



Vermont
Association of
Area Agencies
on Aging

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Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging
Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging
Senior Solutions

To: House Committee on Human Services
From: Janet Hunt, Executive Director
RE: Testimony Related to Older Vermonters and Long-Term Care Services
DATE: April 30, 2020

It is a pleasure and an honor to speak before you today. Thank you for the invitation. On behalf of the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), I want to express our great appreciation for the dedication you have demonstrated by continuing legislative business – as usual – in this new virtual world.

I want to start by telling you how impressed I am with the comprehensive work of the AAAs during the COVID-19 pandemic that may go unnoticed if I don't mention it. Each of the AAAs have been able to respond to their communities in a seamless transition. The agencies moved swiftly to help in flattening the curve and in social distancing by closing offices and moving all of the services remotely. If you are a caller to the Helpline, you would not know that you are reaching a staff person who is now working from home and providing the same level of information and assistance to the caller as always. The communication with staff of each of the AAAs happens, virtually, and consistently to assure that older Vermonter's needs continue to be met.

This is not to say that there have not been challenges. The AAA Directors come together several mornings each week to collectively problem-solve. Of particular benefit is that these meetings also include the team of staff at the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL). DAILE staff have been invaluable in providing the guidance needed from the federal and state level as they receive it. We have truly experienced strength in our collaborative efforts between the state and the AAAs.

I want to point out some high-level areas of concern that the AAAs alone cannot solve:

1. **Technology:** With social distancing, staff have needed to connect with the people who they serve by phone. Broadband continues to be of concern especially in rural areas where there is weak internet and mobile service. It makes it extremely difficult to reach people for telehealth purposes. The need to educate people in the use of technology for future waves of the pandemic is critical. Technology must be adapted so that people are not challenged by devices. The AAAs recommend that technology related concerns with regard to older Vermonters be addressed through public policy.
2. **Anxiety and mental health:** More and more individuals are experiencing increased anxiety, depression and loneliness. AAAs are connecting them to services currently available, but there is going to need to be more resources to support the growing

need. AAAs are also seeing the caregiver crisis intensify with the limited supports that the Home Health Agencies can provide. This was a problem prior to the pandemic, and it would be helpful if the legislature could look at supporting initiatives in this area. Initial thoughts include opening up the moratorium to allow more agencies in the state to provide service, finding ways to pay caregivers a livable wage, invest in systems to build/maintain a statewide caregiver registry. We are also seeing individuals with cognitive issues continue to struggle to access long-term care services, partly because of challenges getting the supporting documents for long-term case management, but also because of the way Choices for Care doesn't weigh the need for this level of support the same as it does with physical hands on assistance. It would be important if the legislature could work to support changes in the program.

3. **Respite and caregivers:** Finding caregivers to do respite is becoming much harder, as both caregivers and family members are increasingly nervous about in-home services. The Rewarding Work system has been cited as a "Promising Practice" by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services yet this program has been eliminated by the state of Vermont. The Rewarding Work system allowed for those who are seeking caregivers to simply put in a zip code and be able to search for caregivers in that area. The state's elimination of this only added to the complications for those seeking assistance to remain in the community. The AAAs request that the legislature consider re-establishing the Rewarding Work system.
4. **Reaching state and federal agencies:** It has been very difficult to reach state or federal workers to discuss pending applications (unemployment is a state example, social security is a federal example). This adds stress to both clients and our staff.
5. **Putting off medical care:** Many clients are "putting off" getting medical care due to fears about seeing their physician or feeling that their physicians are no longer available. This will have an impact down the line as issues come up that should have been dealt with.
6. **The future of "Senior Centers and meal sites":** The traditional model of supporting older adults in congregate settings has proven unsuccessful during the pandemic. Many senior centers and meal sites have changed their model to provide virtual group activities and certainly have helped rise to the occasion to deliver meals to hundreds and hundreds of individuals. Together, we need to support efforts to change the structure of the traditional model and look to the future needs of older adults. The Older Vermonters Act could be the most appropriate way in which we could address food insecurity, the future of meal delivery, social isolation and ways in which individuals can come together.
7. **Staffing:** At times and in certain situations, AAAs staff may also feel the pressures of anxiety and stress combined with their desire to work effectively and efficiently when many of our staff are also needing to tend to childcare and school issues. Our AAAs are working hard to be flexible to the unique home needs of staff.
8. **Re-opening of Vermont:** Of major concern is that there will be increasing political pressure to allow businesses to resume operations and for life to go back to looking a lot more like it did pre-COVID-19. If older adults are still being advised to shelter themselves in a way that the majority of the population is not, this places them at risk of becoming invisible to policymakers and our communities and it will be harder to

maintain the level of support to meet their needs that we have seen up to this point. The pressure to re-open the state has a long-term impact on the health and well-being of all of us, especially older citizens.

I will end on a high note by saying that our AAAs have worked around the clock to assure that older adults nutritional needs are met. Our AAAs have strengthened and established relationships with many community partners to prepare and deliver meals to even the most difficult to reach individuals. Many volunteers of all ages have stepped forward to contribute to their communities for these efforts. If we can put our energy into determining ways to sustain these strong relationships with partners and volunteers it will be to everyone's advantage.