

## Kaine helps launch PACE Center construction

IDA HOLYFIELD / Editor



A \$4.5 million U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development loan will build a facility to house the Mountain Empire Older Citizens PACE center, where up to 200 qualifying participants can receive all-inclusive care. State and local agency officials, MEOC board members, Wise County Industrial Authority representatives, PACE Center staff members and the architect and contractor joined Del. Phillip Puckett, center, Gov. Tim Kaine, MEOC Executive Director Marilyn Maxwell and Del. Terry Kilgore for a ceremonial ground breaking Tuesday. (photo by ELISSA POWERS)

**BIG STONE GAP** — “We would like every Virginian to be able to stay at home as long as they want to ... PACE offers services that wrap around people and make sure they can do so if that is their desire,” Gov. Tim Kaine told those assembled at Mountain Empire Older Citizens Tuesday.

Kaine came to join with state agency heads, regional leaders, county and MEOC officials and PACE participants for a ceremonial ground breaking to officially launch construction of a facility that is part of the \$4.5 million project being administered by MEOC.

Excavation is in progress and construction begins this week on the building which will house a program that is the nation’s first rural center for PACE, the Program for the All-Inclusive Care of the Elderly.

Since April 1, Mountain Empire Older Citizens has been offering PACE services on site to qualifying age 55 and older residents of Wise, Lee and Scott counties and the City of Norton. There, participants can have their medical, nutritional, physical and social needs met in a central setting — and if they’re income-eligible, they won’t receive a bill for services.

Statewide, Kaine has signed legislation creating six PACE centers. Three are open and three are going to open soon. Four are in urban areas and two are in Southwest Virginia, at Big Stone Gap and Tazewell, where a site will be served by the Appalachian Agency for Senior Citizens.

The basic idea of PACE is the same as his administration’s policies for the aging, Kaine said. In the past, the state had systems that sometimes made it easier for the elderly to move into an institution, rather than stay in their own homes. The PACE centers coming into service in Virginia reverse that trend, and will set new priorities for elder care.

The PACE philosophy “is all about humane services and care. Physical things aren’t important. Relationships and people are important,” he said.

MEOC Executive Director Marilyn Maxwell, in a visit to South Carolina 13 years ago, saw a model PACE program and became determined to bring it to Southwest Virginia, Kaine said. Today, her vision has become reality.

Maxwell’s leadership at MEOC, Kaine said, reminds him of the Biblical story of the Loaves and Fishes, in which a small amount of food, after being blessed, fed a multitude.

Maxwell started MEOC with a \$12,000 grant, as the only employee, 33 years ago. Today, the agency has 220 full- and part-time employees and an annual budget of \$5.2 million. “What can one person do? Look at that. How many people have been impacted by her service?”

The effort to establish a rural PACE program has involved intense collaboration between funding agencies, service providers, MEOC’s board and eight advisory councils, and the support of area officials and Virginia legislators, Maxwell told those assembled. Without the assistance of funding agencies, such as Rural Development, construction of the PACE facility would not be possible.

Ellen Davis, Virginia State Director of USDA Rural Development, noted that the agency’s \$4.5 million low-interest loan will result in a project with a direct economic impact of \$7.8 million a year and the creation of 41 new jobs, most at the professional level.

Patrick Finnerty, Director of the Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services, addressed current PACE participants attending the

event. "You all are what this is about. You are going to get outstanding care, the kind of care all of us hope will be available to us when we reach that point in life," he said. "One of Gov. Kaine's first actions after he took office was to recommend budget amendments for aging services, and for the provision of \$1.5 million for PACE sites across the state."

Linda Nablo, Commissioner of the Virginia Department for the Aging, termed MEOC "the best of the best" in providing services to the aging. "As America ages, as we prepare for our senior population to double in a couple of decades, Virginia needs more programs like PACE to help seniors stay in their communities and improve their lives. Once again, MEOC shows us the way."