Summary Report: Cabinet on Aging Listening Sessions

Prepared April 4, 2023

Introduction

The Cabinet on Aging was created in 2022 by Executive Order of Governor Mills. The Cabinet brings together State government agencies to coordinate and advance work on issue such as affordable housing and long-term services and supports; financial security and protection against fraud; access to information, broadband, and services; and engagement and employment in Maine's growing economy. The Cabinet on Aging advance policies that support Maine people to age safely, affordably, and in ways and settings that best meet people's diverse needs and preferences.

Public Listening Sessions

The Cabinet on Aging has prioritized continued public engagement to gather input of older adults to hear about the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of aging here in Maine. This report summarizes key findings from two virtual Listening Sessions, one held on March 16, 2013, and another held on March 30, 2023.

Purpose

The Cabinet on Aging held these sessions to gather input from older adults, family members and caregivers, advocates, service providers, and others on the Cabinet's proposed goals and priorities for the coming years. Priorities focus in three primary focus areas that have been developed by Cabinet members and staff based on previous stakeholder feedback. These focus areas include:

- Supporting sustainable living for older Mainers in their communities
- Supporting community connections that improve quality of life, inclusion, and engagement of older adults
- Engaging older adults in active retirement and work

The Sessions included an overview of priorities within these focus areas.

Summary

Goals and priorities

Overall participants reacted positively to the Cabinet's priorities, with several participants noting that the focus areas and strategies generally align with the goals of most age-friendly communities. Age friendly communities have developed actions plans addressing domains of livability and have initiatives in place that are working to address several of the priority services referenced in the Cabinet's plan. Strategies to improve **transportation** options (including for those not eligible for Medicaid) and address lack of access to **affordable and accessible housing** and lack of capacity in the **direct care workforce** were described as priority areas by several participants, which are included in current strategies.

Participants provided a few specific observations and suggestions relevant to the proposed strategies, including:

- Ensure that **supports for caregivers** include older adults caring for grandchildren (kinship care) who are often isolated and have needs to be connected to resources and supports.
- Include strategies to support caregivers **of people with dementia** and support people on waitlists for services.
- Address the lack of awareness that **LTSS services** are not covered by Medicare or most insurances and promote financial literacy to help people understand the high costs of LTSS. (Participants noted the challenges of engaging people in planning conversation and the need to explore more effective ways of facilitating these conversations).
- Exploring "out of the box" programming to help people with costs of LTSS, including broad-based alternative funding mechanism.
- In addition to increased housing production, consider housing stipends to help with affordability.
- In developing continuum of care issue, consider options to increase access to housing with services. Independent housing with built in services are not available in all parts of the state and few options if any for Medicaid.
- Take geography of Maine into consideration when evaluating **adequacy of continuum of care** differentiate between small and large services areas. While there are opportunities for creativity to those with lack services and assets to come up with innovative ways to fill gap, there is a need to provide planning structures and support at local level. Supporting infrastructure work of communities and assesses resources at community level is important.

Several participants spoke about the need **to better link people to resources and services** and voiced support for including this as a priority area. Participants described their experiences with trying to get help, noting that there is no one person to help and people need to go to so many places. One participant described the difficulties of navigating Medicaid and was unaware that some types of services were available. Participants expressed concern for people who did not have a family member/advocate to help, since it was difficult enough even with an advocate. Some suggestions included:

- Creating information that could be shared with municipalities because they are a trusted source.
- Creating more of a hub system or a roving navigator from the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) to go from town to town.
- Some communities have a community navigator, which can be very helpful. In some cases, this includes a food security navigator.
- Be sure MaineCare refers people who are denied to other available services.
- Because communication is challenging, there is a need to leverage a variety of sources to get word out.

Some participants emphasized the need to focus on outreach for people who are hard to reach or underserved. Participants spoke of **social and isolation and loneliness**. One participant noted it is hard to find funding for wellness and social activity programs. A participant described the importance of public libraries throughout the State, both providing information and help to address social isolation and

loneliness. Libraries are the touchpoint for many people. Offering classes, information, volunteer opportunities and access to the internet.

Several participants mentioned **employment and volunteering**. One person noted that there are very few interesting part-time jobs for people who do not want to work full time but want a meaningful job that uses skills and expertise. Participants also spoke about the need to hep people connect to meaningful volunteer opportunities (including opportunities that leverage skills and interests of the volunteer and opportunities that allow people to give back to their communities). A few felt there could be better coordination of volunteer opportunities and a central place to find out about opportunities for older adults. Because communities are hubs for older adults, communities could include information on their websites as part of a broader vision.

Participants offered several observations about **broadband**, the issue of affordability, and the need to ensure that as we continue to work towards expanded access that those who do not or choose not to use internet are not left out or left behind. Some remarked on the need to enhance digital literacy for new users to take advantage of telehealth and other benefits, and to address ageist beliefs that attach to technology and older adults.

Potential Partnerships

In addition to aging networks, municipalities and life-long community initiatives, participants mentioned several other partnerships that could be helpful in this work, including:

- Higher education
- Health systems
- Libraries
- Schools to participate in intergenerational programming
- YMCA/YWCA/community centers
- Libraries

Other Suggestions or Added Priorities

Participants provided several suggestions, including proposed additional priorities, for consideration:

- Reducing **food insecurity**, particularly considering reductions in SNAP benefits due to the ending of the federal public health emergency.
- Improving **health literacy**, focusing on prevention strategies, and promoting programming that provide needed supports but also support independence.
- Addressing **elder abuse**
- Strengthening **volunteer opportunities** and connections, including suggestion of centralizing background check process for volunteers to reduce costs and burden of duplicative checks.
- **Access to healthcare**, including primary care.
- Increasing understanding of the value of establishing age-friendly or life-long community initiatives.

- Developing strategies for elevating and disseminating innovative and effective programs and practices, creating a learning collaborative.
- Importance of changing the narrative over time about what it means to grow older in the state, the need to look at aging as being other than just a problem and helping to create powerful centralized messaging (addressing ageism head-on).