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Senior Center Response to COVID-19: Social Engagement and Outreach

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Senior Center Response to COVID-19: Social Engagement and Outreach

Background

Social isolation can have devastating effects on an individual's mental and physical wellbeing. The COVID-19 outbreak has put older adults at greater risk of isolation and has pushed efforts to address isolation to the forefront of public health in Massachusetts. Senior centers have been working to end isolation in their communities long before COVID-19 and have continued that work in the face of a global pandemic. This fact sheet describes what Massachusetts senior centers are doing during the pandemic to address isolation among older community members.

Highlights

- In August 2020, 44% of senior centers reported addressing older adults' mental health as a challenge—this figure increased to 68% in November 2020.
- Senior centers focused program offerings on essentials: over 90% conducting telephone outreach, application assistance, and information and referral in November 2020.
- The share of senior centers providing mental health counseling more than doubled between August and November 2020.
- Senior centers adapted their methods of engaging older residents in response to COVID-19.

"There is no limit to what we will do to keep people feeling connected and safe"

Table 1. Challenges faced

	August 2020	November 2020
Most Difficult Challenges Faced		
Addressing social isolation among seniors	83%	89%
Addressing mental health of seniors	44%	68%
Outreach/communicating with seniors	36%	57%
Efforts to Address Challenges		
Increased calls to seniors	86%	89%
Increased e-mails to seniors	53%	56%
Increased mailings to seniors	45%	56%

Table 2. Programs offered at time of survey

	August 2020	November 2020
Programs offered at time of survey		
Telephone reassurance, outreach, or wellness checks	95%	94%
Application Assistance (Taxes, SHINE, SNAP, MassHealth, Housing, Etc.)	81%	91%
Information and referral	*	94%
Mental health counseling	13%	31%
Social groups	44%	56%

* This was not a response option on the August survey

Meeting the mental health and social connection needs of older adults in the community through a variety of methods

Phone calls

- *Wellness calls have been crucial; **volume has certainly increased** since we closed to the public in March."*

Virtual programming (e.g., Zoom, Cable TV)

- *"We received a grant to purchase tablets to allow us to do virtual programming; purchased Vigorous Mind program which will **assist us with virtual programming, especially to those with cognitive issues.**"*

Food provision

- *"We did a Drive In Dinner and now do weekly Drive By Cookouts - **people can pick up and go or stay to enjoy music.** Participants are asked to bring their own chairs."*

Information dissemination

- *"I (the director) **wrote and published a local mental health resource guide** for our newsletter and have reached out to providers in the area to learn more about their services"*

Collaboration with other services

- *"We have been working on **collaborative opportunities with some of the surrounding COAs/Senior Centers** to provide social programming"*

In-person and outdoor programming

- *"We spent several months once a week for several hours driving around in our decorated van **visiting people outside and bringing them goody bags**"*

As a part of the MCOA Database project, three surveys were conducted with all senior centers in Massachusetts to collect data about the organization, operations, and programs and services provided locally through the Council on Aging/senior center. Surveys were distributed in May 2020, August 2020, and November 2020. Each survey included a section of questions addressing current response to COVID-19.

This fact sheet includes data highlights from 280 senior centers that responded to both the second and third surveys (82% of all senior centers). About 6 months into the pandemic, senior centers were still operating and adapting to different methods of program and service provision to meet the social and mental health needs of their constituents.

To learn more about the MCOA Database and its contents, please contact us at CSDRA@umb.edu



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