

AGING IN COMMUNITY COMMITTEE MEETING
Minutes of the November 12, 2024 Meeting
9:30 am to 11:30 am

“A County Update on Affordable Housing Programs for Older Adults”

Call to order: Meeting called to order at 9:30AM

Commissioners In Attendance: Wayne Berman (co-chair), Betsy Carrier (co-chair) Laurie Pross, Mary Sweeney, Mona Grieser, Linda Bergofsky, Joyce Dubow, Norman Goldstein

Staff: Dr. Kimberly Johnson, MoCo; Shawn Brennan, MoCO

Guests: Mitsuko Herrera, MoCo; Sarah Fought, (JCA); Odile Brunetto, guest; Renz Mae Carbo, guest; Deanna Cho, guest; Dhenise Manlag, guest; Byron Tamayo, guest; Brent Toralba, guest

OPENNING REMARKS FROM THE CO-CHAIRS:

At this meeting, the Committee got an update on MoCo’s robust technology programs that helps older adults age in place. Our featured speaker was Mitsuko R. Herrera, Montgomery Connects Program Director, Office of Broadband Programs, to discussed county-wide programs that facilitate the use of smart technologies to help residents age in place. The county’s goal is to achieve digital equity where everyone has access to affordable home and mobile internet, the skills to use technology, and the “digital world” that includes education, employment, connections to family and friends, community engagement, civic participation, and good health.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION NOTES:

Mitsuko began her presentation by talking about the Montgomery County Connects program. Montgomery Connects is the County’s digital equity and inclusion program. The County’s goal is for every resident and business to be part of our shared digital world. They work to achieve this by helping people get access to computer devices, needed technology training, affordable home broadband services and subsidies, and public WiFi access points. Montgomery Connects is powered by the Department of Technology & Enterprise Business Solutions (TEBS) and part of the Office of Broadband Programs.

In rural areas of the County, Montgomery Connects aims to ensure that all homes and businesses located in the county’s rural Ag Reserve have access to high-speed broadband at home. Under the Montgomery Connects initiative, the Ag Reserve has been surveyed and gaps in broadband infrastructure have been identified. Montgomery Connects partners with both federal, state and private internet service providers to fund and construct the fiber needed to close the last mile broadband gap.

Mitsuko then talked about the Senior Planet program. Senior Planet is a proactive and innovative initiative to enable all residents to use technology and the internet to thrive at every age. Senior Planet offers specially designed online and in-person classes for people 60 and older to communicate with family and friends online, access healthcare, understand AI and wearable technology, manage finances, and so much more.

Finally, Mitsuko talked about MoCoNet. MoCoNet is an innovative initiative of Montgomery Connects in which Montgomery County constructs and brings free, high-speed internet over fiber to individual affordable housing communities. The features of the initiative include in-home WiFi connectivity, security and other

enhanced services, all powered in a partnership with Plume, a company that shares the County's digital equity focus. She did cite that some senior apartment buildings do have WiFi issues that make it hard for older adults to access that internet and that restricts where training can take place.

Following Mitsuko's presentation, a robust discussion on technology ensued. Several comments were made about the difficulty people have with navigating important health benefit websites like Medicare and MDThink (the Maryland State Department of HHS website for benefits). There was lots of discussion about this topic and what the County can do to help make these types of websites more user friendly. Mitsuko agreed and said that she would follow up with her contacts in the County that coordinate the MDThink site and the Medicare site. She offered to provide a briefing later on this matter.

BUSINESS MEETING: A business meeting followed to discuss the actions that the AIC might take on Affordable Housing, as a follow-up to the public forum. One possible topic discussed was to work on the development and implementation at Montgomery College of certification materials for Universal Design and a curriculum to train property managers on how to make existing housing for older adults more accessible, affordable, and available. This fits with our interests in Universal Design and Aging in Place. It was noted that Marcia Pruzan and Marsha Weber are working to update a senior housing curriculum first developed by Leslie Marks. It was suggested that we follow-up with Shawn to see the existing syllabus and then follow up to learn more about the updates to the curriculum.

Another possible area for action, would be to understand the positions of other groups in the County who are also interested in the affordable housing issue. For example, contact the MoCo Housing Alliance and the Renters Alliance to better understand their positions and work-to-date on affordable housing. More discussion on this will need to take place.

Finally, Mary Sweeney said that getting access to available HOC housing opportunities is still a problem. She and some of her colleagues from other properties can't find people through HOC to fill available units. This is an important advocacy opportunity for the AIC. Mary offered to provide information and some documentation to the AIC as content for a letter to the County Council members and the relevant Committee. It was also suggested by Odile that the AIC contact Terri Fowler of the Housing Opportunities Commission at 240.627.9507 or Anita Aryeetey of the Office of Management and Budget at 240.777.2784 for more information regarding HOC's operating budget.

To conclude the Business Meeting, Shawn gave a brief update about County and Age-Friendly activities, that also included the status of key hirings in Aging and Disability Services for AIC support and for the County Outreach Manager position. Both are moving along and hirings are expected soon.

UPCOMING MEETING: Our next meeting is planned for Tuesday, December 10, 2024, when Ruth Kershner will be presenting on Multi-Generational Caregiving.

MEETING ADJOURNED: Motion was made and seconded to adjourn meeting at 11:20 am