

Vermont Senior Centers

Supporting Social Connectedness through Food, Friends
and Fostering Opportunity

Report of Survey Results
November 2021

Survey conducted by
the State Unit on Aging of the Department of Disabilities,
Aging and Independent Living

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Executive Summary

The Older Americans Act, federal legislation which funds a variety of supportive services for older Vermonters, calls on states and communities to develop and promote the use of “multipurpose senior centers” to maximize collocation of supports and services for older people, especially those “in greatest economic and social need.” Within Vermont’s current State Plan on Aging, the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) has identified the need to strengthen a high-quality, sustainable network of centers that can meet the growing and changing needs of older Vermonters.

On March 13, 2020, Governor Phil Scott declared a state of emergency to help ensure Vermont had all of the necessary resources to respond to COVID-19 health emergency. The restrictions under the Emergency Declaration were not fully lifted until June 14, 2021. Under the State of Emergency and the proceeding stay at home orders, senior centers and meal sites shut down in person activities. The following information is characterized by the unique circumstances involving senior centers and meal sites offering meals as pickup and delivery. Outings were done socially distanced, most contact was had over the phone, and work conditions adapted to health and safety standards required under COVID.

DAIL conducted a survey of senior centers in July 2018, July 2019, and June 2021. The following pages outline the results of the 2021 survey in detail. Key highlights include:

- Senior Centers reported serving over 11,000 older Vermonters annually.
- Over 70% of senior centers reported being open Monday through Friday and most centers serve people from multiple towns.
- Senior centers offer a wide range of activities and services to promote socialization, health and well-being. In addition to nutritious meals, 81% of respondents offer exercise classes and 78% offer health and wellness education. 70% offer recreational activities and organized trips.
- Senior centers provide communities with a significant return on investment. Most operate with an average of two staff and median budgets of \$142,000, but with the dedicated help of dozens of volunteers, offer a wealth of services to older Vermonters that support healthy aging. Volunteers are foundational to their success.
- Partnerships and collaborations are a key to sustainability – In addition to partnering with Area Agencies on Aging, many senior centers are partnering with financial institutions and foundations, farmers, chefs, and grocery stores, schools, and small businesses. They are developing multigenerational programming, expanded meal choices, and are breaking down the walls of the center in the community.

The survey also points to some key challenges faced by Vermont’s senior centers. The most common challenges and concerns identified include:

- Limited budgets and limited ability to bring in new revenue, preventing centers from hiring staff, diversifying offerings, and providing transportation to participants.
- An aging staff and volunteer network, and limited ability to recruit new and younger staff and volunteers. Challenged by the inability to offer benefit packages and remain competitive.
- Within a limited budget, how to address the wide-ranging needs and desires of multiple generations of older Vermonters; in other words, how to provide a welcoming, engaging senior center for older Vermonters from age 60 to 100.
- Building awareness of services and recruiting new participants.
- Overcome the impacts of COVID and people feeling comfortable participating in a group setting.

To meet the needs of a growing and changing older cohort of Vermonters, senior centers need the support of the State, Area Agencies on Aging, towns and municipalities, business sector, healthcare systems, and local communities. Recognizing the significant cost of social isolation on our health and human services systems in the long-term, we all have a role to play in supporting these front lines providers of healthy aging supports, whether it be through coordination, technical assistance, financial support or volunteerism.

DAIL remains committed to seeking creative solutions to support the sustainability and transformation of senior centers in Vermont. We continue to work to:

- Raise awareness about the critical link between preventing isolation and strengthening senior centers, including the work being done at centers currently to address social isolation and support healthy aging,
- Include the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP) in statewide efforts to bring attention to older Vermonters' needs and contributions, and
- Advocate with various entities for more sustainable support for senior centers.

Survey Development and Distribution

The 2021 Senior Engagement Survey was developed, circulated, and analyzed by staff of the DAIL State Unit on Aging, and was reviewed and revised by the VASCAMP steering committee.

The purpose of the survey was to build upon information yielded from similar surveys conducted in 2014, 2018, and 2019, to analyze trends, changes, challenges, and opportunities and to better understand the current capacity and needs of the network of Vermont senior centers. The survey was not completed in 2020 due to COVID response.

The survey was distributed by email in June 2021 to 42 identified senior centers across Vermont. Of those sent, 36 were returned, an 85% return rate, and an increase from 2019 when 30 of 42 centers responded.

The following pages include a break-down analysis of the data yielded from the survey.

Participation and Access

How many unduplicated older Vermonters are served annually?

Senior Centers reported serving a total of over 11,582 older Vermonters annually. This is a decrease from the total reported in 2019.

The range of unduplicated older Vermonters annually served ranged from 60 to 2,300. It is important to break down these numbers by the counties with the most responses, as there was significant variance:

Chittenden County (from 7 reporting centers)

- The range was 60-700
- The average was about 335
- Only two senior centers reported serving less than 300

Orange County (from 3 reporting centers)

- The range was 170-300
- The average was 218

Rutland County (from 4 reporting centers)

- The range was 300-1000
- The average was about 458
- Only one senior center reported serving less than 300

Washington County (from 3 reporting centers)

- The range was 120-1600
- The average was about 454

Windham County (from 3 reporting centers)



- The range was 175-250
- The average was 225

Windsor County (from 6 reporting centers)

- The range was 80-2300
- The average was about 777
- Only one senior center reported serving less than 200

How do senior centers track participants?

33 of the respondents' reported using sign-in sheets and 15 of the 34 reported using a database to store the information collected from the sign-in sheets. 4 respondents reported using platforms such as RecTrac, www.myseniorcenter.com, and Google Docs.

What days of the week are senior centers open?

Over 75% of respondents operate Monday through Friday. Just 3% of senior centers have hours limited to less than three days a week.

How many towns do senior centers serve?

The vast majority of senior centers, or 92%, serve between three and ten towns, while 8% reported serving over fifteen. One senior center reported serving seniors from a total of 25 Vermont towns

Budgets and Revenue

What are senior centers' annual operating budgets?

Senior center budgets vary significantly and impact how much programming they are able to offer, how many meals they can provide, how many employees they can pay, and whether or not they can provide any sort of transportation for participants.

Analysis of the survey data showed that Vermont senior centers have drastically varying annual operating budgets (AOB). Of those reported, budgets ranged from \$20,000-\$650,000. The average AOB was \$142,000, although that number is higher than 58% of respondents.

The results showed that almost 39% of senior centers had an AOB less than \$100,000.

When asked what the biggest challenges of their centers were, 50% of respondents mentioned challenges related to the costs of operating their facility, paying their employees, keeping up with rising cost of commodities or funding specifically.

What are the most popular sources of revenue?

The options provided for revenue sources were:

- Town department funding (i.e. part of a Parks and Rec department budget)
- Funding from towns served (solicited via town meeting day petition)
- Donors/events
- Participant contributions
- Area Agency on Aging contract
- Foundation grants
- Some other source of revenue

The most popular reported sources of revenue were:

1. Area Agency on Aging Contract
2. Participant Contributions
3. Funding from towns served

**Do you receive Older Americans Act funds for non-meal related activities?
(Wellness, group activities, events, ect.)**

Ten of the respondents to the survey indicated they receive Older Americans Act funds for non-meal related activities. The most common reported things were:

1. Certification costs for leaders to lead evidence-based health promotion and disease prevention classes. For example, Tai Chi.
2. Transportation (\$500 per month)
3. Capitol expenses such as appliances and maintenance

Governance

What form of decision-making body do senior centers utilize?

69% of respondents reported utilizing a board of directors, 11% utilize an advisory board or council and 20% reported using a decision-making body other than a board or advisory council.

Do senior centers have 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status and are they incorporated?

81% of centers indicated that they had 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status and 19% reported being under a Municipal Department

Services and Programming

Do senior centers have membership fees and are they based on residency status?

Five of the respondents to the survey reported having membership fees. The membership fees ranged from \$10 per year to \$35 per year.

What activities and services are offered at senior centers?

Social	100%
Exercise classes	83%
Health/wellness education	72%
Educational speakers	78%
Health screenings or clinics	67%
Recreational	81%
Arts and crafts	72%
Organized trips	56%
Adult Learning	25%
Legal/financial assistance	19%
Online learning/technology training	22%
Cooking classes	19%
Other	22%
None	0%

Upon explanation most senior centers mentioned that all activities promoted socialization and could fall under the “social” category. This included but was not limited to sing-along live music, dancing, food socials, holiday parties, Christmas tree decorating, TED talks and subsequent reflections, talks on current events, card and board games, luaus, beach parties, knitting, bingo, and coffee hours.

83% of returned surveys indicated their senior center offered ‘exercise classes. These often include a combination of tai chi, chair yoga, or bone builders. Other activities offered at some centers include jazzercise, marital arts/self-defense, snowshoeing, stand-up paddleboard lessons for seniors, stretching, qi gong, water aerobics, and pickle ball.

Arts and crafts is one of the more popular categories of programming offered at many Vermont senior centers, including painting including watercolor, oil, and acrylic mediums, knitting and crocheting, jewelry making, birdhouse painting, adult coloring, photography, drawing, pottery, expressive arts, journaling, quilting, and wood working.

Most respondents indicated that their senior center had consistent organized trips for their participants.

Most senior centers, 81%, reported offering recreational activities to their participants, such as sports, tai chi, boating, hiking, bird-watching, kayaking, indoor walking, singing groups, hydro massage, walks around town, dancing, pickle ball, tennis, ping pong, whiffle ball, softball, bocce ball, basketball, swimming, and horseshoes. Educational speakers are also readily utilized by senior centers on a wide variety of topics.

Who leads activities at senior centers?

100% of centers reported that they use volunteers to lead activities. 53% of respondents reported that paid staff led activities. 36% reported that they used outside organizations or experts to lead their activities.

If resources were not an issue, what programs would senior centers like to add?

The responses for this question were relatively similar. Most common answers included: Daily transportation to and from center, transportation for trips, free programming, expanded operation hours, cooking classes, more health and dental screenings, more foot clinics, yoga, and tai chi. In addition, senior centers expressed the desire to offer more of what they already have on the activity calendar. Some senior centers reported that they would like to add recreational activities like snowshoeing, kayaking, water aerobics, swimming, and hunting. Other centers mentioned that they would like to have dedicated spaces for arts, working out and cooking classes. Adult learning was often mentioned as something that senior centers would like to offer. Additional answers included: well-being checks, consistent congregate meals, onsite LNAs/RN, more music performers, legal clinics, and a big-screen television for their center.

Does your center offer technology device lending and/or classes on using technology?

25% of the respondents reported having some type of technology device lending service and/or host classes on using technology. Of those who reported not having a lending device service and/or offer a class, 16% that would like to be able to start it as a service.

Meals

Are meals offered at senior centers?

89% of respondents offer meals at least once a week. The most common day where participants are offered meals across the state is Wednesday at 58%. Monday and Tuesday are the second most common days at 56% followed by Friday at 53% and Thursday came in at 42%. Survey data showed that 11% of respondents did not offer any meals.

How many meals per day are offered?

Most senior centers offer only one meal per day, but most would like the option to provide more as congregate meals are often the most popular service provided by senior centers. Centers cited financial barriers as challenges in expanding their meal programs.

Do senior centers have contracts with Area Agencies on Aging to provide meals?

Of all respondents, 67% indicated that they had a contract with an Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

How much do meals cost?

Per Older Americans Act rules, a meal provider cannot require that a person age 60 or older pay for meals but must offer the person the opportunity to contribute to the cost of the meal. Most centers have a suggested donation amount for meals. 50% had a suggested donation below \$4 and 50% had a suggested donation from \$4 to \$5 for those age 60 or older. For those under age 60, 72% had a meal price between \$5 and \$7.50. There was some variation reported. For example, one senior center had a price of \$8 for monthly dinners and offers free lunch and brunch. For most of Vermont senior centers, donations supplement the cost of providing meals but do not cover total costs, and centers must fundraise to make up the difference.

Are there choices in meals, medically tailored meals, meals for special diets or home delivered meals?

58% of returned surveys indicated that participants had choices in their meals. 58% reported having a vegetarian option. Most centers make some sort of accommodation for some special dietary restrictions. About 25% of senior centers offering meals reported that they made accommodations for diabetics, gluten free and low salt.

About 69% of responding senior centers reported that they offered home-delivered meals.

Do senior centers partner with local farms, grocery stores, or vendors?

53% of respondents partner with a local farm in some capacity and 31% partner with local grocery stores or vendors. Although they were not asked to elaborate, some senior centers indicated that they received donations from local restaurants and stores for their meal programs.

What is your most recently calculated cost per meal? (as calculated on the standard excel spreadsheet for meal cost distributed by your AAA)

The average cost report by the respondents to the survey was \$8.43. The range was \$2.50 to \$24.14. It is believed that the large range of costs can be accounted for by differences with what the center included as costs.

The statewide meal cost analysis was performed by the AAAs for the first time in FFY21. The cost analysis will be repeated in FFY22.

Staff and Volunteers



How many paid staff members are working at senior centers, what are their roles and how many hours do they work?

11% of senior centers reported that they had paid staff of four or more, and this was the highest number of paid staff reported. About 41% reported having two-three paid staff, the most common number reported. Nearly 13% stated that they did not employ a single paid staff member. The most common paid staff positions are administrators and kitchen/food preparation staff. Most administrators do multiple jobs. Many of them help with transportation, meals, maintenance, activities, meals on wheels coordinating and volunteer recruiting, among other duties. 25% of respondents reported offering health insurance, 17% offer dental, and 19% offer a retirement plan to eligible employees.

How many volunteers do senior centers utilize, how old are they, and how many hours do they volunteer?

Most senior centers that responded have a volunteer base that ensure programs run smoothly and meals are served. In many cases, senior centers would not be able to operate without volunteers. The lowest number of volunteers reported was three and the highest was over 100. In total the senior centers who participated in this survey reported over 90,000 volunteer hours provided annually. Most volunteers at senior centers are over 55 years old. The average age of volunteers at senior centers is between 65 and 75 years old.

In addition to volunteers, a small number of respondents reported working with Voc-Rehab to recruit mature workers, implementing work agreements with designated and specialized service agencies, and hosting student volunteers who are required to have a certain number of volunteer hours to graduate.

How are volunteers recruited at senior centers?

Most senior centers recruit volunteers by word of mouth. Many volunteers are recruited by using their local Front Porch Forum, and Senior center Newsletter and social media. Additionally, volunteers are sourced through the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

Transportation

Do senior centers provide transportation to and from their facilities?

33% of senior center respondents reported that they provided transportation for their participants.

Are there regional transit stops at or near senior centers?

58% of senior centers reported that there was a regional transit stop at or near their facility. There was not a significant correlation between having a regional transit stop at or near a facility and number of older Vermonters served annually; nor was there a correlation between a regional transit stop and the senior center budget.

How strongly do transportation barriers impact participation?

47% of respondents reported that transportation barriers impact participation “a great deal”, while 39% reported that it either impacts participation “a little” or “a moderate amount”. 14% reported that transportation does not impact participation. Both rural and urban areas feel the impact of inadequate transportation. When asked what the biggest challenges for their centers were, many senior centers reported that transportation issues, including parking, were a concern.

Challenges and Successes

What are the biggest challenges of operating a senior center?

The most reported challenges had to do with financing, transportation, and space. Additionally, respondents reported that challenge they face with reopening and making an environment where people are comfortable post COVID.

Many senior center directors voiced concerns about their aging volunteer base and staff and worry about program sustainability. Many senior centers face challenges recruiting younger participants (age 60-70), while struggling to meet the needs of their oldest participants and an aging population. Respondents reported the challenge of coordinating meals on wheels to individuals who live miles from a main road and the challenge of coordinating delivery by volunteers during winter months when back roads are not in good condition.

Other reported challenges include reaching all parts of the towns that the centers serve through outreach and building awareness of services and activities.

What are the greatest successes?

The most reported success was maintaining safe programming during the State of Emergency caused by COVID-19. Many respondents attributed their success to committed volunteers and staff who help to create a warm and welcoming environment. Several respondents made mention of their Meals on Wheels program and keeping things running smoothly as the program grew during the shutdown.

There was mention of being able to offer wellness classes, including, foot clinics. Additionally, clinics that address tax assistance, Medicare counseling, and legal assistance. Evolving programming to address the needs of those in the community who want to age in place was noted by a small number of respondents. A smaller number of

respondents also reported the success of adopting remote activities that relied on connecting over phone and/or virtual.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, what were the greatest challenges? What assistance were you able to obtain to overcome the challenges?

The most common challenge reported by respondents was maintaining contact with program participants. For many respondents' challenges with maintaining contact was magnified by participants not using technology to connect virtually. In some cases, the challenge was alleviated by funding to purchase tablets and volunteers to help with training.

Other challenges noted by respondents was obtaining the supplies needed to create the packaged meals. During the pandemic prices on supplies rose and there were shortages in the supply chain. One solution reported was sharing supplies with other centers.

Other reported challenges during the pandemic include the added stress on staff and volunteers, keeping up the increased number home-delivered meals, and adhering to guidelines supplied by the health department.

Acknowledgments

DAIL wishes to express our thanks and appreciation to the 36 senior centers who completed and returned the survey (in alphabetical order):

1. Arrowhead Senior Center in Milton, VT
2. Barre Area Senior Center in Barre, VT
3. Bellows Falls Area Senior Center in Bellows Falls, VT
4. Brandon Senior Center in Brandon, VT
5. Brattleboro Senior Center in Brattleboro, VT
6. Bugbee Senior Center in White River Junction, VT
7. Burke Senior Meal Site in West Burke, VT
8. Castleton Community Seniors in Castleton, VT
9. Charlotte Senior Center in Charlotte, VT
10. Chelsea Area Senior Center in Chelsea, VT
11. Community Senior Center of Bolton, Huntington and Richmond, VT
12. CORE Adult Center in Burlington, VT
13. Danville Senior Center in Danville, VT
14. Essex Area Senior Center in Essex Jct, VT
15. Fairfield Community Center in Fairfield VT
16. Godnick Adult Center in Rutland VT
17. Greater Randolph Senior Center in Randolph, VT
18. Forever Young Club in Poultney, VT
19. Franklin County Senior Center in St. Albans, VT
20. Good Living Senior Center in St. Johnsbury, VT

21. Greater Randolph Senior Center in Randolph, VT
22. Heineberg Community Senior Center in Burlington, VT
23. Island Pond Community Services in Island Pond, VT
24. Mad River Valley Seniors in Waitsfield, VT
25. Meals on Wheels of Greater Springfield in Springfield, VT
26. Montpelier Senior Activity Center in Montpelier, VT
27. Northfield Senior Center in Northfield, VT
28. Orange East Senior Center in Bradford, VT
29. Quin-town Center for Senior Citizens in Hancock, VT
30. South Royalton Area Senior Center in Royalton, VT
31. Springfield Senior Center in Springfield, VT
32. Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock, VT
33. Twin Valley Seniors, Inc. in East Montpelier, VT
34. Waterbury Senior Center in Waterbury, VT
35. Winooski Senior Center in Winooski, VT
36. Young at Heart Senior Center in Poultney, VT

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