

The Council on Aging (COA) provides Concord seniors with a multitude of services and assistance, much of which were severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the early days of 2020, COA staff confronted the beginning of a series of challenges: how would they continue to serve the needs of their senior clients? How would they function during a pandemic that was forcing residents apart for their own safety?

One very important service (of many) that COA provides seniors is a safe social gathering place where seniors can eat together and participate in a rich social group life that includes recreation, learning and discussion. In particular, the Wednesday in-person COA luncheons are enormously popular weekly events that generate and sustain social connections between seniors. The luncheons also provide COA staff opportunities to “check-in” with seniors and learn if any issue is arising or additional service is needed. When these luncheons were shut down in March 2020, COA staff faced a formidable challenge: how to maintain a social connection for seniors during this period of Covid isolation and how to restore (even partially) an in-person interaction with seniors?

COA director Ginger Quarles commented: “It was a hectic, nerve-wracking and very challenging time for the COA and every Town of Concord department. We had to physically close COA, halt COA van services, discontinue home visits, and staff members had to start working remotely. We needed to develop many new systems to accommodate these changes to enable us to do our jobs. However, even as these systems were being developed, we knew what we needed to do first and most importantly - we needed to connect with as many seniors as possible.”

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Calling lists were generated and COA staff made thousands of phone calls. During these calls, COA staff learned whether a senior was safe, had access to food, heat, medical appointments, and other necessities. These calls also provided another vital function – they provided seniors with a personal, trustworthy source of information during a chaotic time as everyone adjusted to the new realities of Covid-19. Volunteers were organized to deliver food to doorsteps and many programs were put onto “Zoom”.

In place of in-person lunches, COA initiated weekly “drive-thru” lunches: masked COA staff placed lunches in masked seniors’ cars and made at least some in-person connection with each participating senior every week. Additional drive-thru events were created, including seasonal flowers, “pamper yourself” toiletry bags, adult coloring books, covid mask giveaways – any and everything that would draw seniors out from their isolated circumstances and help them have a social connection.

COA staff worked from home for three months, from March until June 2020. However, even though staff returned in June 2020, the COA remained closed to seniors until June 2021. Since then, COA has gradually returned to some degree of “normalcy”.

Transportation services have resumed, outreach to vulnerable seniors in their homes has re-started, and most in-person activities have resumed at COA.

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*Julie Melly picks up her COA package at a recent “grab and go” drive-thru event.*