



Read below for the full success stories from the 2020 Butler County Elderly Services Program Annual Report, and for additional success stories of how the program and its partner network assisted older adults in the county to remain safe and independent in their homes.

Amid pandemic, Butler County voters overwhelmingly approve senior services levy

In November 2020, Butler County voters overwhelmingly approved a renewal of the county's senior services tax levy. The levy is the primary funding source for the Elderly Services Program (ESP) in the county. Annually, ESP helps more than 300 older adults with disabilities remain in their own homes with independence and dignity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ESP has been an important resource for people who never before needed help.

Since 1996, voters in Butler County have shown strong support for the senior services levy, but 2020 was a record-breaker. Nearly 77 percent of voters on election day voted in favor of the levy, an increase of three percentage points from the levy's last renewal in 2015, and a 19-point increase since the first levy in 1996.



Even with strong historical support, the committee that worked to pass the levy took nothing for granted. The 2020 election presented unique challenges with a presidential election at the top of the ballot and a lot of uncertainty related to COVID-19. Campaign volunteers attended zoom meetings instead of city council meetings to share information about the levy and hosted socially distanced honk and waves. Volunteers helped assemble and distribute 2,000 yard signs and install 75 larger signs and showed up at polling locations on election day.

“Voters in Butler County understand the important role this levy plays in our county,” said David Mancuso, chair of the committee that worked to pass the levy. “It benefits everyone – from older adults who want to stay in their homes as they age, to family caregivers struggling to juggle the responsibilities of family, career and elder caregiving. ESP even helps our local economy by providing supplemental care that helps family caregivers stay focused on work, instead of sidelined by caregiving responsibilities.”

ESP and Council on Aging (COA) – the Area Agency on Aging for Butler County and ESP’s administrator – have been an important support network for Butler County older adults during the pandemic. Together, ESP and COA provided more than 5,000 14-day emergency food boxes to ESP clients. An additional 4,800 “comfort” meals were delivered to county older adults who live in low-income apartment buildings. The meals came from LaRosa’s, Taste of Belgium, Frisch’s, C&M BBQ Grille and Hamilton’s own Neal’s Famous BBQ, through a partnership with Council on Aging. Personal care supplies, including toilet paper and cleaning supplies, along with masks and hand sanitizer, were also provided to Butler County older adults.

With any luck, 2021 will mark the end of the pandemic. But thanks to the generous support of county voters, ESP will continue to be an important resource for older adults and families during the pandemic and beyond.

Farmers’ market program treats low-income older adults to fresh produce

In 2020, low-income older adults in southwestern Ohio, including Butler County, were able to participate in the United States Department of Agriculture Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program. More than 1,100 older adults in Council on Aging’s (COA) five-county service area participated in the program – 216 in Butler County – which provides fresh, nutritious, unprepared locally grown fruits, vegetables, herbs and honey through farmers’ markets, roadside stands and community supported agriculture (CSA) farmers.

COA was able to offer the program for the first time locally, thanks to support from some Butler County community members.



COA’s Nutrition Business Relations Partner, Jennifer Lake, worked with local community members, area farmers and the Ohio Department of Aging to secure a \$180,000 grant from Ohio’s General Revenue fund to bring the program to the area.

“We were absolutely thrilled to be able to support two very important communities here in southwestern Ohio with the program – older adults who might not otherwise be able to access nutritious, fresh produce – and our farmers,” Lake said.

Cynthia Stever, former chair of the Butler County Elderly Services Program Advisory Council, and Butler County resident and activist, Mike Eck, were instrumental in bringing the program to southwestern Ohio. “The whole theory is that when it comes to local, farm-fresh food, everybody deserves some,” Eck said.

In June, seniors who applied and qualified began to receive \$50 worth of coupons to redeem through the end of October at participating farmers’ markets in Hamilton, Butler, Clermont, Clinton and Warren counties.

The older adults using the coupons were thrilled to have access to the produce. “I greatly, greatly appreciate you for sending [the coupons] to me. They are going to be well-used and it will help my health even better because of the vegetables and the fruit,” said Diana, from Hamilton County.

In addition to the traditional coupon program, Lake engaged three CSA farmers in a pilot program to deliver their produce directly to five low-income senior apartment buildings in Butler and Hamilton counties.

One of those farmers is Steve Willis, owner of Just Farmin' in Butler County. Throughout the season, Willis and his associates delivered produce weekly to Belle Tower apartments in Hamilton. "It's worked out really well. It financially helps the farm, but spiritually... it sure makes you feel better."

Belle Tower residents in the program are feeling better too. Carol, who has diabetes, was able to keep her sugars down by eating two salads a day made up partially of her delivery from Just Farmin'. Another resident, Pam, incorporates the fruits and vegetables into a healthy diet to help with her high cholesterol and blood pressure.

And, for older adults with limited financial means, this access to fresh produce is priceless. Pam is grateful to have "fresh food, and less money out-of-pocket, because vegetables cost a lot."

Lake plans to continue to build the program by serving even more older adults and bringing in more farmers' markets in the future. "Despite the pandemic disrupting the operations of many area markets and keeping many older adults at home this year, I was very pleased that we established great relationships with local farmers and we were able to get so much fresh produce into the hands of those who really needed it. I'm looking forward to building on this great launch in coming growing seasons," she said.

Critical homecare workforce deserves recognition

Home health aides provide critical and often life-saving care for older adults who want to remain in their homes as they age. They help with bathing, dressing and eating, as well as important everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking and running errands, and they get to know their care recipients intimately. Home health aides are often the first to notice critical changes in physical and behavioral health.

Most older adults – nine out of 10 – want to stay in their homes as they age. But most will also need some form of long-term care (seven out of 10). This means many will need the help of a caregiver. As families work to find balance in their daily lives – raising children and managing a career while caring for an older loved one – they increasingly turn to home health aides to fill gaps in care and ensure a good quality of life for their loved one.

But the stability home health aides provide is in jeopardy. Low wages, thin benefits, unpredictable schedules and other job challenges and stresses have resulted in a shortage of qualified home health aides. As the economy has improved in recent years, many have left the industry for higher paying, more stable employment opportunities. The pandemic has made things worse.

The impact of this shortage can be felt nationwide, and our region is not immune. Home health care agencies that hire aides to provide care for their clients are struggling to recruit and retain staff. Council on Aging (COA) contracts with these agencies to deliver services to individuals enrolled in its programs, including Butler County ESP. As a result, older adults who rely on this critical care experience delays in starting their services, irregularities in their service schedule and inconsistencies in the aide who provides their care.



Throughout COA's service area, Butler County has been most impacted by the aide shortage, with more older adults experiencing service delays than in any other county in COA's service area.

"Because of the shortage, clients that need help aren't getting it," said Samantha Williams, clinical director with Home Care by Blackstone, a COA contracted service provider. "We just don't have the aides to work."

"This workforce is absolutely critical to helping us fulfill our mission," said Ken Wilson, vice president of program operations at COA. "Right now, the demand for qualified home health aides far exceeds the available supply. This impacts our ability to provide consistent, high-quality care to our clients. If this trend continues, older adults and families will be faced with difficult decisions about how and where to get care."

In recent years, COA has done a number of things to try to improve the situation locally.

Most recently, specifically to address the need in Butler County, COA issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for Home Care Assistance one year early to try to bring additional providers into the service network. Home Care Assistance includes services such as housekeeping, personal care and respite, which are typically provided by home health aides through a contracted home health care agency. The RFP resulted in the addition of seven new home health care provider agencies in Butler County (the agencies will begin providing services to ESP clients in 2021).

"We want to do everything we can to ensure clients receive the care they need, when they need it," COA's Wilson said. "Our hope is that the addition of these new home care assistance providers will improve the Elderly Services Program's ability to serve older adults in need."

There are other ways COA has sought to minimize the impact of the aide shortage locally:

- Conducted focus groups with area home health aides to learn more about their career choices. The results showed home health aides take pride in their work. "It's a good day for me when I'm able to make someone's day a little brighter," an aide said. Feedback from the focus groups helped COA identify ways to minimize the impact of the aide shortage, including expansion of a program that gives families more choice in selecting a care provider.
- Worked with providers to adjust training requirements for aides who provide only housekeeping services and to create efficiencies to improve scheduling and travel time for aides.
- Piloted a rate increase for home health aides in Warren County. The results of the rate increase showed an increase in client satisfaction but did little to impact aide retention.
- Created the Service Excellence Awards to recognize home health aides by showing appreciation for the important work they do. Through the end of 2020, COA has recognized 121 home health aides who provide care through a COA contracted service provider. "Winning the award was very meaningful to me," said one aide. "It showed me that all the hard work I'm putting into this passion is being recognized by my clients."
- Created the Home Health Aide Hero award to recognize three aides who go above and beyond to meet the needs of their clients. Three aides were recognized in April 2021 and received cash prizes from COA.

Kinship meals bring peace of mind to Butler County older adults raising grandchildren

Through a community needs assessment conducted in 2018, Council on Aging (COA) heard from community members that more support was needed for older adults who have been impacted by the state's opioid crisis – specifically, support for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. COA staff were also seeing the need firsthand.

“Unfortunately, it's becoming more and more common for our clients to be the primary caregiver for one or more of their grandchildren,” said Ken Wilson, vice president of program operations at Council on Aging. “It's difficult to imagine a homebound senior – who needs help with things like housekeeping, personal care and transportation – being responsible for a child, but that's the reality these days and we wanted to find a way to support them.”



COA received approval from the Ohio Department of Aging and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Community Living to use funds from the National Family Caregiver Support Program (Title III-E) to provide “kinship” meals to children who are living with an older adult who receives federally-qualified home-delivered meals. This kinship meal model was touted as a model for other Area Agencies on Aging at the state's fall 2019 advocacy conference.

As a result, COA has been providing meals to children age 18 and under who reside full-time with a Council on Aging client who is eligible for or already receiving home-delivered meals via the Elderly Services Program (ESP). The older adult must meet the eligibility requirements of the federal home-delivered meals program in order for the child to receive a meal.

Feedback from older adults and the children who receive the meals has been positive. “Yay, my meals are here! I'm so excited to have more of my meals and the chocolate milk,” was the greeting Debbie, a local meals driver, received when she delivered a kinship meal.

“These meals will add another layer of security for older adults and the children in their care,” Wilson said. “They will improve the whole family's quality of life.”

In 2020, more than 1,000 kinship meals were delivered to children in the care of an older adult enrolled in Butler County ESP.

Program changes address special nutritional and dietary needs of older adults

In 2020, Elderly Services Program (ESP) and other Council on Aging (COA) clients who receive home-delivered meals had more choices available to them to help meet special nutritional and dietary needs. Council on Aging made changes to the specifications home-delivered meals producers must follow, requiring contracted meal providers to expand options for certain types of therapeutic meals to clients who have a medically-documented need. Therapeutic meals are special meals that meet the nutritional or dietary needs of clients with certain medical conditions.



When Council on Aging sought bids from qualified providers for the home-delivered meal service in the Elderly Services Program in 2019, Jennifer Lake, COA's nutrition business partner and a registered dietitian, worked to make sure the special meals were part of the required service specifications. "Nutrition is an important part of aging – and staying healthy," Lake said. "With these changes, we can now provide meals that are appropriate for clients with a variety of medical issues ranging from diabetes to lactose intolerance." Clients can now receive the following types of meals: diabetic, cardiac, renal, lactose free, gluten free, dysphagia and mechanically-altered meals (most of these meals require a physician's order). The meals are also available to children who receive a kinship meal.

In 2020, more than 443,000 meals were delivered to 2,231 older adults via the Butler County Elderly Services Program. More than 1.7 million meals were delivered to nearly 10,000 individuals across COA's service area.

Marlene finds advocates in daughter and Butler County ESP program

Everyone should be lucky enough to have a fierce advocate to look out for them in times of trouble or need. Marlene, 82, of Hamilton, is lucky times two. She has daughter Lisa – who lives nearby – and the Butler County Elderly Services Program (ESP). Between the two, Marlene has been able to live independently despite some very challenging circumstances.



Marlene has always worked full-time, starting as a teen at a soda counter and later at Sunbeam Bread Company, where she met her husband Bill. Bill overcame losing the sight in one eye to cancer – and his job as a bread truck delivery driver as a result – by starting his own janitorial business that "he grew to be very successful," Lisa said.

This allowed the couple to eventually purchase their own home. Bill passed away 18 years ago due to complications from a previous heart valve surgery. Marlene was alone, and vulnerable.

"Mom is so kind," Lisa said. And a criminal took advantage of her. A man who worked at the same company as Marlene stole her Social Security number and opened credit cards in her name, charging more than Marlene could afford to pay. He eventually "befriended" Marlene, even convincing her to let him stay on her couch, despite Lisa's protests.

As it turned out, it wasn't the first time the man had pulled this scheme, and he was convicted and sent to prison. But he left Marlene with a terrible financial mess. "She ended up losing her house, claiming bankruptcy," Lisa said.

This prompted a move from northern Ohio to be near Lisa. "I've tried to get control over her life since then," Lisa said. "Because it just scares me. I tell quite a few people about Mom's story, especially those who have parents who lose a spouse, and how people can prey on them."

After the move, Marlene took a job at a nearby TJ Maxx and continued to work for another 12 years, until she was 79. "She retired because she started having health issues and her memory wasn't great," Lisa said. "Things have kind of gone downhill since then."

She subsequently was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and her visits to the hospital for physical ailments became more frequent. All along, Lisa was there, fighting for any help she could get for Marlene. "I'm not always the kindest person when people tell me 'no,'" she said, jokingly.

In 2018, after another hospital stay for Marlene, Lisa found ESP. "When mom came out of the hospital and rehab, she was just 87 pounds. [Home-delivered meals] were just delightful. They brought extra food and made sure to ask me what she likes to eat." Meal delivery drivers also serve as another "set of eyes" on seniors living alone.

Lisa tries to always be there when Marlene needs her, but she also has a job and a family. "ESP has given me peace," she said. "We've had great people. We had one aide who would text me all with time with questions or concerns. She was just a gem."

During Marlene's time on the program, her services have adapted to her needs. At times, she's had a home health aide, or been enrolled in an adult day program. She still receives home-delivered meals and has an electronic monitoring system (which she used one time after a fall). ESP has become another invaluable member of the team that ensures Marlene gets the care she needs to stay independent as long as possible.

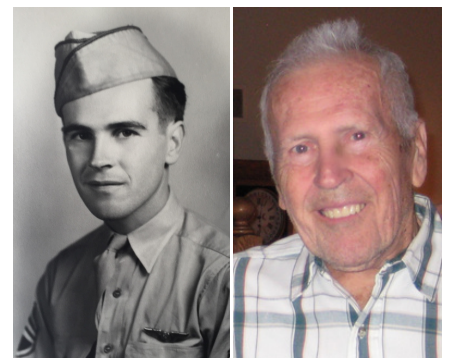
Paul

In his 100 years, Paul has been through a lot – not the least of which is World War II. During his three years of service in the Army/Air Force as a bombardier based in North Africa, Paul completed 51 bombing missions over Sicily and Italy, earning many medals for his efforts.

That was in his early 20s. Fast forward 80 years, and he relies heavily on his walker and the Butler County Elderly Services Program (ESP) in order to be independent in the Fairfield condo he shared with his late wife, Elizabeth.

Growing up in Troy, Ohio, Paul and his older brother came to know the meaning of community through watching their father, who served as Troy's fire chief. Then the attack on Pearl Harbor changed the world. Knowing his community and country needed him, Paul joined the Army/Air Force in December, 1941.

While in the service, he married the love of his life, Elizabeth. She waited for her soldier, and at the conclusion of



World War II, Paul returned to Troy, worked several jobs and raised two children – Juanita and Steve. Paul and his wife moved their family to Florida for a few years, and then to Butler County in the 1980s.

Elizabeth died suddenly in 2007, after 65 years of marriage. Paul and his wife had been inseparable. With her dad living alone during his older years, and even with her two years of nursing school, Juanita knew she was going to need help with his care. She contacted Butler County ESP and Paul became a client in 2012.

Juanita, who exited the workforce to care for her two grandchildren, is beyond grateful for Butler County ESP and the care the program provides her father. Living in the area with her father, she said, “All of this has fallen on me. I handle his finances and much of his care. I honestly don’t know what I’d do without ESP. Allison, Dad’s care manager, has been a shining star. She has been so helpful to me.”

Paul has an aide, Gloria, through ESP. She spends an hour each day helping with Paul’s cooking and housekeeping. Paul and “Glory” (as he calls her) get along famously and can often be found exchanging stories about airplanes, Paul’s chief passion in life – other than baseball.

Paul also enjoys home-delivered meals once a week. He is very picky about food, and knowing the meals pass muster, on weekends he happily eats the three meals that are delivered to him on Fridays.

Another ESP service, electronic monitoring systems (EMS) has literally been a lifesaver for Paul. In 2018, Paul was awakened in the middle of the night and knew he “just wasn’t feeling right.” He pushed the button on his electronic monitoring system to contact the paramedics, who in turn contacted Juanita. Because she lived just five minutes from her father, and knowing he was still alert, Juanita elected to go to his home herself to check on Paul.

When she arrived, Juanita found that Paul was having a seizure, and called 911. The incident had a happy ending, with Paul recovering fully; however, without the initial call for help through EMS, the ending could have been quite different.

What’s the secret to Paul’s longevity? Juanita and her father disagree. Paul gives most of the credit to the more than three gallons of orange juice he drinks on a weekly basis. But Juanita believes it’s her father’s positive attitude that has carried him through a century of change. “He has always taken care of himself, and just accepts whatever comes along,” she said.

Provider network adapts to serve during the pandemic

As the Area Agency on Aging for southwestern Ohio, Council on Aging (COA) contracts with nearly 300 area businesses and organizations to deliver critical in-home care services to more than 27,000 older adults and people with disabilities in COA’s service area – including more than 6,100 in Butler County.

During the pandemic, COA and its provider network adapted programs and services to protect staff, providers and clients. While adult day care centers, senior centers and congregate meals sites were closed in accordance with state orders, other services, including home-delivered meals, transportation and homecare assistance, continued without interruption.



Demand for certain services, like housekeeping and personal care, fluctuated based on spikes and declines in COVID-19 infection rates. But other services, such as home-delivered meals, saw an increase in demand. For example, COA service providers delivered nearly 1.8 million home-delivered meals in FY 2020 – a 32 percent increase over the previous year.

In fact, food security has been a focus of COA and its providers during the pandemic. Calls for food assistance increased when older adults were urged to stay at home to protect their health. COA's provider network adapted operations to meet this need, converting congregate meal sites to drive-thru operations and distributing more than 21,000 emergency food boxes and nearly 60,000 restaurant comfort meals to older adults across COA's service area from April-December. Some of this work continues today.

At Meals on Wheels of Southwestern OH & Northern KY (MOW), CEO Jennifer Steele said her team began over-producing meals and ordering shelf stable food right away. This kept them ahead of the supply chain crunch.

Even with this preparation, Steele and her team were shocked by the demand for services. "Demand tripled overnight," she said. "In one week in March, we delivered as many meals – 50,000 – as we would have in a typical month, pre-COVID." MOW is a service provider for Council on Aging but also serves private pay customers in southwest Ohio and northern Kentucky.

During the pandemic, COA distributed tens of thousands of personal protective equipment (PPE) items to service providers and senior apartment buildings, including masks, hand sanitizer, face shields, gloves, booties, gowns and more. COA received PPE supplies from county emergency management agencies and the Ohio Department of Aging and used CARES Act funds to purchase PPE from other sources.

The PPE items were critical in protecting provider employees, and the older adults they serve, from COVID-19. "Quite frankly, I don't know what we would have done without this program and [COA's] assistance," said Beverly Ellis, director of nursing at Helping Hands Healthcare, a COA contracted provider.

Teresa Winters, owner of Katy's Home Care, said she got to work right away making masks for her staff and their clients but soon needed help. "...As we started getting down to no supplies and things got harder to find, I took the supplies from COA. It was a great help."

Like many other businesses, COA's providers found ways to adapt to new realities during the pandemic.

At Katy's Home Care, Winters' biggest challenge was ensuring staff followed safety protocols. She provided training and showed a video about the 1918 flu pandemic. "That put the fear in everyone and they understood how serious this is," she said.

Winters stayed in contact with clients to let them know what she was doing to keep everyone safe. Staff had clear guidelines to follow and clients knew who to contact if they ever felt concerned for their safety, Winters said. "We worked together through all this – our staff, our clients, everyone," she said.

At Helping Hands, services were adapted to be "contactless." Clients' laundry and to-do lists were left on the doorstep and Helping Hands' staff took it from there. While this ensured clients' basic needs were met, Ellis said the emotional toll soon became apparent.

“What was sad though, was the increased amount of loneliness and fear we saw in each client,” Ellis said. “I would have to say the distancing of care and lack of closeness during delivery of care [was our biggest challenge]. It took a lot for us not to hold someone’s hand or give them that much needed hug.”

At Maple Knoll Communities, Director of Outreach Services and Affordable Housing, Joshua Howard, said, “It didn’t take long for the conversation about providing services during a pandemic to also include discussions about seniors’ mental health and how the isolation and lockdown was taking a different toll on our community.”

To help, Maple Knoll engaged volunteers to make regular calls and provide lessons on how to conduct Zoom calls with friends and family.

Operationally, Helping Hands had to adapt to the impact of school and daycare closures. Ellis said 90 percent of Helping Hands’ staff have school-aged children. To help employees and ensure they were still able to meet clients’ needs, Helping Hands developed a program called Daycare Share where employees took turns watching children and assisting with schoolwork while other employees focused on work. As a result, Ellis said, “We saw our staff relationships transform and it became a win-win for many.”

Maple Knoll’s Howard said even though the pandemic impacted his organization’s operations, it never affected the mission. “Whereas the ‘how’ dramatically changed, the ‘why’ and ‘what’ were never in doubt,” he said. “Our clients never saw an interruption in service.”

While some clients did contact Maple Knoll at the start of the pandemic to cancel appointments, Howard said many more called worried about how they would get to dialysis, therapy and other important appointments. For grocery shopping and other errands, Maple Knoll adjusted trip times to align with special “senior only” hours at area shopping destinations.

“I’m extremely proud of the work our provider network has done throughout this pandemic,” said COA’s CEO Suzanne Burke. “Despite this challenging environment, they have continued to provide services to our clients in a caring and safe manner – often responding to calls for help on short notice. Because of this teamwork, we’ve been able to help our clients weather the storm.”

[Click here](#) to read the full version of this story in COA’s 2020 Impact Report.

Hamilton food icon Neal's Famous BBQ partners with COA on comfort meal program

During the pandemic, Council on Aging (COA) has partnered with many area restaurants, including minority-owned businesses, to provide special meals to area low-income older adults. Neal's Famous BBQ in Hamilton, is a partner in COA's award-winning Comfort Meal Program.

When Ohio Governor Mike DeWine issued stay-at-home orders in March 2020, COA began hearing from older adults who were afraid to go out for groceries and other necessities. Others found themselves without their regular support network. Many who contacted COA had never before needed help.



"We learned from past emergency situations that food quickly becomes an urgent need for older adults," said Council on Aging CEO, Suzanne Burke. "We didn't want supply chain or staffing issues to interfere with our ability to provide meals to older adults, and we knew they might be asked to shelter-in-place for quite a while."

After receiving additional federal funding via the Ohio Department of Aging and the CARES Act to expand meal service to older adults during the pandemic, COA began looking for ways to adapt traditional meal programs to address not only food insecurity among older adults, but also the quality of life older adults were experiencing during the pandemic.

As the pandemic continued, older adults felt increasingly isolated and forgotten. To help ease the monotony felt by many older adults, COA sought out partnerships with local restaurants to bring comfort meals to older adults – particularly low-income older adults who were isolated in senior apartment buildings across COA's service area. With the delivery of a few hundred LaRosa's meals to older adults impacted by a power outage in April 2020, COA's award-winning comfort meal program was born.

Neal's Famous BBQ, owned by Mike Neal, joined the program in September 2020 and by December 2020 had provided nearly 1,200 meals.

"It means a great deal to be able to serve our seniors," Neal said. "This is an opportunity to give back to our community. Seniors deserve the best; they gave us their best throughout their lives, now it's our turn."

Neal and his siblings grew up watching their father cook for the family and community. Neal's dad was a professional chef and used only fresh ingredients to make homemade meals. "He didn't know how to make a small plate," Neal said. "He measured his love by his big meals."

Neal followed in his father's footsteps. Starting on the street corner in 2001 with a grill, three loaves of bread and some meat, Neal's Famous BBQ has grown to serve Hamilton through its brick and mortar store front on North Third Street. Neal's is known for its homemade barbeque, meatloaf, fish and chicken, as well as homemade sides and desserts.

Partnering with local restaurants had the added benefit of helping businesses weather the economic challenges created by the pandemic. Initially, Neal had to lay off some employees, but everyone is back now. When restaurants were closed for dine-in service, Neal kept the business going by serving hundreds of boxed meals daily to first responders. COA's comfort meal program provided an additional revenue stream.

COA's comfort meal program is a community partnership. The meals are paid for by COA via funding from a variety of sources, including the Ohio Department of Aging, CARES Act funds, grants, sponsorships and donations. In addition to Neal's Famous BBQ, the following restaurants prepared meals for the program in 2020: LaRosa's Pizzeria, Frisch's, Taste of Belgium, C&M BBQ Grille, Chef Anthony Jordan, La Soupe, Quatman Café and Beaugard's Southern Bar B Que. COA service providers collect meals from each restaurant and deliver them to senior apartment buildings. Service coordinators, staff and volunteers at each building then distribute the meals to residents. From April – December 2020, more than 58,000 comfort meals were delivered to the doors of older adults in need.

"It's rewarding to see the impact these meals are having on older adults in our community," said Burke. "I have been impressed with the level of teamwork, flexibility and commitment demonstrated by everyone involved in this effort – from the restaurants doing the cooking, and our providers delivering the meals, all the way down to the coordinators at each building where meals are delivered. This is work that makes you feel good. We all need that right now."

[Click here](#) to read more about the Comfort Meal Program in COA's 2020 Impact Report.

Belle Tower residents receive special meals and much-needed supplies during the pandemic

Through Council on Aging's (COA) Comfort Meal Program, older adults in southwestern Ohio received a welcome change of pace to their daily meal. One such delivery was to the residents of Hamilton's Belle Tower Apartments on April 17, 2020.

Surprising the residents, COA worked with Central Connections to deliver approximately 125 LaRosa's famous recipe spaghetti dinners. COA also delivered boxes of personal care supplies for each resident.

Lisa Bendescu, the building manager at Belle Tower, said, "most [residents] are scared because of COVID-19. This was a wonderful treat for them, and I heard many of them say that they will visit LaRosa's more often when they can get out."

Cheryl, a Belle Tower resident, was especially grateful. "It was a very wonderful thing you did...It's nice to have something from the outside since we can't go out."

Similar deliveries occurred at Sherman Manor the same day.



April 23, 2020

I want to thank the Council on Aging for a number of things but first for recommending I talk to the people here at Belle Tower about moving here. It was the best decision I could have made. Thank you!

But more recently I thank you for the meal from LaRosa's - it was delicious & thoughtful as the box of household items & non perishables were also. In addition I am pleased to be a part of the Elderly Services Program where I'm checked on regularly & received the Guardian Monitor System.

Thank you for watching out for seniors.

Central Connections adapts congregate meal program to serve older adults during pandemic; older adults receive special meal at pickup

During the COVID-19 pandemic, “business as usual” was not, by any means, usual. Through this crisis, Council on Aging (COA) made it a priority to ensure adequate food supplies for area older adults.

COA worked with home-delivered and congregate meal providers to adapt operations and ensure clients had enough food on hand in the event of staffing issues or supply chain disruptions.

For example, Central Connections in Middletown adapted its congregate meal program to serve as a drive-thru meal program.



Each Thursday, older adults lined up at the center in their cars to receive a weeks' worth of food and drinks (seven meals per person). Center staff provided contactless curbside service, depositing the food into participants' trunks. Many older adults have felt the economic impact of the pandemic. Kathy, 66, was so relieved to learn about the carry-out congregate meals, she broke down in tears. “I was wondering what I was going to do. I’m waiting for my unemployment and was down to \$1.94 in my bank account. It really made my day.”

Another meal recipient, Diana, 73, learned about the carryout meals through a friend and said, “It helps so much with the grocery bill – thank you.”

For other participants, during the height of the pandemic, the meals provided a safe opportunity to get out of the house, as well as the peace of mind of having food in the fridge without the worry of going to a crowded grocery store.

Bob, 61, and Jim, 68, played pool and attended exercise classes at the center. During the pandemic, they shifted to spending time at a local park. Jim said, “Thanks to the meals, I only have to go to the store once a month now.” When Phillip, 67, picked up meals for himself and his partner, Debbie, he said he was happy to be able to stock the refrigerator. “I grew up on a farm and had eight brothers and sisters, so [at the dinner table] if you didn’t get it quick, it wasn’t there!”

Jim and Marcia were long-time members at Central Connections. They appreciated the meals they received during the pandemic. “It’s good food,” Jim said. “I’m looking forward to getting back inside, but I enjoy what there is now.” As the pandemic wore on, COA partnered with area restaurants, including Taste of Belgium, Neal’s Famous BBQ and others to provide special comfort meals for older adults in need during the pandemic.

On a pickup day in May 2020, congregate meal participants at Central Connections received a special treat. In addition to their weekly supply of meals, they also received a country fried steak and scrambled eggs from COA comfort meals partner, Taste of Belgium.

Most of the participants had never had a meal from Taste of Belgium but were eager to give something new a try. Audrey, 88, was a regular at the center for 10 years before the pandemic. “What a surprise! I’m here to pick up meals for myself and a friend, and I’m thrilled to have the extra food,” she said.

Council on Aging answers call when food shortages reported at Butler County senior apartment buildings

During the pandemic, Council on Aging (COA) was a resource for many older adults who never before needed assistance. Stay at home orders, quarantine and isolation rules, and supply shortages created challenges for many older adults. During this difficult time, community partnerships were essential to meeting the needs of older adults – especially in emergency situations.

That's what happened on Friday in May 2020, when managers at two Butler County low-income apartment buildings contacted the Butler County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) to report that residents were running out of food.



Council on Aging (COA) had been working with county EMA offices to distribute supplies and food to service providers and older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it was natural that Matt Haverkos, Butler County EMA's director, reached out to COA for help.

Within hours, COA had a plan in place to deliver boxes of shelf-stable food to residents in each building – many of the residents were older adults. Local restaurant group, Frisch's, also donated supplies from its commissary.

But the COA team had to overcome some logistical challenges to get the meals packaged and delivered. The EMA's Haverkos connected COA with Butler County's Shared Harvest Food Bank and the Ohio National Guard for help.

COA meal provider, Meals on Wheels of SWO & NKY, delivered several pallets containing 300 boxes of food to Shared Harvest in Fairfield where members of the Ohio National Guard were waiting to help prepare the meals for delivery. Terry Perdue, Shared Harvest's director, opened his facility's doors on a Saturday to accommodate the need. Butler County Metro collected the meal boxes and made the deliveries to Sherman Manor and Anthony Wayne apartment buildings.

Residents at each apartment building received two boxes of food, each containing a seven-day supply of meals. The residents would not have to worry about food for at least the next 14 days.

Property manager, Michele Zeh, reached out to COA after the meals and other supplies were delivered to her building. "This morning we have come into Sherman Manor with some very thankful seniors. I wanted to share a quote with you from John [a resident], 'What a cornucopia! I'm amazed and so grateful for all this food. For all the cleaning and paper goods from before as well. So very helpful!!! I haven't been out much at all.'" Zeh added, "We have many happy faces today at Sherman Manor. The residents are extremely fortunate to have your services here and the staff also greatly appreciate your care for our tenants."

COA-led effort aims to prevent spread of COVID-19 in area senior apartment buildings

Recognized as the regional expert on helping older adults remain independent in the community, Council on Aging (COA) staff members have participated in local, state and even national efforts to help protect and serve vulnerable older adults during the pandemic.

One such group was the regional COVID-19 Multi-Agency Coalition (MAC). Created by Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, MACs include regional organizations and experts that work together to respond to COVID-19 on a local level. Smaller subcommittees in the MAC tackle specific issues related to COVID-19.

COA's Vice President of Program Operations, Ken Wilson, served as a co-chair for the MAC's Congregate Care Steering Committee and led COVID-19 response efforts in settings such as assisted living facilities and senior apartment buildings. Other members of the committee include The Health Collaborative, University of Cincinnati Medical Center, emergency management agencies and local health departments.

The committee's goal was to reduce the number of COVID-19 cases that spread in settings such as senior apartment buildings and assisted living communities through uniform education, prevention and vaccination strategies.

"Focusing on congregate living settings was a priority for the state and our region because most COVID-19 cases that were going to the hospital were coming from congregate living settings, such as nursing homes," Wilson said. "COA is the local expert in serving older adults so it was natural that we were tasked with working with senior apartment buildings to protect residents and prevent the spread of the virus."

COA developed a database of approximately 175 senior apartment buildings in its service area of Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Hamilton and Warren counties. The database helped COA understand how many people lived in each facility and provided a way to track COVID-19 cases among residents and staff.

Wilson and the committee developed protocols and education materials to reduce infection rates in senior apartment buildings, including: ramping up testing and contact tracing; standards for how and when to quarantine; basic guidelines for distribution and use of personal protective equipment (PPE); and education on handwashing, masks, sanitizing and social distancing.

COA then compiled and sent education kits to each building. In addition to specific information and tools for building management, kits included enough education materials and reusable face masks for each resident in every building – more than 8,700 residents in all.

The kits were well-received, according to Judy Eschmann, COA's Vice President of Community and Business Operations and the architect behind the database. "This was the first time anyone had reached out to many of these buildings with specific information and guidance about COVID-19," Eschmann said. "We've received lots of feedback from building managers who were happy to have information and masks to share with their residents and to know that someone was concerned about their health and safety."

COA created a resource page on its website where building managers could access electronic copies of all the materials included in the education kits, as well as additional resources. And, as the pandemic continued, COA began to host virtual Town Hall meetings with staff at senior buildings, pulling in local experts to share the latest news, information and guidance. Later Town Halls focused on COVID-19 vaccination.

“We’ve learned that education is a big piece of the puzzle,” Wilson said. “Early in the pandemic, we heard that older adults were afraid to report COVID-19 symptoms. Now, we’re hearing that some older adults are reluctant to get vaccinated. If we provide consistent information and connect people to trustworthy resources, we can help stop the spread of this virus in these vulnerable communities,” Wilson added.

COA’s work in senior apartment buildings during the pandemic extended beyond education. Beginning in April 2020, COA partnered with local restaurants to deliver COVID-19 “comfort meals” to residents at low-income senior apartment buildings across COA’s service area. COA provided more than 58,000 comfort meals to residents of these buildings in 2020, and more than 84,000 since the start of the pandemic.

“We’re out here in Rural America and COA’s presence has made such an impact on our residents,” said a service coordinator at an area senior apartment building. “We are so grateful and appreciative that COA stepped up during this difficult time.”

Note: Beginning in February 2021, COA worked with the Ohio National Guard, local health departments, the Ohio Department of Aging and management staff at area senior apartment buildings to prepare buildings for COVID-19 vaccination clinics. Read more about this effort [here](#).

Council on Aging distributes 10,000 wellness kits to older adults in southwestern Ohio

In an ongoing effort to help protect and support vulnerable adults during the COVID-19 pandemic, Council on Aging (COA) partnered with the Ohio Department of Aging (ODA) and Pro Seniors to distribute 10,000 wellness kits to older adults in the region.

The kits were paid for by funding from the CARES Act and were distributed via the United States Postal Service to households in Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Hamilton and Warren counties that met certain age and income criteria. The kits included reusable cloth masks, hand sanitizer, and education materials regarding the virus, resources, and frauds and scams. Approximately 2,200 older adults in Butler County received the kits.



“We’ve kept a close eye on the needs of our clients and the community during this pandemic,” said Council on Aging CEO, Suzanne Burke. “But we knew there were people out there who likely needed help, but for whatever reason had not reached out. We saw these wellness kits as an opportunity to extend a helping hand and to let community members know that we are here to help if they need us.”

Throughout the pandemic, COA remained connected to the more than 26,000 individuals enrolled in its programs and services. COA also heard from many individuals who never before needed services. The greatest needs were personal care supplies, personal protective equipment and food.

During the summer of 2020, COA distributed 20,000 reusable cloth masks to enrolled clients and to individuals living in low-income senior apartment buildings in southwestern Ohio. COA also worked with a variety of community partners during the pandemic to procure and distribute personal care supplies, additional personal protective equipment and meals to older adults in need.

COA received calls and letters from people who received the kits expressing appreciation for the help. Pro Seniors, a local non-profit organization dedicated to helping older Ohioans with legal and long-term care problems through a variety of free programs, contributed to the project. Each wellness kit included a Pro Seniors brochure, highlighting the organization's free legal hotline, and information about frauds and scams prevalent during the pandemic.

COA works to get personal care items into the hands of clients

Question: What do 30,000 rolls of toilet paper, 22,500 tubes of toothpaste and 7,600 bottles of hand sanitizer have in common?

Answer: These – and thousands more personal care and cleaning items – were included in more than 7,600 boxes assembled and distributed to Council on Aging (COA) clients during the winter of 2020-2021. Approximately 1,800 of the boxes went to COA and Elderly Services Program (ESP) clients in Butler County. More than 120 volunteers from COA, LifeSpan, other COA service providers and members of the community contributed to the effort.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, many older adults, including COA clients, have been stuck at home, afraid to venture out to shop for groceries, which includes not just food, but personal care and cleaning items. And at times, items such as toilet paper, antibacterial wipes and hand sanitizer were not even available to purchase because manufacturers and supply chains couldn't keep up with demand.

Through various efforts – including its award-winning Comfort Meal program – COA made it a priority during the pandemic to ensure vulnerable older adults in the region have access to food. But also important is the ability for older adults to keep themselves and their environments clean and safe.

Early pandemic partnerships between COA, local churches and Frame USA's Fill the Truck charity yielded hundreds of care packages of personal care and cleaning items distributed to those who contacted COA for help. At the time however, these products were in such high demand that it became difficult to procure enough for all the older adults in our area who needed supplies.

CARES Act funding received by COA months later – along with leveled-off demand for the items among the general public – made it possible for COA to source the box contents and move ahead with the project in August 2020. After hundreds of volunteer hours and several months, the last of the boxes shipped to clients during the first weeks of 2021.

In addition to the toilet paper, toothpaste and hand sanitizer, each box also contained disinfectant, dish detergent, laundry detergent, paper towels, soap, facial tissues and disinfectant wipes. Receiving a box full of these items is a big deal when you have limited financial resources – and when you're following public health guidelines to stay at home.

"These items mean the world to so many of our clients," said Suzanne Burke, Council on Aging's CEO. "Sometimes they have to make the choice between these items and a meal." The project was a major undertaking requiring a large physical space at the Butler County Fairgrounds, and 84 industrial-size rolls of bubble wrap.

The items in the boxes served a practical purpose, but they also provided a big psychological boost to older adults who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. One client, upon receiving COA's letter alerting her the box would arrive soon, said, "You get to the age of 80 years old, and all your family's gone, and not many friends left, it's just good to know that somebody's got your back, and it gives you hope, and it lifts your spirit."