

Council on Aging Minutes for Virtual Meeting of January 8, 2025

Approved at the meeting of February 19, 2025

Meeting called to order at 5:30 p.m.

A roll call of those present: Janis Gray (JSG), Jessica Makepeace (JM), Susan Millinger (SM). Absent: Jeanette Stockton (JS). Guest: Michael DeChiara.

Michael DeChiara, representing the Alliance for Digital Equity, at JSG's invitation, was visiting to explain the Digital Equity programs and what they could offer to Shutesbury's COA for its seniors. Their basic concern is to deal with the digital divide that exists especially in rural western Massachusetts.

There are three main goals:

- connectivity (to ensure all can connect to the internet);
- affordability (to ensure all can afford the equipment that can connect to the internet) and
- skills (to ensure all have the skills to use the internet, and the comfort necessary to use the skills. Safety is included here.)

The Alliance for Digital Equity works in all four western counties with many different organizations, including libraries and COAs.

Shutesbury was awarded funds from the Mass Broadband Institute (MBI) to conduct municipal digital equity planning. The planning was done with FRCOG, jointly with Leverett which also was awarded a planning grant. The Shutesbury Municipal Light Plant took the lead for the Town; the COA was represented by Martha Favre. The planning is now complete and the Select Board approved the plan.

There are now digital equity implementation funds available to Shutesbury to undertake activities identified in the plan. FRCOG is working with the Town and exploring what to do with the money. At present, there are two different potential ways to get digital assistance for seniors. (The main players on the local level would be libraries and COAs.)

Cyber Seniors is a program at Greenfield Community College using younger people to mentor seniors. GCC is interested in partnering with other Franklin County towns that have completed their digital equity planning; each town would contribute part of their implementation funds to support a coordinator at GCC. Cyber Seniors would come to each town (FRCOG is now working with eight towns) with a staff person who can assist seniors locally. This is a possibility for Shutesbury, but it would cost the town to support the staff person.

Another option: Northfield told the Alliance they wanted a professional, a Digital Navigator, in town regularly. The Alliance plans to hire a Digital Navigator (by the beginning of March) who would be available to visit Franklin County towns. The United

Way of Hampshire and Franklin Counties is hosting this person. A Digital Navigator might go to an individual's house or might be available on a drop-in basis at a central location like the Library or Town Hall.

Could Shutesbury have both kinds of technical help? That idea appeals to the COA. The town has 95% subscription to Broadband. The chair of the MLP, Gayle Huntress, wants to have someone who can reach out to the 5%; a goal shared by the COA. Huntress is also concerned about seniors' concern with safety online; seniors tend to be very concerned about scamming.

Equipment is essential as well as skill development. DeChiara pointed out that the Alliance has a program which can get devices free for folks once they have the skills and the comfort level.

Many thanks to Michael for his informative presentation.

SM is going to contact Gayle Huntress to tell her that the COA is definitely interested in participating.

Regular January Business Meeting

Roll Call: JSG, JM and SM present, JS absent. Guest: Mary Jo Johson.

1. Minutes:

- a. **Minutes of the Meeting of December 11, 2024:** *A motion was made to approve the minutes of the meeting of December 11, 2024. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously by a roll call vote.*

Business:

2. Financial Update

- b. **There was no December 11 Financial Report from Treasurer JM** because with FootClinic cancelled for December (because of the illness of the FootClinic nurse), there were no expenditures.
- c. JM suggested that we ask the Town for an increase in our budget line. She will look into the deadline for applying for an increase, and consider what we might ask for.

3. FootCare Clinic Letter.

- a. As suggested at the last meeting, we have drafted a letter to be given to Clinic clients explaining that the COA can not continue to support the FootClinic unless those using it who are able to contribute more, do so for the services they receive.
- b. *A motion was made, seconded and unanimously passed by a roll call vote to approve the letter.*

- c. JM will be able to assist Susan Gomberg in giving out the letter at the January clinic.

4. Joint Grant Application of Village Neighbors and the COAs of its four member towns

- a. Village Neighbors has asked its four constituent towns to join it in applying for a LifePath grant focusing on making the towns more dementia-friendly. JSG, JS and SM all attended a meeting in which this was discussed. Former member MF was there also. SM and MF volunteered to be among those helping the lead, Barbara Bodzin, with writing the grant.
- b. *A motion was made, seconded, and unanimously passed by a roll call vote that the Shutesbury COA would join in the grant application.*

5. Unanticipated Business

- a. JSG has discovered that LifePath's Silverline Directory of Services still lists our COA as providing MedRides. She is trying to get this corrected.
- b. Jessica Carlson-Belanger contacted Susan to see if the COA would be interested in providing seniors to join elementary school children for a Valentine's Day tea. Jessica is exploring that possibility with the principal.
- c. A motion is needed to approve submitting the FY24 Annual Report, which all have seen. *So moved, seconded and unanimously approved by a roll call vote.*

- 6. Adjournment:** Before we could adjourn, the COA meeting was unceremoniously closed at 6:29 p.m. by the opening of another meeting.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, February 12, at 5:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, Susan Millinger, Secretary