

Community of Vermont Elders

Ruby Baker, Executive Director

4/30/20

## COVID-19 Impact on Older Vermonters

### Isolation

- Vermonters with disabilities are already prone to isolation, but even more so without the ability to access their regular supports in person
- Rural areas have limited or no internet service, making it difficult to remain connected. Additionally, Older Vermonters may not be as tech savvy, further limiting their access to Zoom or online platforms.
- Public transportation feels unsafe or isn't available. Volunteer driver corps have been dramatically reduced as drivers choose to isolate. Many older adults struggle to get to essential services in the best of times.
- Social opportunities that Older Vermonters are used to have been largely eliminated

### Fear

- Illness/death is a very real threat for older people
- Fixed incomes or reduced incomes are difficult to navigate. Long term fear of economic collapse and recession raises questions about solvency of government supports including social security and Medicare.
- When spouses or people sharing their household are essential workers there is increased risk of exposure. Many grandparents are providing some level of care for grandchildren when their children are working or running essential errands.

### Logistical Challenges are amplified

- Assistive technology for people with disabilities is less accessible and more necessary when trying to access computers and other ways to stay connected
- Advance Directives may need to be revisited (ventilator provisions, etc.) but connecting with legal supports and understanding your own values is challenging at a time when everything is changing
- Risk to reward analysis of performing essential tasks adds a layer of complexity to previously simple tasks

### Feeling burdensome

- On family and society
- Finding a sense of purpose when many of the ways Older Vermonters contribute back to their communities have closed or become too risky
- Public rhetoric may make Older people feel expendable

## Food security

- Adequate nutrition is vital to ongoing health and ability to resist/fight infection
- Access, money, and fear is limiting how people consume foods, including hoarding behaviors and reducing consumption to ensure enough down the line
- Pride can be a barrier for people to accessing supports such as 3-square, Meals on Wheels, and food pantry services
- Information is harder to access now, with limited avenues for case workers and advocates to assist

## Reopen

- What does the world look like when it does finally reopen? Unknown and uncertain
- Confusing to navigate the ever changing landscape
- Resurgence of infections
- Being forgotten in the excitement to reopen; many Older Vermonters may choose/need to continue to self-isolate for longer than the general population; Do the extra supports and awareness continue once younger people are back to some degree of normalcy?

## Impact on Community Services

Vermont has made a commitment to Aging in Place. We, as a state, have worked hard to build a spectrum of options so that Older Vermonters may age where they choose, even under circumstances that might require an institutional setting in other states. We strongly believe in self-determination; the right of all people to actively participate in decisions made about their own lives is an inherent piece of our identity as Vermonters. As we think about the impact of COVID on our Elder supports and Long Term Services, the first thing that jumps to mind is our nursing homes and hospitals, which have been so much in the news. But flying under the radar are many of the supports and services that make it possible for adults to age in place.

Adult Days have all shut down, however they are reimbursed on a fee for service model which means that without clients coming in for services, they cannot collect any income. Already operating on a shoe string budget, the impact of a shutdown with no income may be catastrophic. For families trying to support and care for a loved one with dementia, stroke, or other impairment, Adult Days can make it possible for them to continue to work, to get a few hours of respite, to run errands, or to access much needed care. In a model that supports aging in place, we must consider that this increases our reliance on caregivers. If we don't adequately support our caregivers and provide a spectrum of supports, the system will crumble.

Senior Centers have done incredible work to expand their Meals on Wheels offerings in the face of reduced volunteers, limited financial increases, and increased health and safety requirements. They

have risen to the challenge in creative and powerful ways. As a cornerstone of many communities, Senior Centers are facing real financial challenges. Much of their income is based on donations, fundraising events, and fee for classes, etc. Without those in-person opportunities, their ability to fill the gaps in their income is limited. Now is the time to recognize how vital Senior Centers are to the ongoing wellness of Older Vermonters.

The Area Agencies on Aging serve many roles to support elders and are working hard to ensure that Meals on Wheels and other essential services are still delivered.

Many more service providers, from domestic violence to home care givers who fall outside the spotlight but who make up the fabric that allows for Older Vermonters to meet their needs in a community based setting. We have committed to that spectrum of care and services, and now we must show that commitment by ensuring that they are able to re-open and provide those services in a safe and responsible way.