:** Kathy Bunnell asked to hear more on this program. Mary explained that the OFA has been looking at ways to offer outreach and respite services by utilizing volunteers, interns and possibly an AmeriCorps worker. These options are just getting up and running. So far, there has been no applicants for the AmeriCorps position, which offers a stipend for living expenses and an educational award. There will be interns through SUNY-Broome Community College ("BCC Buddies") who will go to homes 1-2 hours a week for 12 weeks and bring bags of activities from Adult Day Care (Yesteryears) to do with the clients. The animatronic pets that have been distributed to clients so far have been very effective and well-received.
- **Virtual Senior Center (VSC):** Lucia Esposito reported that OFA had received 20 tablets at no charge, with OFA paying only for internet access. The tablet distribution to seniors is going well. OFA is considering giving tablets to the "BCC Buddies" to allow the interns to access the VSC while they visit clients; a tablet may be given to the AmeriCorps worker as well. The new NYS budget may be allocating more money for VSC's. Currently there are two companies who provide the VSC programming (Self Health in NYC and Get Set Up in California). The OFA continues to promote the VSC through ads in the monthly Senior News, and caseworkers promote it while on calls with seniors. Lucia expressed that it would be helpful to talk more about technology with members Dr. Youjung Lee and Dr. John Kang from Binghamton University. Tablets are

generally not “Age Friendly” in design, which is an issue with training some seniors on how to use them. Josie, an OFA intern, is assisting with efforts to train seniors on using the tablets and making follow up phone calls with clients. She also made a guide for using the tablets by taking a screenshot of the tablet and indicating the buttons, functions, etc. on the guide.

Lucia also gave an update that Marian Apartments has a “resident services coordinator” who worked with OFA on streaming the VSC on the smart TV in the community room of the facility. The coordinator has reported that 8-9 residents typically attend each VSC session and that she is working with SEPP to get smart TVs in the community rooms of their other housing facilities. OFA is actively working to promote the VSC while not detracting from the area senior centers.

Mary explained that the OFA is working on creating its own virtual senior center by streaming live activities happening at the centers, such as drumming classes and zoom exercise classes. This would also help alleviate social isolation. There are still large groups of seniors who are not comfortable spending time at the centers due to COVID concerns or who are too frail to attend in person. Another option to explore is using a student intern at the senior centers to work directly with very frail seniors who would benefit from a partner. The centers continue to offer grab-and-go meals to clients who do not wish to eat at the centers.

- **Staffing:** Mary stated that there are still two unfilled openings for caseworkers in the EISEP (In-Home Services) Unit. Carolyn inquired if the hourly rate for the positions may be a deterrent to getting applicants. Mary replied that a bachelor’s degree is required and the hourly rate is \$18-20 depending on caseworker experience. The applicant pool for taking the caseworker exam has been very limited, and many of the interview candidates have not wanted to take the job, citing reasons that were not heard of in the past. Two individuals who had started in caseworker positions last year each left after a short time, stating they were not comfortable with seeing frail clients in their homes. OFA is now advertising the caseworker positions on Indeed to try to increase and strengthen the applicant pool.

Pandemic Related Updates & Discussion

- Mary reported that the OFA vaccine phonenumber is continuing to operate. The number of cases is declining and the calls are also decreasing. Amy Pessarchick offered kudos to OFA staff for handling the vaccine line. Amy had utilized the line for family members needing vaccine appointments and she found it very helpful.
- Mary shared that NYSOFA is advocating for increases to Homecare pay and the NYS proposed budget aligns with this idea. There are homecare agencies that are willing to take some of our cases. It is difficult to get hands-on care (PC 2) in the home now because of the shortage of aides. Most OFA’s are starting to hire or discuss hiring their own aides; if OFA hired for PC 2 care, then we would likely need to hire more nurses for supervision. We are considering hiring for PC 1.
- Sally Hoffman reported that outside agencies are having trouble getting aides, and that agencies usually want to focus on filling full-time positions and longer shifts (4 hours or more), which makes it harder to have enough aides to cover shorter homecare visits.

- Mary stated that more and more often families are going to a consumer-directed route, where the family pays for some of the cost. OFA is encouraging the consumer-directed option so home care can be provided. While OFA is trying to utilize volunteers and interns to help fill the home care needs, it is a very slow process since the individuals must be trained and undergo a background check, and some college interns would have limited transportation.
- Carolyn commented that she believes the instructor at BOCES who taught the home health care program left the position so that the program is on hold.

Other Announcements from the OFA Director

- The Senior Games and the Senior Picnic were canceled for 2020 and 2021. The Senior Games will no longer be held as they were serving only a very specific part of the senior population. The Senior Picnic will be held this year in some form, most likely as smaller picnics at various senior centers or community locations rather than as one large event at SUNY-Broome as in the past.
- Vince Fox, Program Coordinator of the Foster Grandparent Program, announced his retirement for July 31st. The position will be posted soon.
- There was a recent audit on NYSOFA; it was not a good audit and placed NYSOFA in a poor light. The audit found that NYSOFA was not moving money to local entities, that funding was not being used correctly, however the audit failed to look at the big picture. Broome County was not part of the audit.
- Sally remarked that Broome County is ahead of a lot of other counties in terms of services, and how we operate. Mary agreed with Sally and said that when OFA was under past directors Lisa Schule and Kathy Bunnell Broome was ahead of others. Our OFA continues to get asked a lot of questions and asked for a lot of guidance from other OFAs.
- Tax prep help will be available through AARP again this year. Information is available on the Broome County Office for Aging Facebook Page and through 211.
- OFA is currently updating many of its publications including the Elder Services Guide and the Senior Housing Guide. The new editions will be posted on the OFA website and will be sent out to the council members.

Update to OFA Plan for Services

- Lucia added an agenda item to present highlights of the OFA Plan for Services 2022-2023, which is a recently completed update to the four-year 2020-2024 plan. She shared her screen with the council members and displayed the plan update from the OFA website.
- Lucia first shared some highlights from the “2022 Service Modification and Expansion” on page 4. She then provided a summary of the “Unmet Needs Status Updates” and the “Action Plan Status Updates” on the three priority areas of Transportation, Housing, and Communication, including accomplishments in these areas.
- Both the “Four Year Plan for Services 2020-2024” and the “2022-2023 Update to the Four Year Plan” are available on the OFA website page “Publications and Guides”. Council members can read the full plan update at <https://www.gobroomecounty.com/senior/publications>.

Updates from Council Members

- Suzanne Sullivan shared that the January-February edition of AARP Magazine has a very helpful article on masks and encouraged members to read the article.
- Carolyn provided updates that Broome County is getting involved with the broadband needs of rural areas. The largest broadband desert in the county is around Windsor, with the second largest broadband desert lying near the Whitney Point reservoir. Town of Windsor had applied for a 2.6-million-dollar federal grant to put fiberoptic in its broadband desert and is still waiting to hear on the application. If Windsor receives the grant, it will be on the news, as this is a very big deal. Carolyn is talking with the fiberoptic provider who would install the broadband. Other options are being looked at if Broome cannot get fiberoptic put in. Carolyn noted that the cost to fill all broadband gaps in the US would be about 600 billion dollars. She cited several instances of residents with limited or very slow internet access having to leave home and drive to a public location where internet access is available to do schoolwork, or needing to allow hours to load their children's remote learning materials, and because of the poor internet access the children falling behind in school. Also, there were cases of seniors not being able to access telehealth appointments, thereby putting their health at risk. Carolyn articulated that the need for broadband is only going to increase.
- Dr. Youjung Lee voiced support and agreement with Carolyn's concerns about rural residents' lack of broadband, and stated that internet access is a basic human right.
- Mary noted how much reliance there is on technology, particularly during COVID, and that many lives were saved or helped by access to internet (alleviating social isolation through virtual visits with loved ones, attending telehealth appointments, engaging in social activities online).

Meeting Adjourned

Motion made by Kathy and 2nd by Rene.

Next Meeting

Monday, April 11, 2022, at 12:00pm

We will plan for the meeting to be held in-person at the Broome County Library in the Decker Room unless there is a spike in COVID cases.