



CIVIC UNITY COMMITTEE

COMMITTEE MEETING

~ MINUTES ~

Wednesday, June 11, 2025

3:00 PM

Sullivan Chamber

The Civic Unity Committee will hold a public hearing to discuss how Cambridge can proactively prepare for the growing challenges associated with elder care. The discussion will focus on critical areas including: senior housing needs, equitable access to medical and mental health care, and the mounting shortages in the healthcare workforce that impact elder services.

Attendee Name	Present	Absent	Late	Arrived
Marc C. McGovern	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Jivan Sobrinho-Wheeler	<input type="checkbox"/> Remote	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Ayesha M. Wilson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3:37 PM
Catherine Zusy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
E. Denise Simmons	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

At the request of the Co-Chair, Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Present/Remote
Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Present/Remote
Councillor Wilson – Absent*
Councillor Zusy – Present/In Sullivan Chamber
Mayor Simmons – Present/Remote*

Present – 4, Absent – 1. Quorum established.

*Councillor Wilson was present and remote at 3:37p.m.

*Mayor Simmons went from remote participation to in person at 3:13p.m.

Co-Chair Zusy and Co-Chair Simmons offered opening remarks and noted that the Call of the meeting was to discuss how Cambridge can proactively prepare for the growing challenges associated with elder care. The discussion will focus on critical areas including senior housing needs, equitable access to medical and mental health care, and the mounting shortages in the healthcare workforce that impact elder services. Present at the meeting were Housing Liaison, Maura Pensak, Assistant City Manager for Human Services (DHSP), Ellen Semonoff, Housing Director, Chris Cotter, Executive Director Council on Aging, Susan Pacheco, Director of the Multi Service Center, Maria Melo, and Executive Director for Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), Tina Alu. Present from Somerville -Cambridge Elder Services were Eliza Adams and Marta Corvelo, from the Cambridge Housing Authority Brenda Snowden Downing, and from the Cambridge Public Health Department, Derrick Neal.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Susan Pacheco who provided a brief overview of the Council on Aging, highlighting that their mission is to help older adults stay independent, informed, and engaged in the community. Susan Pacheco explained that the Council On Aging provides information, referrals, and case management to help older adults get the services they need with the right resources, while also operating two senior centers that provide meals, social activities, wellness programs, and educational opportunities.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Marta Corvelo who shared an overview of the services provided by Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services, which has been serving older adults and people with disabilities in Cambridge and Somerville for over 50 years. Marta Corvelo added that they do not provide services directly but manage state and federal funding to coordinate care for the individuals who need it, through vendors that help with services such as homemaking, transportation, and nutrition. Marta Corvelo highlighted that Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services serve about 9,000 individuals and offer services in over 33 different languages. In addition, Marta Corvelo explained their partnership with the Council on Aging and other local partners that help provide services.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Brenda Snowden Downing who shared how the organization has evolved, pointing out that originally the Housing Authority was focused on managing buildings, but has evolved into a service-oriented agency that supports residents, especially elders, in maintaining stable housing. Brenda Snowden Downing shared how the Housing Authority partners with healthcare providers and other organizations that offer support, while also promoting social activities and adding fitness centers to their developments to help reduce isolation and encourage healthy living.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Maura Pensak who explained how they work closely with the Multi Service Center to support seniors with housing. Maura Pensak shared that some of the individuals that they assist are elders facing financial hardships, newly homeless individuals, long-term shelter residents, and homeowners who are struggling to maintain their homes. Maura Pensak provided a brief overview of how they collaborate with other City departments to help people prevent eviction, provide financial assistance, and help get stabilized housing.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Maria Melo who shared that her office helps prevent homelessness and supports housing stability for older adults in the city. She shared that from 2020–2024, her team used several funding sources such as the Housing Stabilization Program, ARPA, and the City’s Rental Assistance Program to provide over \$1.1 million in rental help to elders. Maria Melo pointed out the importance of finding the source causes of why individuals are struggling, such as loss of benefits or lack of financial skills, and assisting them with stable housing and financial support.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Maura Pensak who added to some of the points made by Maria Melo and stressed that there are many challenges elders face beyond just financial assistance. Maura Pensak provided examples of some of the challenges and pointed out that elderly people are entering a housing market that they cannot afford. Maura Pensak added that other struggles may be maintaining their home due to declining health and being reluctant to accept services because of pride or other situations. Maura Pensak shared that there is an emotional and social transition when moving into senior housing, especially for those who do not identify as senior, and are still young and independent. Maura Pensak stressed how important it is for the City to continue to maintain strong services.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Maria Melo who shared that there is a growing challenge with older adults experiencing homelessness in Cambridge and her team helps unhoused individuals receive access to permanent housing. Maria Melo explained how homelessness worsens health and aging and makes these individuals more vulnerable. Maria Melo shared examples of how and where older adults have been placed in housing, such as 116 Norfolk Street, and highlighted how shelters, such as 240 Albany Street, also serve many older adults. Maria Melo stressed how important it is to continue to partner and collaborate with organizations to continue to help older adults transition from homelessness to stable housing.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Tina Alu who offered comments and concerns related to the growing challenges that older adults are facing and how resources are decreasing. Tina Alu shared some of the services that the CEOC assists seniors with, such as accessing Social Security and navigating phone systems, noting that language barriers are a major issue and some seniors are not familiar with how to access certain benefits. Tina Alu addressed how mental health and isolation concerns are increasing, especially with those who do not have support from family. Tina Alu shared how the CEOC helps with food by providing a food pantry and pointed out that other funded intervention programs, such as hoarding, will be reduced in December which will limit their support services.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Ellen Semonoff who highlighted the great support and effort the City puts towards seniors and vulnerable populations, but shared similar concerns about losing major funding sources, such as ARPA. Ellen Semonoff noted that the rental assistance budget has increased to help maintain services, but it still will not be enough. Ellen Semonoff added how CHA plays a very critical role and highlighted their commitment and responsiveness to assist people with housing as well as helping residents with stable housing. Ellen Semonoff echoed comments related to future challenges and the City and other organizations maintaining their partnerships.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Derrick Neal who stressed how important it is to care for seniors, but also their caregivers, who may also have health challenges. Derrick Neal noted that with federal resources becoming limited and the National Family Caregiver Act is an option to assist with caregiver needs. Derrick Neal shared examples of how the Cambridge Public Health Department is supporting seniors through programs such as music jam sessions, which is aimed to help cognitive and physical health.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Chris Cotter who highlighted the Home Improvement Program offered by the City to seniors to assist with renovations, such as accessibility upgrades. Chris Cotter also offered comments related to Neville Communities, which provides assisted living and nursing care and offers income-restricted units. Chris Cotter noted that Neville is currently under renovations, being funded by the City, to continue to meet community needs.

Co-Chair Zusy opened Public Comment.

Sandra Foster shared concerns about rental assistance cuts and federal funding.

Sharon offered comments and suggestions for supporting older adults, intergenerational housing, and housing displacement.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Mayor Simmons who highlighted the strengths and opportunities that are available within the Cambridge community despite financial and funding challenges. Mayor Simmons addressed funding loss, noting that organizations will have to do more work with less support financially. Mayor Simmons added how important it is that the City remains connected to all the networks that provide support to seniors. Mayor Simmons shared information and concerns that were raised at the 2024 Senior Town Meeting, such as social isolation, pedestrian safety, sidewalk maintenance, transportation accessibility, scam prevention, affordable food access, and hearing and language barriers. Mayor Simmons pointed out the mental and emotional challenges that are faced with not only seniors, but their caregivers. Mayor Simmons offered comments that were supportive of addressing disparities that are faced by black, brown, and LGBTQ+ seniors, emphasizing there needs to be more culturally appropriate programming so everyone feels welcomed and supported. Mayor Simmons urged that city leadership and partners need to continue to work together to prioritize purposefully in the efforts to support senior wellness.

Co-Chair Zusy thanked Mayor Simmons for the Senior Town Hall, noting that it was a very effective public engagement opportunity by listening to feedback from seniors. Co-Chair Zusy stressed the importance of having community-based programs and solutions, sharing how a small act by a neighbor, such as carrying groceries or helping with mail, could help create support networks for older residents and take some weight away from the City. Co-Chair Zusy also suggested creating a volunteer-based program similar to Big Brothers Big Sisters, but geared towards older adults, which could help with isolation. Co-Chair Zusy pointed out how the religious communities help support seniors and the City could create partnerships with them to extend support opportunities. Co-Chair Zusy shared how important it is to encourage seniors to participate in social programs and shared her experience with her own mother during mealtimes at a living facility and added that it was a vital social interaction for everyone there.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Susan Pacheco who agreed it is important for city leadership and community partners to prioritize the needs and wellness of seniors and caretakers. Susan Pacheco shared the challenges of engaging with older adults and emphasized the need for creating programs and support that are culturally tailored and accessible across the entire city. Susan Pacheco shared how accomplishing these goals will take time and that there should be no decrease in the efforts towards a supportive community for older adults.

Co-Chair Zusy shared observations about the diversity and sense of community at the senior center and highlighted the many activities they provide. [Cut? I don't remember discussing this but don't have my notes with me to confirm. The programs seem very inclusive to me.] Co-Chair Zusy agreed that there should be more inclusive programming and offered suggestions on how the city could create services to work towards that goal.] Co-Chair Zusy and Mayor Simmons noted that some older adults may not identify as senior and are hesitant to be involved in the senior centers and offered the suggestion of providing activities that are more

independent and offsite. Additionally, Mayor Simmons proposed the possibility of using inclusionary housing options as an alternative for those who may not want to reside in senior housing.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Chris Cotter who shared support of Mayor Simmons' comments related to inclusionary housing, but did note that there could be some challenges, such as income requirements, which can be restrictive for those on a fixed income, unlike CHA housing, which has more flexibility with rent based on income. Chris Cotter noted that the city encourages affordable housing developments to have units that are mixed sizes to help with and promote intergenerational living.

Co-Chair Zusy expressed concerns about the increase in aging and unhoused individuals that are seen throughout the Cambridge community. Co-Chair Zusy pointed out that it is encouraging to see some of the unhoused older adults moving into housing, such as Norfolk and Wendell Streets, but pointed out that many still do not have housing. Co-Chair Zusy shared concerns about not being able to provide housing to those who are vulnerable but also added that the city is not capable of housing everyone even with all the efforts and partnerships. Maria Melo responded by sharing that many of those in the unhoused community are known to outreach teams who regularly check in with them and are actively working to get them into housing and provide support services. Maria Melo shared some of the many challenges that the unhoused are faced with, such as no ID, no income, and mental health. Maria Melo emphasized that between CHA, the Multi Service Center, and Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services, all working together, Cambridge has many resources to reach out and engage with people.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Marta Corvelo who offered comments related to the challenges that older adults face, such as housing insecurities, food access, and healthcare, and stressed that these should be recognized as a public health crisis and not isolated issues. Marta Corvelo added that services should not be reactive, but proactive, and organizations should partner together to create a crisis-driven model to support a more proactive approach. Marta Corvelo pointed out that being proactive will have its challenges due to possible state and federal decreases in funding. Marta Corvelo shared that even with these many challenges, Cambridge does have the capacity to lead with innovative, community-centered solutions, and emphasized that collaboration and smart resource use will be essential to maintain support for the city's aging population.

Councillor Wilson expressed appreciation for the thoughtful discussion and the panelists' contributions, emphasizing the importance of supporting elders in the community with compassion and intention. She shared her experience attending the Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services breakfast, where she had meaningful conversations with seniors and service providers. One major issue raised during her visit was the challenge of parking and accessibility, which directly affects the quality of care that seniors receive. She noted that vendors and caregivers often struggle to find nearby parking, sometimes having to walk several blocks, which can delay or hinder services. Councillor Wilson highlighted the need to address these logistical barriers collaboratively and explored ways to ensure seniors have consistent, quality care—despite broader resource constraints. She invited further dialogue on potential solutions to this access issue.

Co-Chair Zusy thanked everyone for the discussion and appreciated the strong support for continuing to help older adults and for continuing the conversation to keep partnerships and collaborations strong. Co-Chair Zusy echoed previous comments about future challenges related to funding and highlighted the services that are already being provided in Cambridge. Co-Chair Zusy agreed that working proactively and collaboratively is a beneficial way in creating preventative strategies, such as food security and volunteer engagement. Co-Chair Zusy concluded by sharing her gratitude for everyone's work.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Mayor Simmons who thanked everyone for their participation and thoughtful discussion, as well as all the efforts that are being made to support older adults. Mayor Simmons shared how the embedded services within 237 Franklin Street could be a good model to look at while trying to expand services. Mayor Simmons pointed out the diversity in the older adult community and the importance of recognizing multiple solutions of support. Mayor Simmons shared that she would like to reconvene in the future to continue the discussion and focus on key initiatives that could be worked on over the next year. Mayor Simmons thanked Councillor Zusy for convening the meeting and all the commitment from partners and city staff that support older adults.

Co-Chair Zusy recognized Co-Chair Simmons who made a motion to adjourn.

Clerk of Committees Erwin called the roll.

Vice Mayor McGovern – Absent

Councillor Sobrinho-Wheeler – Absent

Councillor Wilson – Yes

Councillor Zusy – Yes

Mayor Simmons – Yes

Yes – 3, No – 0, Absent – 2. Motion passed.

The Civic Unity Committee adjourned at approximately 4:58p.m.

Clerk’s Note: The City of Cambridge/22 City View records every City Council meeting and every City Council Committee meeting. The video for this meeting can be viewed at:

https://cambridgema.granicus.com/player/clip/1041?view_id=1&redirect=true