COUNCIL ON AGING:

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Purpose and Duties:

The Belmont Council on Aging serves the needs of Belmont's sizable senior citizen population -- over 9,000 Belmont residents are age 50 and older. According to the federal census of 2020 the number of Town residents aged 60 and over is 4,922and older. Using a combination of Town-provided funds, state, federal and foundation grants, user fees, donations from individuals and organizations, and volunteer services, the COA efficiently provides a wide-range of services to seniors. They include transportation, nutrition, health and wellness, social, arts and educational programming, as well as social support for seniors and their families. Most of this past calendar year the center was closed to the public but robust services were provided to meet the challenges senior residents face in the pandemic. The center was closed to the public from mid-March 2020, and only fully opened Nov. 1 of 2021 due to safety issues resulting related to the pandemic. Therefore, a count of center users cannot be offered in this report.

The primary purpose and responsibilities of the department are the following:

- **Transportation:** The COA provides and coordinates transportation services for Town seniors and disabled persons. Transportation is critical if seniors are to remain independent. The service enables seniors to perform instrumental activities of daily living such as food and medication shopping, and banking. The rides also make it possible for seniors to access medical care and meaningful activities.
- **Social Services**: For both seniors and their families, the COA provides social work evaluations, resource identification and assistance with financial, social and safety needs.
- **Nutrition**: The COA sponsors on-site and home delivered meals and provides other nutritional resources. While the meals are provided by and funded through Springwell, a regional and state funded non-profit organization, the lunch is served at the center. The COA is responsible for the administration of meal reservations.
- **Health and Wellness**: The COA provides an array of user-funded fitness activities (such as aerobics, Tai Chi, yoga, water aerobics, walking, fitness room program, bocce and dance classes), a variety of health education opportunities including evidence based programs, as well as direct health services such as weekly blood pressure clinics.
- **Socialization, Adult Education & Arts**: The COA sponsors a variety of recreational, educational and arts programs. Most of these programs are user funded and/or rely on volunteers.
- **Volunteer Services**: The COA recruits, screens and places volunteers needed to help operate the COA. In compliance with current law, all volunteers undergo a CORI check. These volunteer services not only benefit the COA and its activities, but also provide an opportunity for the volunteers to give back to the community and keep them engaged in valuable activities.

- **Senior Trips**: The trips organized by the COA provide additional socialization opportunities for homebound frail seniors who otherwise are not able to enjoy outings. In the past year the Friends have financially supported offering weekend trips to local events in a bi-monthly basis. This offers programming for seniors without the cost of keeping the center open. The bi-monthly supper club trips on Tuesday evenings accomplish a similar purpose and are very popular. In addition, the COA also makes available opportunities for seniors to organize trips. Except for minimal administrative costs all trips are fully paid for by the participants.
- **Rentals & After-Hour Use of Facility**: The coordination of all after-hours use of the building has been centralized through the COA for the past five years. This includes use by Town departments (such as the Recreation Dept.) for programs, by Town committees for meetings and public hearings, and by outside renters. The administrative tasks of the rentals involve meeting with potential renters, handling the applications, arranging for custodial care of the building during rental events, tracking and processing payments and ensuring that renters properly arrange for alcohol licenses and permits from the Board of Health and Fire Departments. Ongoing meetings and communications with the Town Administrator's office are held to discuss increases in rental and custodial rates.

The following is a list of just select accomplishments over the past year:

Summary of Activities and Accomplishments in 2021:

Meeting the unique needs of seniors during the pandemic, assisting them in obtaining the health tools they need to stay healthy and protected in this phase of the pandemic and providing creative, expanded services and programming as the center moved to re-open, were the overarching goals set for the COA this past year. The following is a list of major activities and accomplishments over the past year. It is not an exhaustive list.

- **Re-opening of the center as resources permitted** 1. New Outdoor Equipment Programs – So as to provide as much outdoor programming as possible while the center remained closed (for health reasons), purchase of an outdoor ping pong table was made, and a donation of a car port installed on the patio enabled programming and select events to take place on the patio. Outdoor programming began in May for the once weekly bridge group. Outside programming expanded to veteran's breakfasts, Hot Topics and Book Discussion Groups as well as select events, such as a Volunteer Recognition Luncheon, concerts and "Ice Cream Fridays". **2. Zoom and Hybrid Programs** Some fitness classes and select events continued to be held over Zoom exclusively, but hybrid programming, i.e. on site programming where remote participation can also take place, also began. It is projected that hybrid programming will become a permanent feature of COA offerings. Procurement of suitable equipment and adequate staffing are needed to enable more of this type of programming at the center.

  The center embarked on a gradual re-opening in June. The limited start of one day a week over the summer months was due to: 1. Volunteers, who comprise a large of part of the workforce, indicated, through a survey conducted in May, that they did not feel ready to return to their duties 2. Rates of participation at the center were anticipated to be low. However, as volunteers continued to trickle in and more programs were ready to resume days increased each month, so that by Nov. 1 the center was fully open 5 days a week. Recreation Department programming also resumed at the center after hours. It should be noted, however, that at the onset of the Omicron surge in mid-December participation rates at the center again declined, and a number of volunteers again chose not to report to work.
- **Expanded Transportation Services** Thanks to a special grant awarded by the Mass. Advisory Planning Council this past April the COA has been providing taxi rides to medical destinations not covered by COA transportation services. This service became very popular very quickly. As funds for the grant were expended the Friends of the COA, coupled with several private donors, enabled the program to continue through the end of the calendar year and beyond. The volunteer driver program remained suspended during this past year. COA drivers were very busy with medical rides over the summer and into the fall, as many seniors were slowly resuming their healthcare appointments that were neglected during the more restrictive phases of the lockdown. The COA's fleet expanded and improved. The Mass. DOT awarded a third 6 passenger van that comes in very handy. A new 12 passenger

BelderBus was also awarded and arrived ready to go in late December. In the Fall, the COA resumed driving passengers to social programs, like the monthly the supper club and a holiday lights program in December.

- **Social Work Outreach** The COA repeated its phone outreach to all Town seniors this past March. This was undertaken because the COA was concerned about social isolation caused by the effects of being locked down for a second year coupled and the winter. As a result of the outreach effort, several more seniors were provided with weekly well being checks from COA staff. Social work services were provided over the phone or online during the first part of the year. However, in person encounters resumed over the summer.

- **Meeting Nutritional and Other Special Needs Created by Pandemic** Food insecurity remained a pandemic induced issue this past year. The COA continued to work proactively to address that need by: 1. continuing the grab n 'go lunches through Springwell. 2. Introduction of on-site lunches when center reopened. 3. Use of new federal covid funds (ARPA) to provide breakfast program twice a week 4. Continuing to coordinate with other groups in town who offered food donations to seniors, such as baked goods organized by local teens and monthly meals provided by local assisted living facility, Neville Manor. 6 continuing to partner with Belmont Housing Authority for food pantry food distribution to low-income seniors twice a month.

- **Vaccination Clinics and Senior Assistance** Beginning in February COA staff, including transportation staff, partnered with Arlington to provide vaccination clinics one time a week for several months. During this time period and beyond COA staff also provided assistance to seniors who could not be accommodated by the local clinic and who needed access to vaccines offered at other clinics, including at the Belmont Housing Authority. In the fall of 2021, the COA assisted seniors in obtaining booster shots.

- **Age Friendly Action Plan**

  The COA took the lead in the Select Board appointed Age Friendly Advisory Council. AFAC completed its mission to develop a 3–5-year action plan. That plan was approved by AARP over the summer. The Plan is available online through the Town's website. The Age Friendly Action Committee was charged by the Select Board, and appointments were made. The Committee will be implementing the Action Plan over the next few years.

  - **Parking Permit Program** The need to make parking easier for seniors in the metered municipal parking spots and lots was identified in the Age Friendly Advisory Council. This program was developed by the COA and approved by the Select Board in April as a pilot program. At the end of the calendar year the Select Board voted to renew the program on a permanent basis. Close to 200 seniors over the age of 65 now partake of this benefit. Appointments can be made to issue a permit by calling Dottie Boyle at 617 993 2978.

COA Goals for 2022

- **Revert to Full Pre-Pandemic Level Programming at the Center**
  With many instructors having dropped out of the workforce and participants more reluctant to pay for programs on account of economic insecurity it has been a challenge to resume programming to pre-pandemic levels. However, as of end of 2021 programs, such as trips for the year, are in the planning phase, as are new programs like a theater group and podiatry clinic.

- **Resumption of Volunteer Driver Program**
  Plans are in place to have the program resume in April using special new safety procedures and waivers.
- **Enhance Staffing Levels with Introduction of a Full time Social Worker**
  It has long been a COA goal and need to employ a full-time social worker. The growing needs of the senior population facing economic insecurity and for supports to successfully age in place, have made such a position an ongoing request over the years. It is hoped that Town Meeting will approve ARPA funds to be used to hire a temporary social work position for the period July 1, 2022 through December 2024 at least.

  - **Enhance Diversity at and Marketing of the Center**
    It has been a permanent goal of the COA to make the center a welcoming place for all. To that end the COA was awarded a special grant in November, to provide marketing of the center and provide welcoming messages, so that seniors of a multitude of backgrounds can make good use of center programs and services.

This marketing project scheduled to be launched in March, will be followed by a special event in May when the COA will solicit feedback from the community about introducing new programs and evaluating procedures that will enhance the welcoming nature of the center.

- **Progress on Short -Term Action Items of Age Friendly Action Plan** This may be the most ambitious goal for the year. The Age Friendly Action Plan has short- and long-term action items. It is hoped that the Age Friendly Action Committee will be able to make progress, if not complete, several of its action items. The Plan can be found on the Town web-site on the Age Friendly Action Committee page.

The COA is very grateful for the support of the Town and departments such as Facilities, IT, Health, Recreation, Town Administration, Town Planner's Office, Fire and Police. These departments are greatly appreciated for collaborating with COA in assisting seniors during this second challenging year of the pandemic. The COA is appreciative of volunteer groups such as Belmont Helps and Belmont Dines, "baker" volunteers from Belmont High School, volunteer mask makers, the Belmont Chinese American Association, Belmont Media Center, the Belmont Citizen's Forum, clinical psychotherapist volunteers, the Friends of the COA and the Town's Diversity Task Force for providing the necessary assistance to seniors in the community and for providing guidance as to the future well-being of the center.

Last, the work of the department would not be possible without the guidance, wisdom and hard work of the COA Board.

Respectfully submitted,

Nava Niv-Vogel
Director