

The National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty presents

COVID-19 Funder Briefs (5 of 6) Older Adults

As one of the most vulnerable populations to the coronavirus, older adults have faced vulnerability and unique challenges during the COVID-19 crisis. Social services agencies, even as they face their own pandemic-related challenges and revenue loss, have ramped up and pivoted services to meet urgent and rapidly-evolving needs for this population.

Investment in agency response to the crisis is needed to provide critical emergency support for vulnerable older adults while ensuring sustainability and continuity of these services for some time to come.

The National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty seeks to bring community need to the forefront, spotlighting agency response and concrete opportunities to partner and invest in this work.

- Older adults make up seventeen percent of the population in the United States.
- Nine to 14 percent of older adults live in poverty.
- In a new study by the Cohen Center at Brandeis University on the impact of COVID-19 on the Jewish community, 14 percent of the sample population consisting of 10 Jewish communities lost a job, including 26 percent within the ages 65-74 population.
- Based on a special report of the UJA-Federation of New York in 2011, of the 196,100 households living in poverty in New York 18 percent were older adult households.

Needs and Responses

Older adults often face challenges accessing basic food and essential needs. There is increased need, particularly among those living alone, sheltering in place, or with limited or no transportation options, for home delivered meals. Older adults may be unable to get to supermarkets or food pantries during the pandemic. They may have less assistance at home and face challenges preparing food or may have relied on prepared meals in communal settings that are shut down. Older adults with limited resources or on fixed incomes, face difficulties stocking up on food and supplies or affording higher-cost, more accessible items.

To date, agencies have worked to respond to these needs. Congregate meals are turning to Grab and Go; friendly visiting is turning to phone and video calls; pantries are increasing food stock and ramping up home delivery of groceries, prepared meals, and essentials and scaling up via innovative partnerships with existing delivery mechanisms.

Older adults aging in place live alone and may be suffering from isolation.

Since the pandemic hit, in-person social programs and services for older adults have been cancelled or shifted online. Office visits now take place via phone or video. Community activities are not taking place. Senior Centers have closed down.

Since the pandemic began in mid-March, online classes and communication have moved from a supplementary to a central role. Alternative means of socialization for older adults have been developed, including transitioning workshops, classes and programs online, and establishing phone-based buddy or check-in programs. Virtual Senior Centers, previously used in limited ways, are expanding with community-wide offerings. Agencies and nonprofits are working hard to support older adults in the transition to programs and services on virtual platforms.

While agencies and nonprofits have had to rapidly transition to digital platforms and maintain online delivery of services and programs, itself a significant need for additional resources, the challenge is compounded by the fact that **older adults often lack the necessary technologies and therefore access to online programs and services.**

To facilitate access, organizations and agencies are distributing devices, supporting Wi-Fi setup and the costs of monthly service, and finding innovative ways to provide tech support and train older adults in new technologies.

The Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies shares “The issue of access to food, PPE, and comprehensive supports for the most at risk (persons with disabilities, frail older adults) remains an ongoing concern as interventions to support these populations have still fallen short.”

A Federation in a mid-size city shares that its meal delivery program for older adults has needed to serve about 50 percent more clients in the past few months. Some organizations are delivering Shabbat Boxes to older adults.

JFCS Pittsburgh shares “Face-to-face services may be paused, but services are still being rendered.”

Senior living/assisted living facilities are **experiencing additional needs directly related to the health and well-being of their residents**. Many facilities have needed to invest in new technologies such as temperature-taking kiosks to ensure the health and safety of the residents. Others have needed to increase the number of on-hand electronic devices so that residents can communicate with their families more regularly. There is also a new need to **provide meals to staff** so that they can remain in the building during the day and avoid increased exposure to the virus.

Agencies working with Holocaust survivors have seen an **increased need for mental health supports as many survivors are experiencing returned trauma**.

Investment Opportunities: First Response

Pantries and human service agencies need funds to stock more food, increase capacity to provide prepared meals, and significantly ramp up home delivery. Innovative partnerships launched with existing food delivery mechanisms will require funding to continue meeting home delivery needs of older adults. In some areas it will be necessary to expand or replicate these partnerships.

Organizations need funds to provide direct financial assistance for older adults, particularly those on fixed income and facing increased expenses, less assistance, and cancellation of communal programs.

Organizations need support with technology access for older adults, including distributing devices, supporting Wi-Fi setup and monthly service, and tech support geared toward older adults to facilitate participation in virtual senior centers and programming.

Agencies need funding to support their own digital transition, including development of virtual workshops, moving programming and essential services online, and growing virtual caregiver support programs and phone-based buddy or check-in initiatives, and to create more education materials and online resources.

Some agencies with caregiver support groups are seeing an increase in attendance as the groups have moved online and as families struggle to support their loved ones through the pandemic-related challenges.

A nonprofit in a large metro area shares “Our seniors are adapting to technology very well. We have a Tech Hub with a staff member who gives personalized assistance which is really what makes it work... their adaptability astounds us! But we do need to clone our Tech Concierge.”

Investment Opportunities: Organizational Resilience and Sustainability

In order to sustain expanded programming and alternative modes of program delivery, **organizations need to further increase their capacity.** In particular—

- Agencies will need to **expand case management and social work staff** to support older adults navigating a complexity of services and programs while trying to maximize limited resources.
- There will be a need for **training of staff on new platforms** and transitioned services and programs.
- Support will be needed to **grow organizations' technology infrastructure** including devices, Wi-Fi and tech support to facilitate remote work where needed, along with robust delivery of virtual services and programs.
- Investment in **growth of partnerships with volunteer programs** will help support organizational work while providing older adults with meaningful opportunities for intergenerational connection.

Agencies need funding for **assessment and evaluation of programming** to allow for thoughtful program development, effective outreach, and long term planning for sustainability and community impact.

Organizations continue to need **operating funds to enable flexibility and sustainability** as they face declining revenues and increased expenses. As these organizations have dipped into their reserves deeply in order to serve critical client needs, funds are needed to restore their stability and viability or some may go under, potentially leaving clients underserved or with nowhere to turn.

Emergency funds continue to be critical to address unexpected and rapidly growing client needs.

Addressing Needs: New Directions

- Rapid shifts in delivery of services are creating an opportunity to reimagine program and service delivery to address challenges while opening doors for community building, national curricula development, and generating connection across generations and beyond geographic boundaries.
- Transition to online platforms allows agencies to reach more clients and offers socialization options for older adults who may be homebound for reasons unrelated to the pandemic. It also allows older adults in remote areas to benefit from a rich variety of programming opportunities.
- Partnering with home delivery services, Uber, Arro, volunteer corps, and others, to ensure those who are most isolated still get the assistance they need.

Philanthropic Response

Foundations and donors are invited to reach out and join in this work within the framework of the National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty.

Please contact **Deena Fuchs, Executive Vice President of Jewish Funders Network**, at Deena@jfunders.org to learn more.

Data, quotes, and other insights included in this brief are sourced from convenings, webinars, and work-group meetings hosted by the National Affinity Group on Jewish Poverty; JFN COVID-19 response surveys; and organizational websites.