

The unprecedented challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have affected nearly every aspect of our lives. Despite these hardships, the staff members of the Peabody Council on Aging have never stopped serving the older adults of Peabody. There have been numerous inquiries regarding when the PCOA will be reopening. It would be a disservice to our staff members to answer this question with a simple date, as throughout the pandemic, we have never closed down completely. I thought it would be helpful to provide a timeline of our plans over the next few months. To do this, we must first review what we were able to do during one of the most trying times in many of our lives.

Even though the doors to our senior center closed on Friday, March 20, 2020 - many of our staff members reported to work on Monday, March 23rd. To do so, they had to balance serving members of our PCOA family while keeping their own families safe from the increased risk of Covid-19 exposure on a daily basis.

Following our contacting of the PCOA board members via telephone, it was decided that we would work in emergency mode. We returned to our roots outlined in the Older Americans Act legislation, focusing mainly on transportation, nutrition, and social services. We concentrated all of our resources on these essential functions. It was clear that we needed to continue transportation services for necessary medical appointments. During a stay at home order, dialysis and chemotherapy treatments as well as many other procedures still continued. Additionally, we provided transportation for grocery shopping as well. On average, 100+ people per day ate a meal at our center, so we knew that prepared food was also a necessity.

Peabody has a considerable senior population, as about 36% of the people living in Peabody are over age 60. While many communities shifted the demand for meals to the Elder Services Home Delivered Meals program, we felt that Elder Services already had to keep up with a sizable demand for the truly homebound. With our ability to cook onsite and flash freeze meals, we figured that we could handle delivering frozen meals to older adults who needed them for however long the pandemic lasted. Merrimack Valley Elder Services was very grateful for our ability to fill that need. To date, we have delivered nearly 28,000 frozen meals. We would like to thank the Friends of the PCOA, JB/Lahey fund, CDBG and many private donations for financially supporting the frozen meals delivery program. All of the delivered meals were provided at no charge due to the generous support we received. It was truly a case of neighbors helping neighbors.

Our social service staff assisted clients with SNAP benefits, MassHealth applications, fuel assistance, open enrollment, vaccination appointments, and a myriad of other services. Our maintenance department installed a sliding window and doorbell so we could collect important paperwork to complete applications for needed services. The maintenance department also assisted with the reopening of our Adult Day Health program in December, which is currently operating at 40% capacity. Additionally, they also made several improvements to both the inside and outside of our building.

Many staff members were more than willing to change their job duties. They assisted at the reception desk, helped in the kitchen, delivered frozen meals and commodity foods packages, helped with cleaning, and made thousands of phone calls for wellness checks. It was "all hands on deck" when we were making countless vaccination appointments. We also assisted when our building was needed for voting and again when it was used as a vaccination site. Our vaccination site was able to help the frailest seniors that were not able to access the MassVax sites, as our buses transported seniors in wheelchairs and walkers that required use of lift vans. We will be forever grateful to Sharon Cameron and her

incredible team at the Peabody Health Department as they helped us with not only re-opening our ADH program but also with several staff COVID exposures. Most importantly, they set up and operated an incredibly safe and efficient vaccination clinic for some of our most vulnerable residents.

The need that was more difficult to fulfill was socialization. What could we do to combat the social isolation that we knew was so devastating to the physical and mental health of our participants? We started making trips to senior's homes, holding classes via Zoom and through Peabody Access Television. We mailed thousands of birthday, "thinking of you" cards, and most unfortunately, far too many sympathy cards.

What have we done over the last month to serve more seniors at the center?

After removing all of the exercise equipment out of the fitness room, we were able to accommodate 10 classes per week – a morning class, and then an afternoon class following a deep cleaning of the room. We chose this location because it has its own HVAC system and bathroom. We also erected a tent that was ordered months ago - one that can accommodate all of our exercise and line dancing classes outdoors. Soon we will have access to our large stage area and dining room, allowing us to hold the remaining classes.

Our biggest challenge will be to accommodate the older adults that drop in. In the past, they may have visited to have a cup of coffee and a donut in the morning, or perhaps come in for our wonderful lunch program. Many of those people use our transportation to arrive at the senior center. We still currently have mask and distancing requirements on our buses per DOT, limiting available capacity.

Our ADH is also under both a mask and 40% occupancy requirement as well per Massachusetts DPH. Seniors that currently visit the senior center are no longer required to wear masks, but unvaccinated seniors are encouraged to do so, to protect themselves.

As we look to the future, we plan to transition classes held under the tent to our stage area and use the tent to accommodate drop-in visitors. The PCOA will be fully open when we can do that, and we are currently planning for mid-July. At that time, we can expand transportation services. The Board of Directors recently made the decision to continue our frozen meals delivery program until we are able to once again offer our nutrition program. *It truly will not be long now*, but we want to put the same careful planning that we have done over these past fifteen months into reopening to full capacity.

True leadership is not marked by being first. It is marked by taking time to do the best job possible, and in doing so, ensure the safety and wellness of everyone involved. Rest assured, we have a very good and well-thought-out plan in place, and will not take any more time than what is necessary.

We will announce any changes and updates in our monthly newsletter, on our website, and through Peabody Access Television. The Mayor's office has also offered to make a robo-call with the latest updates as well. The entire staff of the PCOA is looking forward to the day when we are back to normal. Please remember we are only a phone call away at 978-531-2254. We look forward to serving you.

Thank you.

Carolyn Wynn