

**Issue Brief: Older Adults and COVID-19
Issues, Resources and Gaps in Services
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May 4, 2020**

A special thanks to Grace Smith, Executive Director of the Council on Aging of Middle Tennessee for sharing data and providing input on this paper.



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We all know that older adults are among the most vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. While all ages are susceptible to infection, older adults who contract the disease are significantly more likely to experience severe symptoms and/or death. Based on current data from the Tennessee Department of Health, the COVID-19 death rate for persons over the age of 80, is 18.75% compared to .01% for persons in their thirties. Persons over the age of 60 account for 85% of all COVID-19 fatalities in Tennessee.

These grim statistics are further compounded by the fact that older adults are often in congregate living environments. Nationally there are 1.3 million nursing facility residents, most of whom are older adults and more than 3 million older adults are living in close communal contact in independent living, assisted living and senior housing facilities. COVID-19 has killed over 10,000 residents and staff in nursing home in 23 states that report fatality data, representing about 27 percent of COVID-19 deaths in those states.

The challenges facing older adults and their service providers are presented here in two categories. The first set of challenges are those faced by older adults who are living independently in the community. The second set of challenges are those impacting congregate living environments – nursing homes, assisted living facilities and senior housing communities.

Issues impacting older adults living in community:

A survey of service providers was conducted by the Council on Aging of Middle TN to identify the biggest issues impacting older adults and their families during the COVID-19 crisis. The issues identified, in order of priority are:

- **Social Isolation** – older adults are suffering more from social isolation than other age groups because of their increased vulnerability to the disease, their mobility challenges and the fact that they are more likely to be living alone. The impact of isolation and

Loneliness on physical health has been well documented and is a growing concern as this period of physical distancing continues.

- **Access to food, medications and other basic necessities** – obtaining affordable and nutritious food to maintain good health and/or manage chronic health conditions is more complicated logistically for older adults. The same is true for being able to obtain medications, personal hygiene products and other basic necessities to maintain a healthy quality of life.
- **Caregiver Support and Relief** – family caregivers of the frail or disabled elderly and persons with dementia are not able to get the respite they need, resulting in higher stress levels, increased mental health issues and an increased risk of abusive situations. Over sixty percent of caregivers of older adults are working professionals, now sandwiched between caring for children and aging parents while working from home. Grandparent caregivers raising dependent children who are out of school have heightened stress and economic burden during the pandemic.

While some of these issues pose more serious risks to vulnerable or marginalized populations, most of these issues are impacting all older adults regardless of social and economic status.

Other issues that emerged in the surveys and from conversations with providers include access to other needed services and supports such as home-based supportive care, home repairs/mobility modifications, transportation to medical appointments and other services that allow older adults to remain in their homes and in their communities.

Resources Available:

Services to Combat Isolation: Every organization that serves older adults is providing telephone reassurance to their clients, weekly or semi-weekly to check in with them and assess needs. The Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disability has established a statewide program called Care Through Conversation which matches vetted volunteers with older adults and caregivers who want a phone friend. Volunteers call at least weekly and offer a friendly voice and can connect the caller with needed services. Mental health agencies are providing counseling via telephone or video conference. Despite the availability of telephone reassurance services, isolation remains high, especially when transportation services are limited for homebound older adults. Other strategies are needed to keep older adults connected to their communities to minimize then longer-term consequences on health and well-being. Those with technology have more opportunities to remain connected to family members and friends but many older adults either do not have access to technology and the internet.

Food access & Meal programs: Meals on Wheels and Mobile Meals programs have continued to operate in modified formats. Rather than daily meal delivery at noon, providers are delivering shelf stable meals and supplemental groceries once or twice weekly. Drive through meal pick up is also a new delivery model that is working well for some older adult populations. The need to package food as single meals or family size meals has increased the cost. Agencies are using these contacts to assess other needs and to connect persons with cases managers if needed. While online food orders and delivery is an option many adults are using now, low income older adults and those living in rural areas are less likely to have technology and internet access. A few agencies are helping their clients with online grocery orders and deliveries on a limited basis. Congregate meal sites are no longer operating.

Meals Program Partnerships: FiftyForward is partnering with the Nashville Food Project, Second Harvest, The Store and Senior Ride Nashville to help keep older adults fed. They provide a two week supply of groceries and frozen meals to FiftyForward Fresh clients. On Mondays, they offer a drive-through meal pick-up at their Bordeaux Center with boxed meals. The Nashville Food Project is partnering with restaurants who are now serving as community kitchens to prepare meals. TCAD has provided nearly \$5 million statewide (\$900K) in middle Tennessee to create partnerships with nonprofits and local restaurants to keep older adults fed. There are opportunities for additional partnerships to be formed to address the need for food. The Council on Aging and The West End Home Foundation have formed a taskforce to take a deeper look into the specific gaps in food service for older adults and the resources that can be mobilized to address them.

Caregiver relief and support: Organizations that provide caregiver support are convening support groups virtually and providing telephone reassurance and basic information/referral. Respite programs have seen a sharp decline in usage due to the need for social distancing. During the best times, caregiver relief and support is inadequate. New strategies are desperately needed to ensure the health and wellbeing of both the caregiver and the person(s) being cared for, especially given the increased financial burdens on caregivers and the steep increase in unemployment impacting many of them. The Council on Aging's focus groups with working caregivers have revealed four key needs: 1) information/education, 2) expert guidance, 3) emotional support and 4) supportive employers/workplace culture. COA is partnering with Abe's Garden and others to launch a new caregiver support initiative offering online resources, decision support tools and pre-scheduled phone consultations with geriatric care professionals.

Other Support Services: Home based care is still available through both the private and nonprofit sectors but the pandemic has obviously created additional challenges. The two local agencies that provide home repairs and mobility modifications have suspended all indoor services due to the increased health risks. Volunteer assisted transportation services have also been suspended, leaving many older adults without access to routine medical and other necessary services. Rent, mortgage and utility assistance are continuing needs as well.

An issue that is complicating service delivery pertains to volunteers. Due to the risks of infection and transmission, most programs have either severely reduced or totally eliminated the use of volunteers to deliver services. Further compounding the situation is the fact that a large percentage of the volunteer base in the nonprofit sector are older adults themselves. TCAD and GNRC are recruiting and vetting volunteers that can help fill this gap.

For all of the above issues, an underlying concern is how to inform the public about the availability of these services. Nashville Public Television has been producing short spots (2 minutes) on COVID-19 issues impacting older adults and is airing them throughout regular programming. More awareness about resources is needed.

Issues Impacting Communal Living Environments:

Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Facilities: There has been regular media coverage about the horror stories that are occurring in our nation's nursing homes and assisted living facilities but little is being done to address it. PPE and testing is not available at the level needed for residents and staff, facilities are on lockdown further isolating an already isolated population, and the caregivers and staff are not accorded any value for the work that they are doing. There was some good news this week when Governor Lee urged all nursing home residents and staff to be tested and committed to providing nursing homes with test supplies and PPE. This is a positive step but greater ongoing support and resources for residents and staff are needed. A collective advocacy effort is being launched, led by the Council on Aging of Middle Tennessee to influence policy makers to address resource needs, prioritize testing before admission and increase supports that are needed to ensure the safety of residents and staff.

Communal independent living communities (retirement communities and senior apartments/high-rises) – Residents of these communities are not as susceptible to outbreaks as those in long term care facilities but they have often been cut off from their support systems. Many of the low-income senior high rises are on lock down and have not been allowing food and other necessities to be dropped off. GNRC, with the funding from TCAD is now partnering with local restaurants to have meals delivered to residents of some of the MDHA senior towers but they are only providing one meal three days a week for a limited period of time. Commodity food boxes are being delivered once a month. Social isolation is also a serious issue for this population. Many of the 1900 seniors living in the MDHA towers are not getting needed services on an ongoing basis and there is not adequate staffing on-site to facilitate a coordinated response.

Summary:

All of the agencies that serve older adults have really stepped up to find creative ways to adapt services, connect with their clients and expand their reach if possible. The challenge facing this group of providers is the fact that older adults, because of their increased risk for serious illness and death from COVID-19, will likely remain isolated for a much longer time than the rest of the population. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gaps in care, food and economic insecurity,

and a digital divide for older and disadvantaged Tennesseans. Sustainable new models of care are essential if we are going to be able to ensure a decent quality of life.

Much is being done but often in siloes and more services and coordinated efforts are needed. Government, non-profits and faith communities need to enhance collaboration to provide and deliver essential food and medicine to older adults so they avoid potential exposure to the virus for the duration of time physical distancing needs to be practiced. Service providers must continue outreach through telehealth approaches to help combat isolation and loneliness.

Those providing services to older adults need funding to handle increased demand/costs and to address areas where local service providers have indicated needs are not being met adequately: social isolation, caregiver support and relief, food & medication access and delivery and emergency financial assistance. The Council on Aging and The West End Home Foundation are convening groups of providers to better assess the gaps in service and to identify service delivery models that are replicable and sustainable. In some cases, the resources are available but the delivery models are not. In other cases, additional resources will be needed to sustain service delivery at a level to ensure the health, safety and well-being of our community's older adults for the next 12 – 18 months. We need to ensure that investments are prioritized to address critical needs for this vital segment of our population.