

Testimony of Betsy Sawyer-Manter, LMSW, SeniorsPlus President and CEO
Before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Re: COVID-19 - Social Isolation and the Aging Population

Good Morning Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and members of the Special Committee on Aging.

I am Betsy Sawyer-Manter, the CEO of Western Maine's Agency on Aging – SeniorsPlus. I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you today.

Maine has a very old population. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the service delivery system that older Mainers have come to rely for services and answers on aging. I can assume this is reflected all across our nation.

We have continued to provide services since our public closure in mid-March. While we could no longer serve clients face to face, we quickly moved to adapt our services to a telephonic and virtual platform.

Many of our clients rely on the friendly volunteer who delivers their meals, or the class in our education center that gives them purpose and socialization, or the home visit with a care coordinator checking to insure that their home care services are intact. With the impact of COVID-19, we knew that we needed to find ways to connect and stay connected.

I would like to share with you some of what we have done to address the service delivery needs and combat social isolation.

A hallmark program for us is Meals on Wheels. We cannot deliver meals virtually so we needed to keep our meals on the road. We found adequate PPE to keep our clients and volunteers safe. We instituted a drop and go strategy to avoid direct contact and began making reassurance calls to all the clients to insure that they are doing well and feeling connected.

Our kitchen went into overdrive and produced an extra 3 weeks of shelf stable and frozen meals for every client in case we were unable to get meals out to them. We also produced 2000 extra meals but found that we needed additional freezer space. Our local Walmart distribution center dropped off a freezer trailer at our kitchen and we just have to keep the diesel engine going to keep it cold.

United Health Care came through with additional food products, but just as importantly, pet food. We deliver the food along with the meals as we know pets are incredibly important companions for older isolated people.

Our home delivered meal count is up **46 %** since mid-March and still climbing.

We have been inundated with calls on our helpline. Our small staff is fielding nearly 100 calls per day. Older people reach out for help with issues such as Medicare counseling, food insecurity, information on how to get groceries or pharmacy deliveries, etc.

We have 3 administrative staff answering the phone live and they report receiving calls from folks who really just want to chat. They are lonely and reaching out. We have identified these clients and we have a group of volunteers who are doing friendly visitor calls to check in and chat with them.

Our Community Services staff are pretty tech savvy and immediately went into the mode of “how do we use ZOOM to deliver our services?” They are offering ZOOM 101 training every week for clients and staff.

One client recently called after taking a class. He shared that he’s very grateful for all the work we’ve put into changing how we do business, and that he just wants to stay connected with other people. He feels that he is able to do this because now he has learned how to use Zoom! Such a testimony to the power of lifelong learning.

We are offering many services using ZOOM technology. These include:

- Medicare Counseling
- Caregiver support groups. Caregivers are more isolated than ever and need support
- Grief support group – especially during this time of deferring services and the inability to say goodbye.
- Evidenced Based classes such as living well for better health
- Chair Yoga and Tai Chi, and other exercise classes, and
- An all-important, Coping during COVID support group!

We just began offering Trivia as a means to engage people in a light hearted activity to build more interaction.

A client recently shared that before she started taking the class she was struggling with depression and was spending most of her day in bed. The weekly class has brought so much positivity and motivation into her life that she feels like a completely new person. She has been walking, spending time outside, and has been so much happier.

In addition to our work in Western Maine, we are a state wide service coordination agency working to support over 4400 Mainers to remain at home. We are part of the Long Term Services and Support System that coordinates in home care.

Our care coordinators are based throughout the state and have typically used a combination of telephone and in home visits to insure that quality services are meeting the needs of people enrolled in the programs. Our ten ZOOM accounts are in frequent use as we conduct virtual home visits with clients. Seeing a face instead of just a voice is so important to making strong personal connection. We also have the ability to get “eyes on” some of our most vulnerable clients.

One care coordinator shared that people are wanting to talk longer and have a lot of disinformation that we can help unravel. They are afraid to venture out at all. We brainstorm with them and offer suggestions such as inviting friends and family for an outside social distancing get together. They appreciate the time we are spending with them.

We have found our clients to be receptive and welcoming of new ways of doing business. For those with technology and the connectivity it works well but many do not. To that end, we have secured some private funds and are using CARES funds to purchase tablets and hotspots to get out to those who are open to learning new technology. We have found tablets to be easier to use and less threatening technology for many of the older people we serve.

Social isolation is detrimental to our health. We can feel the need for human interaction in every call and virtual contact that we have. We will continue to look at our business model to see how we can enhance the opportunity to serve people in new ways. I live in a state with many rural and frontier areas. This “new normal” could serve as a means to help us reach those underserved areas and further combat social isolation.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.