

TO: House Human Services Committee

FROM: Molly Dugan, Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives

RE: Covid-19 Response Updates

DATE: January 15, 2021

My name is Molly Dugan and I work for Cathedral Square. I was the Director of the statewide SASH<sup>®</sup> (Support and Services at Home) program since its inception in 2011 and recently took a new position as Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives. My brief comments today will focus on the SASH response to Covid-19. SASH utilizes the network of affordable housing providers across the state including all public housing authorities in partnership with health and community provider organizations such as Area Agencies on Aging and Home Health to provide support and health care coordination to help approximately 5,000 vulnerable Vermonters stay at home throughout their lives.

It has been an extremely challenging time since early March. The foundational strength and value-add of the SASH program is the everyday presence and in-person contact our Care Coordinators and Wellness Nurses have with their participants by being embedded in affordable housing settings across the state. This type of presence had to stop abruptly early last spring. I am here, however, to report that the investment the Legislature has made over the years in the statewide infrastructure for SASH provided a swift, thorough, consistent and *compassionate* response that helped keep thousands of older Vermonters and adults with disabilities living in your communities connected, informed and healthy.

#### **How did we provide this kind of a response?**

- With our centralized administrative structure for SASH at Cathedral Square coupled with the decentralized delivery system of the program through local community non-profits and public housing authorities we were able to immediately develop and deploy a COVID-19 Resource and Information section for SASH staff through our statewide intranet that included the latest guidance, tools and resources from the CDC, VDH and DAIL.
- We developed an individualized COVID-19 questionnaire and action plan that staff went through by phone with each SASH participant whether they live in St. Johnsbury, Bennington or Winooski or any town or city in between. This consistent and standardized process allowed us to identify the most pressing needs facing our participants across the state and we then were able to prioritize how best to meet those needs. Some of these **most pressing needs included medication refills, access to food and health care and social isolation.**
- The SASH teams which include staff from housing, Area Agencies on Aging, Home Health agencies, Community Mental Health and Community Health Teams based in primary care continued their regular at least monthly meetings just by phone or Zoom rather than in person. These established inter-agency relationships and meeting structure allowed for the continued collaboration and action planning with no or little interruption.

- With the data we collect on our SASH participants we developed a report for each SASH panel that identified for SASH staff the participants at high risk for Covid related complications due to pre-existing conditions. Staff quickly prioritized outreach and collaboration with partners.

#### **Recent SASH Initiatives in Response to Covid-19**

- **Distribution of 270 Ipad**s to all SASH panels across the state. Obtained through the Vermont Program for Quality in Health Care (VPQHC) in November, these will allow for the creation of tablet lending libraries and all SASH participants will be able to access telehealth visits with their healthcare providers, prevention programs and social connections with family and friends.
- **Focus on Social Isolation and Loneliness.** Our most pressing challenge as the pandemic has worsened and we have had to reinstate some restrictions loosened in summer months. We are rolling out an in-depth training for all SASH staff in early February to share current research and evidence-based practices. Staff have been doing as many group activities virtually and via phone as possible through the Community Healthy Living Plans.
- **Food Distribution** – SASH has an MOU with the VT Food Bank for the Direct Distribution Program, which provides distribution sites at many of our housing communities across the state. SASH staff coordinate delivery and outreach and trained in safe food practices and nutrition. Recently received funding to provide needed equipment (pushcarts, etc.) to ensure food delivery can continue seamlessly during the winter months. This will help with Meals on Wheels deliveries as well.
- **Vaccination Sites** - Collaborating with local pharmacies to be sites for Covid-19 vaccinations.

Thank you for your time and attention and support of the SASH program.

Sincerely,

Molly Dugan  
Director of Policy and Strategic Initiatives  
Cathedral Square