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Carmel Roques, secretary of the Maryland Department of Aging, is drawing on her extensive experience in aging services to lead the Longevity Ready Maryland Initiative that aims to recalibrate societal perspectives on aging.

A blueprint for aging

Department of Aging leading Longevity Ready Maryland Initiative

By **KATIE TURNER**

Special to The Daily Record

Sixteen percent of Marylanders are over the age of 65, and that number will continue to grow. Although aging is often portrayed as a villain, the reality is that people are living longer now than ever before. Soon, your “older” years will far outlast your youthful days.

Carmel Roques, secretary of the

THURSDAY: A Q&A with T. Rowe Price’s new lead for the Global Retirement Strategy Team.

Maryland Department of Aging, explained that to prepare for this future, we need to shift the paradigm for how we think about aging and longevity.

Drawing on her extensive experience in aging services, Roques is leading the Longevity Ready Maryland

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Initiative, which aims to recalibrate societal perspectives on aging.

“This initiative lets us think about and work toward changes that are about people who currently are at the later years of their lives, and about the

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journey of longevity,” said Roques regarding the overarching framework of Longevity Ready Maryland. “How does aging impact us as individuals, and as a society, now that we have decades more lifespan?”

Rather than viewing older years as a phase of decline, Roques sees it as a period rich with opportunities for growth, contribution and active engagement. Through a multi-dimensional approach to solving the challenges and opportunities presented by an aging population, the goal is to prepare Maryland for a future where the number of older adults is not only larger, but also more integral to the fabric of society.

That means breaking down barriers that older adults face, such as employment, education, or civic participation. Battling ageism is central to achieving

these goals, so a key aspect of the initiative is focused on transforming the narrative around aging into a more positive, inclusive dialogue.

“All of the conversation has been forever framed around the biological realities of aging. We get the narrative of cognitively impaired, frail, unable to participate, burdensome, costly, useless,” Roques explained. “These are the conscious and unconscious biases that continue to perpetuate ageism.

“We need to be looking much more broadly at the fact that individuals age differently for a lot of reasons,” she added. “This initiative allows us to think about that, and to understand that there’s incredible variation in what happens individually to a person, in terms of their health and well-being, and socially to whole cohorts of peo-

ple.”

To ensure that this initiative can achieve its forward-looking objectives, Roques is eager to see Longevity Ready Maryland adopted into legislation. An Executive Order issued in January by Governor Wes Moore provides governmental support and embeds the initiative within state policy. This strategic move ensures that Longevity Ready Maryland is not just a set of ideals, but a series of actionable policies and programs.

“The State plan is structured so that there are milestones and metrics associated with very specific targets. We want to create a comprehensive and coherent picture for stakeholders,” said Roques.

Execution will depend on a collaborative, multi-sector approach, which

Roques said is modeled after the Centers for Healthcare Strategy, which emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement, inviting input and collaboration from a broad spectrum of the community, government agencies, private business, educational institutions and beyond to enrich the planning process.

Roques is optimistic about the transformative potential of Longevity Ready Maryland.

“Using a longevity lens helps us see that chronological age is not really the appropriate marker for things like work, education, raising families and so on,” she added. “Current policies were created for the last century when people didn’t actually live to be 65 to collect Social Security. And now, you could live to be 100.”