

2020

HAMILTON COUNTY Elderly Services Program

ANNUAL REPORT Success Stories



Read below for the full success stories from the 2020 Hamilton 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.

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

In 2020, low-income older adults in southwestern Ohio, 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 – 792 in Hamilton 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'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.

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.

Kinship meals bring peace of mind to Hamilton 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 1,300 kinship meals were delivered to children in the care of an older adult enrolled in Hamilton County ESP.

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 home health care agencies to deliver services to individuals enrolled in its programs, including Hamilton 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.

“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 decision 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, 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. COA received 21 proposals and awarded contracts to 18 qualified agencies. Eight of the contracts were awarded to companies that are not currently serving ESP clients (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.
- Created the Service Excellence Awards to recognize home health aides by showing appreciation for the important work they do. Since 2019, 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 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. Two winners were from Hamilton County: Gwen Squire, from A Miracle Home Care and James Roe, from Hillebrand Home Health.

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.

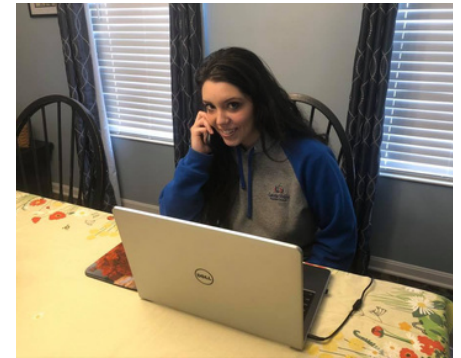
“Nutrition is an important part of aging – and staying healthy,” Lake said. “With these changes, we can now provide meals that are appropriate for clients with a variety of medical issues ranging from diabetes to lactose intolerance.”

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 1 million meals were delivered to 5,023 older adults via the Hamilton County Elderly Services Program.

COA, Hamilton County ESP help area older adults through the COVID-19 pandemic

Council on Aging (COA) relied on the help of many local organizations and generous volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The help was appreciated, as COA began to hear from existing clients who were concerned for their safety or who had new needs as a result of the pandemic. Additionally, COA heard from older adults in our community who never before needed assistance.



When food and other supplies became difficult to obtain because of the pandemic, community partners and volunteers helped COA and Hamilton County's Elderly Services Program (ESP) provide these essential supplies to older adults in need.

One of the ways COA and ESP were able to support older adults who were staying home to protect their health was by enrolling them in the home-delivered meals program or providing emergency food boxes. The emergency food boxes contained a 14-day supply of shelf-stable meals. Clients and community members in need also received personal care supplies, masks and other types of personal protective equipment.

Aretta reached out to COA at the beginning of the pandemic to receive home delivered meals. Seven months later, she was still receiving meals and support from Hamilton County ESP. In the midst of the winter 2020/21 virus surge, Aretta received a letter from COA explaining that she would receive a care package of personal care supplies. She called COA to express her gratitude. "As you get to be 80 years old and you don't have family and not many friends left, it's good to know somebody's got your back – it gives you hope and lifts your spirit...I thank everyone that is involved with Council on Aging - you're wonderful."

Elizabeth, 82, had been a Hamilton County ESP client for several years before the pandemic started. Then, like many others, she began having difficulty finding cleaning and personal supplies. She reached out to her ESP Care Coordinator, Jodi, for help. Elizabeth received a care package filled with toilet tissue, disinfectant wipes, denture tablets and bar soap.

Other ESP clients, like Gloria, opted to suspend their in-home care services out of an abundance of caution. But ESP and COA remained involved in her life. She, too, received a care package filled with personal supplies – and a deck of cards. "They will come in handy!" she said.

Gloria called COA's Aging and Disability Resource Center to express her appreciation. "It came at the right time, when I need it most," Gloria said. "People are so kind. I just hope that when this is all over, people keep the same attitude of kindness."

Jean has been enrolled in Hamilton County ESP since January 2019. She receives help with housekeeping as well as an emergency response system (life alert button). Then, when the pandemic made it more difficult for her to go out, she began receiving home-delivered meals.

At first, Jean was reluctant to have the meals because she remembered not liking the taste when she tried them years ago while taking care of her mother. But she gave it a try and was pleasantly surprised. "I'm so thankful for the meals," she said. "I am a recent cancer survivor and can't get out to get any food."

Volunteers helped COA stay in touch with community members who needed help as a result of the pandemic.

Robin, with Lakota Hills Baptist Church (LHBC), volunteered for COA by placing weekly check in calls to area older adults. On Good Friday in 2020, Robin spoke with Harry, 72. Harry was not a COA client, but was familiar with COA and ESP because his mother had received services. During their call, Harry told Robin he was out of food.

Robin immediately alerted COA staff to Harry's situation. Because of this teamwork, COA sent Harry an emergency food box to get him through the Easter weekend until home-delivered meals could be put in place.

At this point, Harry had not been out of his North College Hill apartment in almost two months and was grateful to receive the emergency food package. "He was so grateful, he immediately started crying," COA Care Coordinator, Allyssia, said.

"I literally had nothing to eat. I was losing a lot of weight because I haven't been eating," Harry said. "You really saved my life. She [Robin at LHBC] rescued me." In his emergency food box, Harry received an unexpected item – something he'd never tried before – pistachios. "I have never had them before, and I am now in love with them – they are so good!"

Robin at LHCB felt fortunate to be able to help Harry and the other adults she was calling on a regular basis. "This is a hard time," she said, "but there definitely is light at the end of the tunnel."

COA also heard from family caregivers who were worried about exposing their loved-ones to the virus. Others, like Michele, were worried about who might step in to provide care if they (the caregiver) were to become infected with the virus.

Michele's father, John, lived in the same condo complex as Michele and her husband. She regularly provided food for her father and worried where he would get his meals if she or her husband were to become ill. Michele contacted COA to see what help might be available. John was enrolled in ESP to begin receiving home-delivered meals on a temporary basis due to the pandemic.

Both Michele and her father were delighted with the first meal delivery. "It was like Christmas," Michele said. "I was just tickled pink. There were seven dinners, seven snacks, bread, milk and condiments. After the first night when I asked him how the meal was, he said 'it was really good! I would even pay for these meals.'"

"It's incredibly amazing that COA can do even more during this time when everyone is busy anyway," Michele said.

Years later, family appreciates the impact ESP had on their lives

Emmett was extremely close to his parents, Trudy and Jimmy, and their family unit was incredibly tight. His parents were very active when Emmett and his brother were young, but as they approached 65 years of marriage, everyone realized the couple would need help to continue living in their large North Avondale home.

Trudy and Jimmy enrolled in Hamilton County's Elderly Services Program (ESP) and began receiving home-delivered meals and housekeeping help from an aide that visited weekly.

When Trudy passed away in 2002 at age 94, Jimmy continued to enjoy ESP services in the family's North Avondale home. However, even after downsizing to a two-bedroom apartment, it grew increasingly difficult for Jimmy to move around her home. ESP was able to help Jimmy purchase a motorized chair, which was a relief to her and her son, Emmett.

Looking back, Emmett is extremely grateful for ESP. His older brother had special needs and did not live past age 18, and, Emmett remembered, "I was the only son, and it was just the help I needed. It was a real relief because we knew the services were in place."

Emmett's wife of 40 years, Pat, also played a big role in caring for Jimmy. As she juggled raising their own children, and their many activities and needs, with the needs of Emmett's mother, Pat took comfort in knowing that ESP was there to help.

"You know," Emmett said, "Mom has been gone for a while, (she died in 2007) but it seems like just yesterday. I can remember sitting at the dining room table with the aide. Each aide added their own individual care and when someone comes in and is accepted, that means a lot."

Emmett and Pat know that without the Hamilton County Elderly Services Program, their lives, and the lives of Jimmy and Trudy, would have been very different.

COA partners with local restaurants on pandemic 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. In Hamilton County, partners have included major area restaurant chains, a personal chef who uses a Northside community kitchen to prepare health-conscious meals, and everything in between.

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 meals to Mt. Healthy older adults impacted by a power outage in April 2020, COA’s award-winning comfort meal program was born. By June, restaurant partners included LaRosa’s Pizzeria, Taste of Belgium and Frisch’s.

Then, as attention shifted away from the pandemic to the demonstrations taking place across the country in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, COA searched for opportunities to be more inclusive in its comfort meal program by engaging small, African American owned businesses the program.

In July, C&M BBQ Grille, located in Kennedy Heights, and Chef Anthony Jordan, who uses a community kitchen in Northside to prepare meals, joined COA’s comfort meal program, providing barbeque, grilled chicken, greens, potato salad, meatloaf and more to seniors in Hamilton County and across COA’s service area.

Cecil and Mary Solomon – the C and M of C&M BBQ Grille – are no strangers to serving older adults in the community. Cecil Solomon was a driver for Cincinnati Area Senior Services, taking older adults to the grocery store and other outings.

“This is personal for me,” Solomon said. “When the [Hamilton County Senior Services] levy was up, I went and spoke up about how much it’s needed. Seniors are vulnerable. I’m a heartbeat away from having someone drive me!” For Chef Anthony Jordan, COA’s meal program was an opportunity to “stand in the gap” and help older adults through the pandemic.

A Certified Personal Chef, Jordan has led cooking classes for older adults and children through the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, Center for Closing the Health Gap and Cincinnati State University.

“For me personally, this connection and collaboration with COA is huge,” Jordan said. “These are our people, our elders. COA stands in the gap [to help older adults] and I want to emulate that.”

Partnering with local restaurants had the added benefit of helping businesses weather the economic challenges created by the pandemic.

“This is an opportunity for us to bring some people back to work and keep the lights on at our commissary,” said Jean-François Flechet, owner of Taste of Belgium, at the start of the comfort meal program. “But more importantly, it’s an opportunity to give back and be part of something good that’s happening in our community.”

Matt Imm, owner of comfort meal partner, Quatman Café, said his restaurants have seen a boost because of the program. “People are coming in that might not have otherwise heard of Quatman,” he said. “It’s a win-win. The program has been great for business, and it’s a wonderful thing for the older adults. It’s like people helping people. That’s what we need right now.”

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. 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, Neal’s Famous BBQ and Beaugard’s Southern Bar B Que. COA service providers collect meals from each restaurant and deliver them to senior apartment buildings across COA’s service area. 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.

Teamwork helps clients caught in perfect storm of COVID-19 and power outages

As if the social and emotional effects of the COVID-19 pandemic weren’t enough, during the evening and overnight hours of April 8, 2020, a large portion of Council on Aging’s service area experienced a line of severe weather. Many people in our region were left without power for 24 hours or more – including older adults living in several area senior apartment buildings.

COA first became aware of the issue around 11am on April 9 when a COA care manager received a call from a client at AHEPA 127-II Apartments, a subsidized senior housing community in Mt. Healthy. The area had been hit particularly hard by the storm with reports of road closures and downed trees and power lines. A similar community in the same vicinity, The Reserves at South Martin, was also impacted and without power.



Wheels started turning quickly to get relief to residents of these buildings who were already feeling the stress of isolation and worry due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COA care managers who had clients in the buildings began calling to conduct well checks.

COA’s Provider Services department jumped into action to have hot meals delivered to residents in the buildings.

Council on Aging CEO, Suzanne Burke, placed a call to Duke Energy to ask that the buildings be placed on Duke's priority list for power restoration.

COA employees, Ken Wilson and Amber Daniels, purchased flashlights and secured bags of ice to distribute to residents in the buildings. The ice was important for older adults who needed to preserve medications.

With no power and growing concerns about spoiling food, COA staff reached out to LaRosa's Pizzeria to see if they could provide hot meals to the residents in the buildings. Within just a few hours, LaRosa's delivered hot spaghetti meals, including salad, bread sticks and condiments, to residents in both buildings – 115 meals in all. LaRosa's returned the next day, April 10, when power was still out at one of the buildings.

Meanwhile, the COA team worked with meals provider, Meals on Wheels Southwest OH & Northern KY, to deliver a two-day supply of shelf-stable meals to residents at both buildings.

After the meals were delivered to AHEPA 127-II, the building's manager expressed to COA how grateful the residents were for the support.

COA later received a letter of thanks and appreciation from AHEPA Management Company's Regional Manager, Dale Parsons. In the letter, Parsons said, "For your agency to step up and help us out without even being asked is outstanding. This is truly a testament of how your agency cares about our senior community. We are eternally grateful and thankful to you and your staff for what you provided at a time of need."

FastTrack Home supports older adults and caregivers during pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when nursing facilities were hot spots for outbreaks and even deaths, an innovative Council on Aging (COA) program helped area hospitals divert more than 1,800 older adults away from care facilities, to instead receive support in their homes. The program, FastTrack Home, has been available in Hamilton and Clinton counties since 2017 and expanded to Warren County in 2020.

FastTrack Home provides temporary in-home care services (transportation, meals, personal care and homemaking services) before an older adult goes home from the hospital. While other COA programs require an in-home assessment and focus on meeting long-term needs, FastTrack Home assessments are completed at the hospital bedside and are designed to meet short-term, acute needs – while recovering from an illness, injury or procedure. This distinction is key because older adults have an increased risk of illness and injury in the 30 days following hospital discharge. With a speedy assessment and enrollment process, FastTrack Home services can be in place when the patient first arrives home.



During the pandemic, COA worked with area hospitals to adapt the program to safely serve older adults who were being discharged home from hospitals, and who needed to be isolated or quarantined to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the region saw a decrease in the number of older adults who were discharged from

hospitals to area nursing facilities to complete their recoveries. Additionally, FastTrack Home helped to free up critical bed space in area hospitals – especially when the region experienced surges in hospitalizations due to the virus in the spring of 2020 and winter of 2020/21.

The program also offered relief and peace of mind to families who were worried about sending a loved one to a nursing facility – where visitation was limited (if available at all) and COVID-19 positivity rates were often the highest in the state.

For example, Shelley was already juggling a full-time job and caring for three grandchildren when her 82-year-old father, Wayne, was admitted to the hospital and diagnosed with COPD complications. While in the hospital, Wayne tested positive for COVID. Shelley also tested positive.

Shelley's required quarantine period meant she would be unable to care for her father when he was discharged home from the hospital. She worried about his meals, cleaning and personal care. "It was a very stressful and desperate time for me," Shelley remembered.

In Wayne's case, Savannah, one of COA's FastTrack Home hospital coaches, worked to ensure he was not discharged over a weekend – when services are more difficult to arrange. She also arranged for home-delivered meals to start right away, and within five days had a home health aide begin visiting to help with personal care and housekeeping issues.

Wayne's FastTrack Home services were provided by COA through the Elderly Services Program. His services were temporary, designed to support a safe recovery at home. Before Wayne's FastTrack Home services ended (a maximum of 60 days), he received a full evaluation for the Elderly Services Program and other Council on Aging programs. This process ensures continuity of care for older adults who need assistance beyond FastTrack Home's 60-day window.

Shelley was grateful for FastTrack Home – the support it offered her father and the peace of mind it brought to her. "Without FastTrack Home," she said, "I don't know what would have happened."

In Hamilton County, COA programs and services, including FastTrack Home, helped to divert more than 2,300 older adults from area nursing facilities during the pandemic (through May 2021). In 2020, 915 Hamilton County older adults received temporary supportive care in their homes via FastTrack Home.

COA and community partners work together to meet older adults' needs during pandemic

Early in the pandemic, when older adults were encouraged to stay in their homes and were unable to get groceries and other essential supplies due to shortages, Council on Aging (COA) partnered with community organizations to collect personal care and household items to donate to area older adults in need.



In the early weeks of the pandemic, through regular programming and monetary donations from the community, COA and its regional provider network delivered food to older adults in need. By the end of December 2020, more than 20,000 emergency meal boxes (each containing a 14-day supply of food) had been delivered to older adults in COA's service area.

However, many older adults quickly ran out of other essential supplies such as toilet paper, soap, toothpaste, cleaning supplies, even pet food. To meet this need, COA requested special funding through the Greater Cincinnati Foundation's COVID relief fund, and also partnered with local organizations, including Frame USA's Fill the Truck (www.fillthetruck.org) and Crossroads Church, to collect donated items.

A major donation event was held in early April 2020 at Crossroads' regional church campuses. Additionally, items could be dropped off at Frame USA's Springdale store front, and at other established donation sites across the region. Donations could also be made online.

"This is an extraordinary time for everyone, but older adults are particularly at risk," said Council on Aging CEO, Suzanne Burke, at the start of the pandemic. "Our staff are working hard to make sure seniors in our region have the supplies they need to get through this public health emergency, but we can't do that without community support. We are grateful to the local businesses, organizations and non-profits that have stepped up to offer help in one form or another. This is truly a collaborative effort."

These partnerships resulted in more than 1,000 personal care supply box deliveries to older adults in need during the pandemic. The boxes were delivered by volunteers including COA staff, volunteers from area churches, area students, players from FC Cincinnati, staff from Hamilton County Commissioner Denise Driehaus' office, and staff from Hamilton County Clerk of Courts Aftab Pureval's office.

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."

Robyn Allen is the lead social service coordinator for several area senior living properties owned by Episcopal Retirement Services (ERS). Allen said they recently distributed the masks and education materials they'd received from COA.

"I'm a big believer in information," Allen said. She said both ERS and COA have been good about sharing information and keeping staff and residents up to date on what's happening with the virus – everything from scams to handwashing and social distancing. And she said the information from COA arrived at a time when people are starting to put the virus out of their minds. The materials were a good reminder that the virus is still here. "My goal is to make sure residents have the information they need to stay healthy."

COA's Wilson agreed. "We've learned that education is a big piece of the puzzle. 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," Wilson said. "If we provide consistent information and connect people to trustworthy resources, we can help stop the spread of this virus in these vulnerable communities," he added.

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.

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. Click [here](#) to read more about COA's comfort meal program and the impact it's had on older adults during the pandemic.

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](#).

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 9,100 in Hamilton 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 overproducing 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 had to find 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 Suzanne Burke, Council on Aging's CEO. "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.

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 recently assembled and distributed to Council on Aging (COA) clients. Nearly 4,500 of the boxes went to COA and Elderly Services Program (ESP) clients in Hamilton County. More than 120 volunteers from COA, COA's network of service providers and members of the community contributed to the effort.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our 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 has made it a priority during the pandemic to ensure vulnerable older adults in our area 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. After hundreds of volunteer hours and several months, the last of the boxes shipped to clients during the first week 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 COA's CEO Suzanne Burke. "Sometimes they have to make the choice between these items and a meal." The project – which was a major undertaking – required a large physical space at the Butler County Fairgrounds, and 84 industrial-size rolls of bubble wrap to bring to fruition.

The items in the boxes serve a practical purpose, but they've also provided a big psychological boost to older adults who've been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They appreciate they haven't been forgotten during this difficult time. 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."

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 5,000 older adults in Hamilton 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.

Throughout 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.