**ME SILC Monthly Meeting, April 22, 2020**

**Attendees:**

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|  | **MEMBERS** | **PUBLIC** |
| **In attendance** | Cheryl Peabody (Chair), PWD; Patricia Thorsen, LTCOP; Stephanie Desrochers, Program Coordinator Benefits Services MMC; Darcy Gentle (Vice Chair), AIVR Program Director; Diane Frigon, Regional Director, DBVI; Samantha Fenderson, Assistant Director, DVR; Jessica Cyr, PWD; Tom Newman, Executive Director, Alpha One. | Karen Mason, DHHS/OADS;  Julie Hovey, Alpha One.  STAFF: Beth Mogan, Executive Director;  Rebecca Eliot, Administrative Assistant |

**Welcome and Introductions:**

The Council members introduced themselves.

**Minutes:**

Changes for the March minutes were discussed. Changes will be made. The March minutes were accepted as corrected.

**Survey Update:**

78 surveys were completed online. 5 surveys came in via mail. 29 people included contact information and a request to learn more about Maine SILC. So, some possibilities for new members.

Beth & Cheryl to begin working with Alpha One on the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). Anyone else on the Council is welcome to join in, just contact Beth or Cheryl.

**Financial Update:**

Financial reports for February and March were reviewed. There is one outstanding invoice for the closed captioning services. All agreed the Council is in good shape and on track to the budget.

Stephanie gave a reminder to begin tracking spending closely so any surplus dollars can be sent back to the State. She also mentioned the question of money set aside for the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) conference in July. Will it perhaps be done virtually? Cheryl to research and track status of this event. Beth asked if the event is online, could ME SILC possibly have two attendees?

Financial report will be posted in the One Drive for all to View only. Please email any questions to Cheryl and Beth.

**Online Petition:**

HR5741 is an online petition for waivers for Medicare & Medicaid. Cheryl sent out the request so the group could share whatever information and clarification they might offer on this petition. There was concern expressed that this petition came as an anonymous request. Stephanie pointed out that if it was really important and appropriate, the bill would have been discussed by NCIL or Administration of Community Living (ACL). The group came to consensus to not sign this petition. Cheryl to contact petitioner to decline.

Diane suggested if this sort of anonymous request comes in again, Beth & Cheryl can go back to the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) or Alpha One to see if they know anything. Julie shared that Alpha One usually tracks only State level bills, petitions, amendments. NCIL would certainly be aware of national level items.

**COVID-19 General Discussion:**

**Diane** shared the Division for the Blind & Visually Impaired (DBVI) is continuing to provide services to clients through phone calls and video conferencing calls. All completed with a lot of creativity by staff to help the clients. DBVI staff are also taking this time to participate in various webinar trainings to build their skills,

Diane mentioned her current focus is in supporting the Business Enterprise Program (BEP). Due to the Stay in Place orders, many of the BEP managers are currently on unemployment. In anticipation of re-openings, she has been working closely with national and state resources for support and preparation toward going back into a “new normal” in a safe way.

Cheryl asked about DBVI senior services during this time. Diane said DBVI staff are paying extra attention to their independent living and older adult clients. Especially now, it is so very important to keep reaching out via calls, teleconferencing, etc. to ensure they are getting what they need; medication, food, and connecting to other services/resources.

**Julie** from Alpha One (Maine’s Center for Independent Living) shared that all staff are having fairly good success staying in touch with clients via calls and video conferencing. Her staff have reported some consumers have been impacted with personal care attendant issues, such as attendants choosing to stay at home or clients choosing to not have anyone come into the home. These clients are choosing to utilize their informal supports; family and friends as their care givers.

Grant programs are continuing but dependent on consumers choices and their reaching out. Alpha One has been working with the state Office on Aging and Disability Services (OADS) for grant exemptions to allow the live-in care givers to be paid beyond the current 40-hour limit. She also mentioned that a pay rate increase has come through for some of the programs.

Cheryl asked if the agency has less quantity of services provided; have they received any directions from the Government on what happens to unused funds in a grant program; and how it affects the following year.

Julie responded that she has not received any directions to date. A surplus at year end is highly unusual. The Independent Living grant money is sent out as a lump sum at the beginning of the fiscal year and then distributed out to the various programs.

**Trish** from the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program stated that all advocacy services continue.

Letters have been sent out to all the various Home Care agencies and facilities. The staff are trying to connect to as many residents as possible via phone calls and post cards are being sent to individuals in the long-term care facilities. Staff are really concerned about the impact of isolation on the residents. Mental and emotional health is a large concern and focus this coming month.

The program participated in a survey for assessments of nursing homes across the state. They also worked with American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) on a notice before the state asking to extend the bed hold time to 14 days, up from the standard 7 days.

Trish mentioned a big concern currently is the lessening of many oversight controls and reporting measures on the long-term care facilities. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) have waived a lot of oversight requirements; no staffing numbers report, no licensing follow-up and less reviews overall on the facilities. She is particularly concerned for the welfare of the patients because right now her staff can’t go into the facilities to see and assess.

The Ombudsman Program is doing more advocacy these weeks for families to connect with patients, especially when the technology is available.

**Sam**for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) shared that services continue, and for the most part, all staff are working remotely. This week, all across the state, DVR kicked off the Virtual Career Exploration Workshop. DVR wants to offer weekly VCEWs that can cover the whole state in one workshop. This workshop is accessed through the Virtual Job Shadow website, which allows group workshops, virtual classes with Zoom or Skype, and easy access to course materials. Teachers can outline lesson plans and post links to materials and other resource sites. The Transitional Counselors can also use this website to work with their clients and pull in teachers to work 1:1 or in small groups. Lack of access to technology eliminates some clients right now and DVR is continuing to be flexible.

Sam shared that DVR has a concern in regard to planning now for the summer programs that are a big part of the Pre-Employment Transition Services (PreETS). With the current COVID-19 precautions, it is unclear what the “return to normal” timeline will be. Planning for these programs is on hold now and will come down to some very tight organizing deadlines to complete successfully. These services constitute a large part of the 15% of the budgetthat must be used for PreETS. How to make them happen safely and when is definitely part of the conversation DVR is having with Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA).

DVR really is continuing business as usual for the most part. Staff are using Zoom or Skype video conferencing to stay in contact with most clients. The job coaches are obeying all personal protective equipment (PPE) rules when working 1:1 with their clients. Still moving forward on the new VR client applications, only now for the time being, they are relying heavily on the individuals supplying what medical documents they can supply with a re-review of most applications later. Lastly, professional development is a big opportunity for the counselors, so DVR has been sending out a lot of information and links to various webinars to the counselors to capitalize on this time for their CRC~~s~~.

**Stephanie**from Benefits Counseling Services stated that all services by the Community Work Incentives Coordinators (CWIC) are continuing through phone calls or video conferencing calls. She reminded all on the Council to please remind their staff to call CWICs directly these days. DO NOT use referral packets.

Lots of information coming out about public benefits and how the various bills affect these benefits.

MMC did a webinar last week with an estimated 130 people attending. Cheryl asked if there is a website or resource to direct people to for questions on SSDI/SSI from outside agencies. Stephanie referred to two resources that will be live on the MMC website; a list of links to other trusted websites and MMC’s Resource Guide. This guide is organized in an easy to use Frequently Asked Questions format. For example: “How will the economic impact payments affect public health benefits?” The guide then presents answers in plain language along with guidance to further information resources. Both are continually updated so as information about Social Security Benefits changes, MMC will continue to add links, post updates and make applicable changes to the resource guide on the website. Stephanie encourages all to check out the resource guide on the website, to be posted by 4/23. SILC will receive an email when the links are live. Cheryl suggested adding this list of links onto SILC’s website.

Stephanie mentioned a concern with a recent announcement regarding recipients of Social Security Title 2 Benefits. To claim their $500 child credit payment, they need to file their 2019 taxes by 5pm today. Otherwise, they are forced to wait until the spring of 2021 when they file their 2020 taxes. These individuals were essentially given a 48-hours’ notice to file for this credit. Also just announced is SSI recipients will receive a $1200 economic impact check. Stephanie is very concerned what the deadline may be for the SSI recipients who are eligible to claim the $500 per child credit. Will it be another situation of a 48-hour turnaround? Thus, Stephanie strongly encourages all Council members to share with their clients who may be receiving SSI benefits, and have children, to file online now and not wait for an announced deadline.

Stephanie mentioned an advocacy request she made to SILC last month in regard to the effect of Unemployment Benefits on other public benefits for many individuals. She is happy to announce there has been some policy acknowledgements and the government has taken steps to mitigate impacts to various individuals in the present.

MMC has hired a new team counselor. Her name is Kate Hamlin. Her territory is not yet assigned. She will be training for the next few months with online classes. Stephanie will email when she knows Kate’s territory and her client start date.

Stephanie raised a question in regard to long term care facilities and the economic impact payments received by some of the residents. They are getting reports that there are some facilities under the impression that they can keep the money to pay toward residents’ care costs. Her research shows the residents who are experiencing this diversion of their checks should contact the national equivalent of the Ombudsman Program. Stephanie asked the Council for guidance on who is the best agency to contact for Maine residents? Karen suggested perhaps Legal Services for the Elderly (LSE) could help with these cases. Stephanie shared that from her knowledge and understanding, for those residents eligible to receive the money, the economic impact payment is NOT counted as income for any public benefit programs that get State or Federal funds. Thus, any economic impact money received by residents should not be factored in the cost of care funds at these long-term care facilities. Also, Stephanie clarified these economic impact payments are not taxable, as it is clearly stated all over the government’s COVID 19 website.

**Darcy** of the 121 American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Program shared her team is busy letting agencies know they are still operating, and staff are working remotely. If the counselors must have an in-person visit, they make sure it is only one person at a time that goes into the home with proper personal protective equipment (PPE) in place. The VR counselors are utilizing the AWARE program to make sure progress notes are updated and information is documented and recorded. They are checking in with consumers and making sure they are okay and the AIVR staff share information of any resources available to offer.

Darcy shared her office is staying in contact with the Rehabilitation Service Administration (RSA) and any other Tribal VR Program directors. They have been forwarding the AIVR staff many webinars, trainings and fact sheets on the COVID-19 topics that they then send out to their consumers. the AIVR staff also are doing referrals by phone, Zoom and Go To video meetings. For consumers with no access to technology, her team is staying in contact through mailings. They have also been checking on consumers through the tribal organizations to ensure their basic needs are continuing to be met.

They have received some grant funding specifically for COVID-19, so they are clarifying how best to utilize the funds for consumers and Tribal Community members. All these steps to make sure consumers and members are supported during this time. AIVR staff are also very aware of the effects on mental health from this long period of social distancing.

**Karen** from the Office on Aging and Disability Services shared that 85% of staff are working remotely. If doing an in-person visit, staff are following the social distancing guidelines and using personal protective equipment (PPE).

Karen shared that for her two programs: Aging and community based Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS), she has been holding up to 5 weekly calls to stay in contact and keep staff and programs supported. These weekly calls have been happening at least for the last 4 weeks. Her agency has been working very closely with Licensing & Certification, the Office of Maine Care Services and the Office of Family Independence to make sure operations are still moving along.

Important recent steps have been to work with MaineCare to submit several documents and Disaster Plans to Centers for Medicaid Services (CMS) requesting rule modifications and financial assistance to three different buckets of MaineCare services. Some of those have been sent out and one is about to be sent. They are hoping for a quick turnaround answer.

Karen announced her office has recently received two major relief packages for the Older Americans Act funding.

One for Families First Funding that provided a significant bump to the area agencies for the home delivered meals program, allowing access to broader areas of the state. The food programs are operating on full steam ahead. The other is for the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding which was spread out to the Area Agencies on Aging and the Ombudsmen Program. Maine’s CIL also received some of that funding. She has just informed Tom Newman of Alpha One there is money there to be allocated.

Karen shared how the CARES Act funding is flexible in its ability to provide services across the state, such as food programs and support for the Area Agencies on Aging Outreach and Intake sections which have seen an increased call load from consumers looking for information and resources during this difficult time.

For COVID-19 responses, the current good news is the PPE supplies have started coming in. Karen shared her office has been working with the Maine CDC directly. She has a link to the weekly CDC update with Dr. Shah (Mondays at 1:00pm) which she will forward to Beth to share with others and perhaps post on the One Drive.

She shared that over the last week, her office worked very collaboratively with the Office of MaineCare Services, the Offices of Licensing & Certification and the Ombudsman Program to complete a statewide survey of the nursing facilities. They used the I-CART Assessment, An Infection Control & Response survey, to ensure all facilities were prepared and that they have the personal protective equipment and other resources they need.

The survey process also helped to be in contact and stay connected with nursing facilities through this time of the pandemic. The data results from the surveys are still being analyzed. OADS will be doing the same process for the residential care and assisted living facilities across the state. There are currently over 960 in Maine, hence this next survey effort will most likely be a sampling only. But again, it is being done to ensure the facilities are prepared and have what they need.

**General Updates:**

Cheryl reminded everyone to complete the Monthly Activity Table for March and April. Please email completed forms for each month to Rebecca and Beth.

Diane had a follow-up question on last month’s minutes item: “Diane and Sam to check with the {Designated State Entity (DSE)} for exceptions on the meeting mandate on voting members”. Sam clarified that she had mentioned this to Libby and this question was sent to the AAG. The priority concern is how to address the lack of communication with the Governor’s Office on Boards and Commissions in the PPR (704) report. Diane recommended that Cheryl and Beth keep pressing for member approvals from the Governor’s office so the PPR (704) report will document all the attempts made, and the time delays.

Cheryl shared that the PPR (704) report submitted in December 2019 was rejected. Additional information was provided to ACL and it has subsequently been accepted.

**Adjourned** – Meeting ended at 11:40 a.m.