

Silver Threads Listening To Seniors' Needs

By SUSAN LOUCKS Aug 4, 2017

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Compelling. Daunting. Overwhelming. Compassionate. These words describe a recent two-hour listening session last week with area residents and businessmen hosted by Governor Charles D. Baker Jr.'s Council to Address Aging in Massachusetts on what can make Massachusetts better for seniors. Held at the Barnstable Senior Center as part of a statewide tour, the event was moderated by Alice Bonner, secretary of the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (OEA) and drew more than 150 people.

The listening session fittingly started on a personal note. Ron Green of the Brewster Alzheimer's Support Group shared his story of taking care of his wife until he could no longer care for her at home. He spoke of the stress on spousal caregivers and the financial pressures that continue now that she is in a residential facility. He asked that the state create a new category of medical facility that accepts MassHealth, thus giving relief from the financial burden of a skilled nursing facility.

The plight of caregivers continued. One speaker called fulltime caregiving for a loved one "a killer"; another said "24/7 caregiving will exhaust you physically, mentally, and financially." They called for respite grants, more support groups, and additional direct support. HopeHealth's Melissa Weidman urged the state to advocate for advanced care planning and to engage the business and faith communities along with more public-private collaborations.

Several local and regional elected officials spoke to the panelists. State Representative Sarah Peake (D-Barnstable 4th District) spoke of the Cape's geographical remoteness and the distance to medical facilities, stressing the critical importance of transportation for those who no longer drive; she praised the Cape Cod Regional Transit buses but stated there was a clear need for finding and funding more transportation options. Tom Cahir, director of the CCRTA, also attended and spoke later to these issues. Peake spoke of social isolation among seniors and the lack of year-round housing and affordable housing options on the Cape, affecting many in the senior-serving workforce.

State Senator Julian A. Cyr (D-Cape and Islands District) felt that the Cape's proportionately high number of seniors presented a great opportunity for the region to lead in the critical areas of social services and health care. He echoed Rep. Peake's statements on housing and added that options for seniors to downsize are limited, as many are land rich and cash poor. He cited a pilot program on hypertension, diabetes, and fall prevention as a model for innovative approaches.

State Representative Will Crocker (R-Barnstable 2nd District), like Cyr, suggested creative "out of the box thinking" to help make Massachusetts more age-friendly. Crocker believes the state should focus on caregivers and pointed to several bills in the legislature now designed to give tax credits for families of caregivers.

The desire and economic practicality of seniors aging at home was universally upheld. Representatives from Cape Cod's Village-to-Village organizations were present, with Pat Zeiss attending from the Outer Cape's Nauset Neighbors and Susan Loucks attending from Neighborhood Falmouth. Zeiss spoke about the work of "villages" in addressing transportation issues, home handyman help, and forging social connections, as well as the significant role of volunteers in providing services to seniors. Others spoke of the need for help for seniors at home, whether with non-medical needs like transportation, shopping and cooking, or with managing chronic conditions, like those requiring regular eye drops, oxygen, or insulin. Many of these light medical needs are not covered by insurance.

Many attendees advocated specific areas of need. Retired public school educator Barbara Mann of Bourne advised prioritizing training for physicians in working with Alzheimer's and dementia patients. Sheila Mulcahy of the Barnstable Disability Commission made a plea for access – to buildings,

beaches, and restaurants. She said that even people aging at home need to get out, and if there aren't ramps, good lighting in public places, manageable acoustics, or handicapped parking, even very healthy seniors can struggle.

Speakers advocated for Meals on Wheels, Elder Services, helping homeless seniors, and for senior veterans. Other presenters focused on vision loss, fall prevention, adult day care programs, concerns for LGBTQ seniors, non-English speakers, and the need for trusted advisors for financial, real estate, and care planning. One speaker advocated for financial and tax help for seniors, citing little-known tax breaks for elders which require that elders file a return. From fitness programs and aging research, to the Death Café, Elder Law, and redefining the role of nurses, it seemed as if every possible senior topic was voiced and appreciated.

Some current areas of appreciation? One speaker told of the importance of SHINE (Serving the Health Insurance Needs of Everyone) advisors who provide medical insurance counseling and information. Many lauded the terrific work of the state's councils on aging and appealed for more funding for them.

And amidst all the articulated needs, awareness, and applause, there were many light moments also. Near the end of the event, Cape resident Lola McCrea, a compact, tanned, stylish woman stepped to the podium and spoke of her own priorities. "I am a senior," she said, "and I drive. I'm 91" (at which the crowd gasped, not believing her true age), "and I still want to go out at night. We need more lights on our roads! And repaint the lines! I don't care if you pave the roads, just paint them!"

From this and other statewide listening sessions, the Office of Elder Affairs will examine ideas and create an omnibus bill that incorporates the ideas they feel best benefit all. There is still an opportunity for you to share your comments. E-mail aging.conversation@state.ma.us or go online to www.mass.gov/agingcouncil to register your thoughts. Our Cape Cod seniors are depending on it.

Susan Loucks is the executive director of Neighborhood Falmouth, a local membership organization whose mission is to provide information and services so members can live safely and comfortably in their own homes for as long as possible. To serve as many members as possible, Neighborhood Falmouth is seeking additional volunteers. For information, call 508-564-7543.