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25

### No Wrong Door partners:

228



LOA participant

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia's 25 area agencies on aging (AAAs) are supporting, assisting, and engaging with the Commonwealth's older adults. This promising practices series was developed by [DARS Division for Community Living](#) through interviews, conversations, and four statewide surveys. We hope this sharing of ideas and innovation from local communities will inspire new partnerships and creative solutions.

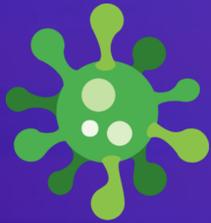


## Emergency Planning and Response

Months into the COVID-19 pandemic, AAAs have declared they can never return to "normal" operations. COVID-19 has left its footprint on service delivery, causing AAAs to be more diligent, focused, and prepared to meet the need. Prior to the pandemic, less devastating crisis situations (tornadoes, extreme weather, seasonal illness breakouts) had contributed to AAAs' ability to rapidly pivot operations and service delivery to a remote, contact-free model that met demands for new and existing services. Despite the efficient and effective response from Virginia's AAA network, a common sentiment expressed by AAAs was that going through the pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities in existing continuity of operations plans (COOP). As AAAs revise their COOPs to address pandemic scenarios, policies, staffing, governance, partnerships, and community awareness are top of mind.

**Policies.** Virginia's AAAs have shared how COVID-19 has illuminated a need for agency policies to be developed or revised. For example, relative to governance, the Board of Directors bylaws must reflect the ability to continue the agency's business. Specifically, policies related to board meetings and board voting protocols are being changed at some AAAs. Moving forward, policies and practices for remote operations will need to be more vetted and formalized, since policies to guide telework operations are imperative to smooth functioning in a crisis. For many, the shift to working remotely on such a large scale presented a challenge, in part, because some positions are not conducive to remote work. As a result, policies guiding the use of hazard pay for front line workers will be an important consideration for future emergencies. Also related, policies guiding returning to on-site work have also been put in place for the future.

Likewise, policies addressing flexibility in service provision, such as Uniform Assessment Instrument completion, and threshold levels of supplies, such as personal protective equipment (PPE), have been developed. [Central Virginia Alliance for Community Living \(CVACL\)](#), for example, has emphasized ongoing risk mitigation practices for illness, including a supply of PPE, utilization of technology that includes video conferencing, and an annual assessment of crisis readiness. AAAs also noted that federal and state-level policies put in place for COVID could assist with the ongoing need to be flexible and responsive to a dynamic environment. For example, flexibility in funding allocations and carryover limits would help with efficient, effective service delivery.



### COVID-19 Outreach

64% of AAAs have started or continued outreach to nursing facilities that includes daily checking | provision of PPE | COVID-19 testing coordination |resources for grief, social isolation, and resident rights |virtual family-resident meetings

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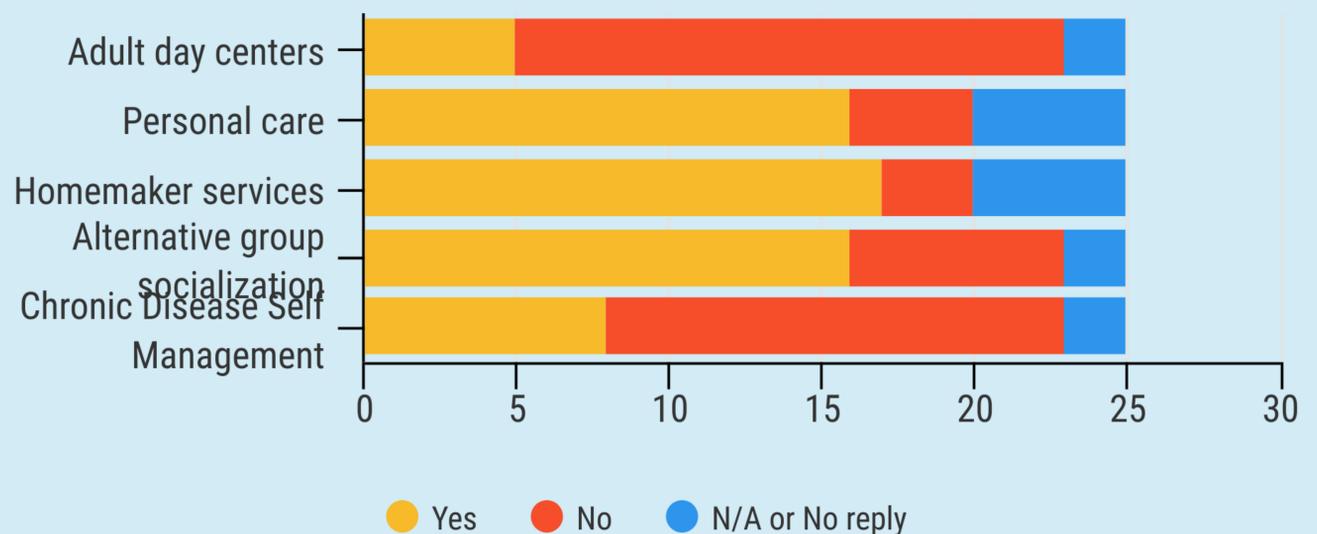
### Emergency Planning and Response, cont'd

**Staffing.** Healthy Generations emphasized that having the right staff is essential to being ready to respond quickly and effectively to this kind of crisis. “Without people who know 100% how to complete the job, the work does not get done.” Other AAAs echoed the importance of hiring the best staff possible and not settling for someone to fill a position.

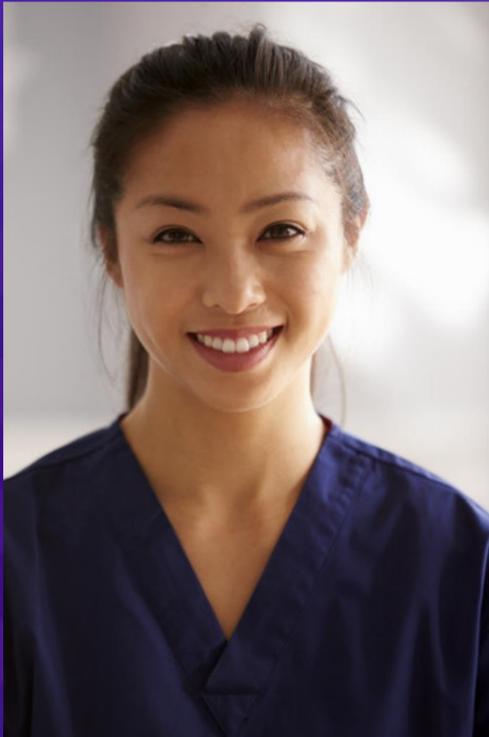
**Community awareness.** For many AAAs, the pandemic underscored the importance of raising community awareness of the role of AAAs. While some directors lamented that AAAs remain a hidden face of help in the community, providing the direct service but receiving very little recognition for the yeoman’s work being done, others observed that the pandemic has actually increased the awareness and importance of AAAs.

### Local Network Capacity

Services Operating During Pandemic in 25 AAA Regions



Local networks of home and community-based services are facing several system-level capacity challenges. Adult day centers provide community-based health and social supports for older adults, as well as caregiver supports. As of July 2020, adult day centers had re-opened in 20% of AAA service areas. With regard to in-home services, of those AAAs that operate a personal care program, 73% reported continued operations during the pandemic. A severe challenge to AAAs and their networks of home care providers, specifically, is the shortage of personal care aides (PCAs), which impacts the ability to accept new clients. [Bay Aging](#), for example, expressed a “dire need” for aides. [Southern Area Agency on Aging](#) is considering how they can address PCA wages. “We have considered renegotiating contracts with our providers whereby SAAA would agree to an increase, with the stipulation that the provider would offset the increase in the contracted hourly service rate with a like amount increase in hourly wages to the aides.”

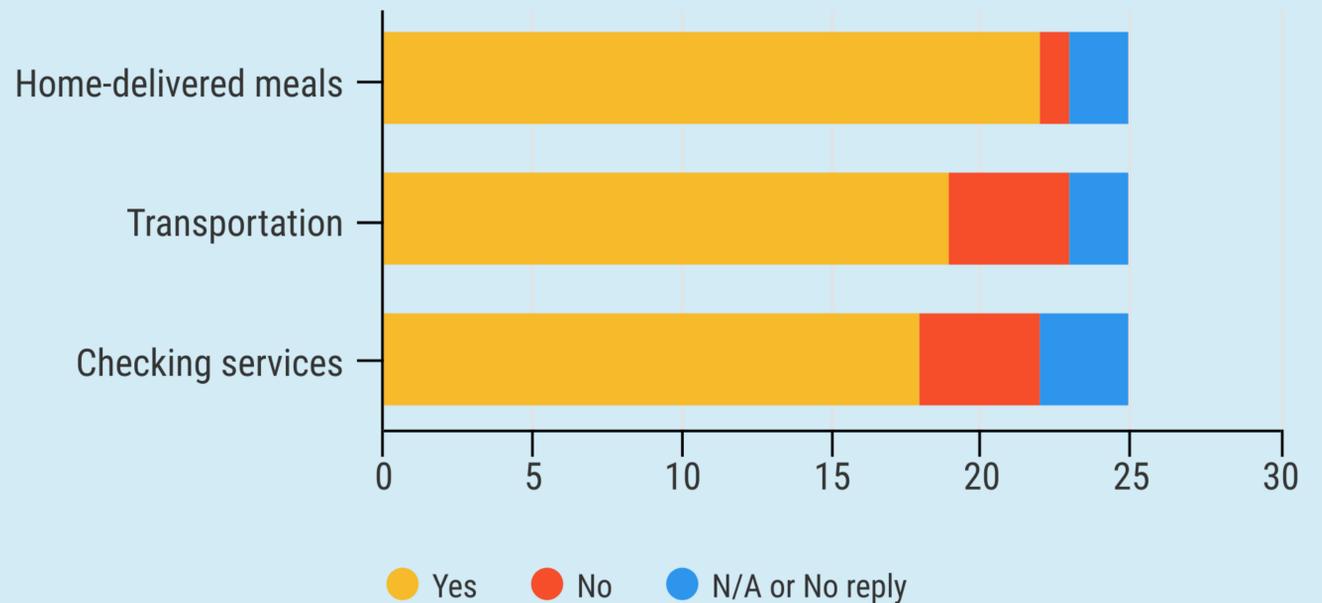


### Demand for PCAs

*While there is significant funding to add new clients, we're still limited due to the inability of our contracted providers to staff the additional clients and hours. We're currently working with our providers to determine to what extent they can expand services. Most all of our providers are advertising for aides. Southern Area Agency on Aging*

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### Adequate Workforce for Basic Services in 25 AAA Regions



### COVID-19 six-month Referral Increase:

124% - Financial assistance

416% - Public Awareness

597% Telephone Reassurance

### Remote Operations

Growing through this experience has necessitated that the aging services network develop an alternative for business-as-usual. Many AAAs reported having the ability for most staff to work remotely pre-COVID, but capacity has been tested during the pandemic and strengthened to better continue operations and client services. For the most part, services around the state have continued, as AAAs have shifted many administrative and social work tasks to being conducted remotely or through contact-free methods. Of course, there are some exceptions to remote service delivery such as home visits and transportation. Despite difficulties, new opportunities have opened up for older adults who have been unable to leave their homes even before the pandemic. For example, Arlington Agency on Aging reported that, “despite all of this, we are also seeing some positive aspects from COVID. We launched new programs like Friendly Callers, grocery deliveries from our local Food Bank, virtual volunteer orientations, intake assessments by phone and tele-health for VICAP counseling.”



### Creativity and Resilience



AAA teams have focused simultaneously on changing operations, meeting the needs in the community, and developing effective partnerships in an ever-shifting landscape. [Eastern Shore Area Agency on Aging](#) observed that one key to success in the pandemic has been that staff are willing to make changes immediately and add additional support daily. Healthy Generations concurred that “thinking outside everyone's box has become a necessity. This can only be accomplished with a staff that is willing to listen and learn from others. I think for a small staff, working together with a positive attitude has helped us tremendously.” [Jefferson Area Board for Aging \(JABA\)](#) offered this practical example of creative use of resources. “Staff moved swiftly to providing services through a previously underutilized conference call system, as well as, individual phone calls and Facebook live events.”



### Inclusive Communities

New and different demands on time and resources have sparked new partnerships and outpourings of support. Many AAAs reported having witnessed extraordinary generosity among local businesses and organizations. Still, the shift to remote, contact-free service delivery has also shown that these changes in business practices need to be inclusive of all people. For example, not all clients are confident in using or desire to use technology to meet their social needs. Likewise, materials may need to be offered in multiple languages so that all older adults in a given community have the same opportunities to connect to the services and resources they need. One way to understand the disparate needs of clients is to conduct a survey. [New River Valley Agency on Aging](#), for example, surveyed clients about their desires and preferences for using electronic devices, internet communication, and group activity participation. Likewise, virtual volunteer opportunities have allowed AAAs to continue to provide quality services, while also strengthening their ability to combat social isolation via virtual telephone visits. The pandemic has also affirmed that there are older adults under 60 that need AAA services as much as those over 60. Some AAAs have vowed to continue fundraising to support those individuals.

#### Everyday Creativity

*Our staff have been very creative in serving clients while working remotely.*

*We have learned that clients and staff alike are resilient! We hope to continue to offer some programs online/remotely in order to expand our reach as well as provide support to those who may choose not to and cannot come to visit us.*

Jefferson Area Board for  
Aging

Here for Seniors  
Through Everyday Life  
*The most critical role of  
an AAA is to be there for  
seniors in crisis, whether  
a national, statewide,  
local or personal crisis.  
AAAs do not close down  
when seniors are in  
need, they ramp up.  
Seniors can trust AAAs  
will be there to support  
them, this is critical.  
AAAs are here for  
seniors through  
everyday life; in crisis;  
and staff will respond,  
effectively and  
compassionately. We  
will move forward  
knowing we can  
overcome anxieties; we  
can be creative in  
response; we can  
respond with  
compassion; we will find  
the resources needed,  
and we will practice  
gratitude every day.*  
Central Virginia Alliance  
for Community Living

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### Shifts and Transitions

As the pandemic landscape shifts, so do the temporary arrangements made with community partners. These transitions may trigger surges in requests for services such as home-delivered meals, emergency food, and PPE. Additionally, the economic consequences of COVID-19 are causing significant increases in housing counseling, rental assistance, and emergency assistance requests. The increased demand for services has demonstrated to AAAs which services are most critical and how service models may need to change or expand in order to help prevent social isolation. For example, New River Valley reported that augmenting their Telephone Assurance Program with their Emergency Checking service brought them in closer touch with older adults, which helped combat social isolation and address needs that might not have been apparent otherwise. Several months into the pandemic, some services are opening back up to regular capacity; others are still being monitored for potential exposure. A concern expressed by AAAs is that some community members who were eligible for services at the peak of the pandemic may not continue to be eligible for services, but the need will remain.



### Health and Well-Being

**Social isolation and loneliness.** Sixty-four percent (n= 16) of Virginia's AAAs have reported offering alternative formats for group socialization, most often in the form of virtual senior center activities and virtual caregiver peer support groups.

**Infection control.** As with many business sectors, this pandemic reinforced for AAAs that the best practices for avoiding COVID-19 are the best practices for avoiding illness, in general. These enhanced practices will continue during flu season or other times of illness.

**Staff well-being.** AAAs across Virginia reported that the COVID-19 environment has been hard on staff, older adults, and caregivers; yet, they have seen first-hand how clients and staff alike are resilient. Employees have sometimes stopped working due to concerns with their own health issues and possible exposure to COVID-19. Staff are reporting they are working harder now than before the pandemic. Consequently, staff burnout is an ongoing concern. As noted previously, hazard pay for frontline workers will be one strategy to mitigate these issues in future emergencies.



### Technology

Communication and technology are key components to readiness planning, as AAAs need to be adaptable and in touch with clients, the general public, and community partners. Furthermore, technology and communication go hand-in-hand in combatting loneliness and social isolation among older adults. Sixty percent of Virginia's AAAs (n= 15) reported either needing additional assistive technology (AT) supports or are considering the need for additional AT to help older adults and people with disabilities during the pandemic. Types of support needed includes:

- Identifying who receives technology devices when resources are limited
- How to address training needs
- Expanded Internet access
- Help with the purchase of personal emergency response systems, mobile phones, laptops, tablets, hotspots, phone systems, and virtual connection platforms