

The Pennsylvania Council on Aging
State of Older Adults During COVID-19 Report
April 2020

Executive Summary

COVID-19 is a virus that vastly and disproportionately affects older adults. In Pennsylvania, 51% of COVID-19-related hospitalizations are of people aged 65 and older. Those 85 years and older have fatality rates between 10% to 27%. In order to support well-informed decision-making, the Pennsylvania Council on Aging (PCoA) determined that there was an immediate need to better understand the landscape that older adults in Pennsylvania are navigating during this crisis.

The PCoA launched a brief survey to their network on March 31 in both English and Spanish. The survey was geared toward all of those over 60 who live in Pennsylvania. It was open for one week and drew more than 3700 submissions. The PCoA created the survey to assess the immediate needs of older adults, specifically around food access, public risk factors, and social isolation.

Some of the major findings are as follows:

- Older adults still engage with their communities, on average, almost twice weekly to get groceries.
- Almost 6% of the “oldest” older adults (91 years and older) reported that they still attended religious events.
- Fewer than 20% of the “oldest” older adults have access to smart phones, but more than 20% stated that they were interested in virtual connections.

Other indicators revealed vast differences among age groups and rural and urban settings in how all older adults connect with their communities, how they access food, and what technologies they use.

Additionally, charts and graphs illustrate how reported living situations, behaviors, preferences and access to technology affect their ability to function in a variety of areas of daily living, such as how older adults are accessing food, frequency of social contact by age group and level of satisfaction with communication by their living situation.

Through data interpretation, several themes emerged, highlighting areas where all older adults can be supported during this pandemic and in the future. Some of these recommendations include:

- Suggestions for ways for older adults to more safely access food.
- Ways to pivot services to maintain communication with older adults and minimize social isolation.
- A strong case for increasing connectivity across the commonwealth for older adults.

In addition to providing practical recommendations for helping older adults meet their needs during the COVID-19 emergency, the PCoA views the data collected as a rich resource for continued planning for services for older adults now and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, The Pennsylvania Department of Aging will be using the results to guide the development of their current approach to these issues, and in the development of their 2020-2024 four-year State Plan on Aging.

Food access, social isolation and connectivity have and will continue to be issues affecting older adults' well-being and quality of life; the responses drawn in real time during this pandemic present an opportunity to deepen policymakers' understanding of these major issues and engage partners throughout our Pennsylvania communities in the development of thoughtful, creative and effective solutions.