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Town of Sudbury

Board of Health Social Work Department

Wednesday, January 12, 2022

Town Manager Hayes and Sudbury Select Board Members
278 Old Sudbury Road
Sudbury, MA 01776

Dear Mr. Hayes and Select Board Members,

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Board of Health Social Work Office proposes the following allocation for ARPA Funding, using a social determinants of health and a health equity lens. Significant disparities existed in MetroWest prior to COVID-19¹⁵ and these inequities were exacerbated by the pandemic, resulting in immediate resident needs.

These proposals focus on the intention of ARPA funding as stated by the U.S. Department of Treasury, which states, “The American Rescue Plan (2021) is providing fast and direct economic assistance for American workers, families, small businesses, and industries...The American Rescue Plan also creates a variety of new programs to address continuing pandemic-related crises, and fund recovery efforts as the United States begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹⁹ The Department of Treasury further reflects on their commitment to put “equity front and center”, stating, “The American Rescue Plan represents an unprecedented opportunity for both immediate recovery efforts and lasting, generational investments in vulnerable communities across the country...”

The goal of this proposal is to provide direct and immediate resources to aid in the recovery of those most impacted by the pandemic and to strengthen systems that provide supports around social determinants of health.

1. Expanding Social Work Resource, Referral and Case Management Services (ARPA Category: A1; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 2, 3, 4)

Recommended Action:

- Allocate funds to hire or contract additional social workers/social work services
 - Requested amount: \$65,000/year + benefits for a minimum of 2 years

Justification:

This is an equity issue. A data project completed by the Sudbury Board of Health Social Work Office in 2020 evaluated demographics of residents who presented repeatedly with ongoing needs in the prior 12 months. The office is a critical source for resources and services, and disproportionately serves underrepresented groups.

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Living Arrangement	Other Statistics
Black 14%	Female 87%	Subsidized Housing 55%	Single Parent 39%
White 36%	Male 11%	Market Rate Renter/Homeowner 19%	Reported a Disability 26%
Latinx 17%	Non-Binary 1%	Homeless 2%	Non-English Speakers/English Not Primary Language 12%
Asian 1%	Unknown 1%	Unknown 23%	Reported Experiencing Domestic Violence 15%
		Other 2%	

- Board of Health increased the number of social work interns as well as the number of hours worked by the Senior Outreach Worker to meet rising needs. With these changes, the office is still struggling to keep up with demand. It can take more than 72 business hours for residents to get a response to their email or voicemail.
 - 2019: 2 Masters level interns; Outreach Worker 8 hrs/week
 - 2020: 3 Masters level and 1 Bachelor level; Outreach Worker 8-16 hrs/week
 - 2021: 4 Masters level and 1 Bachelor level in 2021; Outreach Worker increased from 8 to 12 hrs/week in October

BOH Social Work Office Outputs		
	Pandemic	2019
Referrals (average per month)	426.38	200.25
Community Meetings to Collaborate and Share Resources (average per month)	16.29	8.08
Trainings (average per month)	6.76	1.34
Total # of people served (average per month)	150.9	121

- Despite checking and clearing voicemails daily, the Board of Health Social Work Office’s voicemail is full at least two days a week.
- Cases have become more complex and present higher risks, including domestic violence, homelessness and mental health needs, often combined with food and financial insecurity. Most residents present with symptoms of trauma that were caused or exacerbated by the pandemic.
- The journal Preventative Medicine notes, “the pandemic may have sizable long-term impacts on psychological distress and health behaviors...” and “ data from previous pandemics suggest that there are not only acute mental health effects, but that psychological distress may persist long after the pandemic ceases.”²³
- The 2021 Sudbury Master Plan lists the following objective: “Increase staffing to support public health work and utilize volunteers in the community to assist with educating and serving residents.”

2. Support Financially Vulnerable Residents

(ARPA Category: A1; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 2, 3)

Recommended Action:

- Allocate funds to the Sudbury Emergency Rental Assistance (ERAP) program to pay for housing costs and basic utilities.
 - *Requested amount: \$200,000-\$300,000*
- Expand emergency assistance to include homeowners through the current ERAP program
 - *Requested amount: \$100,000*
- Purchase emergency gift cards for distribution by Jail Diversion Program Clinician, Outreach Worker at the Senior Center and Town Social Worker
 - *Requested amount: \$10,000-\$20,000*

Justification:

- Emergency Housing Assistance Program (ERAP) allows use for rent arrears or utilities.
- From data collected between April-May 2021, about 90,000 Massachusetts residents report having zero confidence in their ability to pay their rent on time. It is estimated that 91,000 Massachusetts households are behind on rent, owing more than \$335 million.⁸ More than 40% of adults in Massachusetts report anxiety about paying at least one expense or bill.⁶
- About 10% of residents in Middlesex County were behind on their rent, like Massachusetts as a whole where 12% of renters are in arrears.⁶
- As of 9/14/21, Longfellow Glen (Sudbury federal subsidized housing) reported the following arrears: 34 households of 120, total owed: \$20,122.99, and the Sudbury Housing Authority, providing subsidized housing to seniors, persons with disabilities and families, reported that 21% of households were behind on rent due to the pandemic.
- HOPEsudbury pays resident's bills in emergency situations. In 2020 and 2021, over 50% and 70% of applicants respectively requested funding to pay rent or mortgage, and the majority reported that this funding (\$600-\$1200) was not enough to alleviate the financial crisis.
- As of July 1, 2021¹ 824,972 Massachusetts residential gas and electric customers owed about \$794 million in past due bills. By the end of September, over 7,000 residential customers had been terminated, of which about 86% had not been identified as low income.⁷
- Nearly half a million residential gas and electric customers in MA were more than 90 days behind on their bills. Nearly 70% of residential customers 90 days behind on their bills are struggling residential customers who were not coded as low income.⁷
- Residents at Longfellow Glen are not eligible for the fuel assistance program. For residents who are eligible, the lengthy application and significant amount of required documentation on barrier to accessing this program without case management support.
- There were nearly 5 times as many unemployed MetroWest individuals in April 2020 compared to April 2019.¹²
- \$80,000 is currently allocated to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) fund. In a preliminary evaluation, social work office has already identified almost 60 household who could benefit from this program. The program will pay rent for residents for a minimum of 6 months, and the amount paid is based on number of bedrooms. It is estimated that the cost of these identified needs would be around \$216,000 and this does not take into account additional residents who are eligible and not yet known to the social work office. It also does not take into account conversations by the Housing Trust to consider allowing applicants to reapply after 6 months if there is still a financial need.
- In regards to the needs of homeowners, as of January 6, 2022 there are 20 homes in Sudbury that are in pre-foreclosure status. There are an additional five homes in foreclosure status, and two homes being auctioned in sheriff's sales.²⁴ This is merely a point-in-time snapshot of the housing crisis impacting Sudbury homeowners.
- MetroWest agencies, especially those providing food, saw client enrollment numbers increase 3-5 times over their typical amounts.¹²

- U.S. Department of Treasury states, “The pandemic cast in stark relief the racial disparities that have persisted in this country for far too long. Black, Latino, and Native Americans were more likely to be infected, hospitalized, or die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts. Communities of color were forced to bear a double burden in this pandemic: both more likely to work in essential, frontline roles with a higher risk of exposure and more likely to lose those jobs as the pandemic caused the economy to contract.”²¹
- The Social Work Office, Police Department’s Jail Diversion Clinician, and the Senior Center’s Outreach Worker are contacted when residents have critical needs. Gift cards are used when available to provide immediate access to: food (including special dietary needs), clothing (including outerwear, undergarments, and footwear), personal care necessities (diapers, medications, formula, medical supplies) transportation (Uber, gas, taxi), and hotels (for those facing homelessness or fleeing domestic violence). Depending on gift card availability, the social work office can distribute more than \$1000/month to meet basic needs requests, and these amounts are typically inadequate to fully meet the needs.
- Emerson Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment conducted from January-September 2021 identified economic insecurity (housing, financial and food security) as a priority area. Also noted a strong association between food insecurity and risky youth behaviors.¹⁶

3. Expanding Mental Health Services

(ARPA Category: A1; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 3, 4)

Recommended Action:

- Allocate funds to contract a licensed mental health counselor for Sudbury residents.
 - *Requested amount: \$83,000/ year for minimum of 2 years*

Justification:

- Many adults have reported declines in their mental health during the pandemic, and the number of adults with symptoms of anxiety and depression has nearly quadrupled when compared to pre-pandemic rates.⁸
- 11% of adults reported having suicidal thoughts, compared to 3.9% before the pandemic.^{13,14}
- In late 2020, one out of three adults in Massachusetts reported experiencing fifteen or more days of poor mental health in a single month and three or more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic has been characterized as a “mass trauma.”²²
- The journal Preventative Medicine notes, “the pandemic may have sizable long-term impacts on psychological distress and health behaviors...” and “ data from previous pandemics suggest that there are not only acute mental health effects, but that psychological distress may persist long after the pandemic ceases.”²³

- At some area hospitals waitlists have reached nearly 6-12 months for mental health care, and nearly 24% of patients in some regions are waiting for psychological care.^{9,10}
- Contracting a mental health counselor with Eliot Community Human Services would allow a clinician to provide “drop-in” and mental health triage services, providing critical access to mental health care. A similar program was piloted in Lincoln. The Sudbury Town Social Worker reached out to the Director at Eliot who was enthusiastic about creating a similar contracted program with Sudbury. The cost of the program is approximately \$40/contracted hour and based on the needs, a full time 40 hr/week clinician is recommended.
- Emerson Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment listed mental health as a priority area and the top health issue identified in the 2021 survey.¹⁶
- The 2021 Sudbury Town Master Plan identifies mental health as an area of concern, noting, “Untreated, mental illness can contribute to substance abuse, social isolation, poor performance at school and at work, fewer employment opportunities or career advancement, and increased risk of suicide.”

4. Funding for Transportation Services

(ARPA Category: A1; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 2, 3, 4)

Recommended Action:

- Allocate funds to cover/expand transportation services for residents.
 - *Requested amount: \$350,000 (Please see Transportation Committee’s request for specific allocation of funds.)*

Justification:

- From May to September 2021, the town’s subsidizing transportation program provided over 300 trips. The cost totaled \$23,188, as reported by the Sudbury Transportation Committee.
- These rides were used to attend medical and behavioral health appointments, access basic needs, and engage in social activities (which has grown increasingly important for mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic).
- The social work office continues to refer residents to this program monthly.
- Many residents report that even with the transportation subsidies, they cannot afford all of their transportation needs.
- The Sudbury Transportation Committee is exploring a 100% increase to these services due to limits with funding. This would be burdensome to many residents.
- Transportation is a social determinant of health, and funding this program is an issue of equity and public health.
- Addressing transportation needs is outlined in the 2021 Sudbury Master Plan. “Sudbury commits to be a community where people of all ages and abilities and financial means are able to get where they need to go locally and regionally without use of personal

automobiles,” and “Sudbury will work to connect public health resources with transportation options.”

- Emerson Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment in 2021 listed this as a priority area, noting lack of transportation’s impact on access to employment, housing, food and medical appointments.¹⁶

5. Investing in the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Commission

(ARPA Category: A1; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 2,3)

Recommended Action:

- Allocate funds to hire consultant/trainers to assist with development of the DEI Commission’s mission and action steps.
 - *Requested amount: \$15,000*

Justification:

- Antiracist work is both an equity issue and a public health issue, as identified by multiple sources, including the CDC which states, “Racism—both interpersonal and structural—negatively affects the mental and physical health of millions of people, preventing them from attaining their highest level of health, and consequently, affecting the health of our nation.”¹⁷
- The front-line workers are among those who are most likely to be exposed to COVID-19, as well as those least likely to be able to get to a testing facility during business hours in order to be tested.
- Those same front-line workers are, in many cases, low-income hourly wage workers as well. Data shows that front-line workers are also more likely to be Black or Hispanic, which creates an issue of inequity.²¹
- Town social worker, at the request of Town Manager and Select Board, sought consultation from the MetroWest Health Foundation’s Racial and Ethnic Disparities Workgroup. Due to the complexity of the issues addressed by this Commission, the Workgroup highly recommended hiring a consultant in the formation of the Sudbury DEI Commission to ensure that it meet its intended goals and does not inadvertently cause harm.
- Emerson Hospital Community Health Needs Assessment in 2021 notes systemic racism, racial injustice and discrimination as an overarching theme in the assessment.¹⁶

6. Premium Pay: Compensation for Town Cleaning Staff, Etc.

(ARPA Category: A2; Sudbury Focus Area: 1, 3)

Recommended Action:

- Retroactive compensation to town cleaning staff

- *Requested amount: TBD based on consultants estimates around eligible amounts*
- Consider retroactive premium pay for other frontline workers in the community

Justification:

- This is an equity and social justice issue. People of color, non-English speakers, low-income individuals, and individuals with less than a high school diploma were disproportionately impacted by the effects of the pandemic, both mentally and financially.¹ Town cleaning staff are members of these populations.
- Critical to safety of employees and residents.
- Cleaning staff are often paid low wages, and work long hours more than five days a week.
- The Town's cleaning staff members were frontline workers, at an increased risk for contracting the virus. They put themselves at risk to protect town employees and the community when cleanliness and hygienic practices were paramount.
- Peer support and collaboration were critical for mental and physical health during the pandemic.² Have relatively few social interactions at work, combined with the risk of exposure to other frontline workers may have increased isolation and decreased overall wellbeing.
- Frontline workers put their own lives on the line during the pandemic to continue to support themselves and their families financially, and to support the community. Their efforts had significant economic impacts (keeping businesses open), provided access to food, basic needs and critical services, and impacted the overall wellbeing of the community. These workers lived in fear of the virus and of infecting loved ones. They lived through the illness and death of colleagues and loved one and continued to go to work each day. They dealt with the behavioral symptoms that the public displayed due to the trauma (which at times included irritability, disrespect, and aggression). All of this and often while not making enough income to adequately meet basic needs and cover emergency financial situations. There has been a great deal of verbal and written gratitude expressed for these workers, but limited financial support.

Thank you for your consideration in regards to these equity-based proposals.

Sincerely, 
Bethany Hadvab, LICSW

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- ⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). Understanding the impact of trauma. *Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>
- ⁵ Law, J. (2021, May 21). Equity group: 91,000 Mass. tenants behind on rent, owe \$335 million, from <https://www.boston25news.com/news/health/equity-group-91000-mass-tenants-behind-rent-owe-335-million/MCYDJUAFTBCZM2VVSFKZV2BFE/>
- ⁶ Back Rent Trending Downward in Middlesex County: Analysis. (September 2021). *Patch*. Retrieved from <https://patch.com/massachusetts/natick/back-rent-trending-downward-middlesex-county-analysis>
- ⁷ Kowanko, A., & Harak, C. (November 2021). More Can and Must Be Done to Prevent Utility Consumers from Losing Service Due to Mounting COVID-Driven Arrearages in Massachusetts and Other States. *National Consumer Law Center*. Retrieved from https://www.nclc.org/images/pdf/special_projects/covid-19/Rpt_More_Covid_Util_Arrearage_Svc.pdf
- ⁸ Household Pulse Survey. (2020). Anxiety and depression. [Data set]. National Center for Health Statistics. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>
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