
**Report to
The Vermont Legislature**

**Meals To Older Vermonters
And Other Vulnerable Populations**

**In Accordance with Act 136. Section 13
An act relating to health care and human services related appropriations from the
Coronavirus Relief Fund**

Submitted to: Joint Fiscal Committee

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**AGENCY OF HUMAN SERVICES
Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living**

Introduction:

Act 136, Section 13 requires that the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) submit a report to the Joint Fiscal Committee by August 18th 2020 on the adequacy of funding for the provision of nutrition services to older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations.

This report, per legislative request, includes the following:

- Specific federal COVID-19 funding provided to date for the provision of nutrition services to the elderly and vulnerable populations served by the Department; and
- Older Americans Act funds distributed to the Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) for the purpose of providing nutrition services to older Vermonters; and
- Any funds made available for nutrition services for older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations from the Coronavirus Relief Fund pursuant to the Joint Fiscal Committee's May 11, 2020 approved plan; and
- Any recommendation for additional Coronavirus Relief Fund monies for nutrition services for older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations from a subsequent Joint Fiscal Committee allocation or legislation.

Background:

Nutrition plays an important role in promoting good health and preventing disease for all Americans. Approximately 13.6% of older Americans face the threat of hunger, including 10.4% of older Vermonters. The Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Services Program promotes the health and wellbeing of older adults through access to nutritious meals, social contacts, nutrition screening, nutrition education and nutrition counseling.

The purpose of the OAA Nutrition Services Program is to:

- Reduce hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition
- Promote socialization, health and well-being

The target population for the program includes people age 60 or older, including:

- Low income older adults
- Minority older adults
- Older adults living in rural communities
- Older adults with limited English proficiency
- Older adults at risk of institutional care

Persons eligible for home-delivered meals are those individuals age 60 or over who are unable to leave home without considerable difficulty and/or assistance; **and** who experience a physical or mental condition making them unable to obtain food or prepare meals on a temporary or permanent basis. Also eligible are the spouse, regardless of age, of eligible individuals; and individuals under 60 years of age with a disability, who reside with an eligible individual.

As Vermont's COVID-19 State of Emergency began on March 13, 2020, the closing of congregate meal sites followed on March 16, 2020 and the Governor's Stay At Home Executive Order then took effect on March 25, 2020, more older Vermonters and other vulnerable populations, such as Vermonters with disabilities were in need of nutritional supports at home.

Because congregate meals were not available starting in March, DAIL was able to relax these eligibility requirements to allow for those individuals age 60 or over or those with a disability who were unable to leave home due to the need to isolate during the pandemic to also be eligible for home-delivered meals. This includes "to-go" meals that people picked up "curbside" at senior centers and meal sites. See [3/30/2020 Memo to AAAs and Meal Providers](#).

In addition, once Vermont's Major Disaster Declaration was approved by FEMA, OAA disaster relief rules took effect which allowed for a relaxation of dietary meal requirements and the flexibility to target funding from other OAA titles to the needs of the nutrition program. This provided the AAAs with more options in which to serve more people and meals. See [04/09/2020 Memo to AAAs](#).

People with disabilities who are food insecure, have difficulty accessing food and/or are unable to cook for themselves also need nutritional support and DAIL partners with the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL) to serve these Vermonters with nutritious meals. With the COVID-19 State of Emergency, DAIL worked with VCIL to expand eligibility for home-delivered meals for Vermonters with disabilities who were unable to leave home during the crisis.

Funding Overview

The Older Americans Act nutrition programs are designed as a public-private partnership. Federal funding is not designed to cover the full cost of the programs. Rather, OAA funding is designed to be supplemented by state and local funding, fundraising, use of volunteers and participant contributions.

When federal funding is appropriated for Older Americans Act services, including home-delivered meals, the Administration for Community Living (ACL) distributes that funding by formula to the States. DAIL then awards and distributes the funding by formula to the five AAAs. AAAs then contract with meal providers to prepare and distribute meals. This year's COVID relief funds for OAA services from the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and the CARES Act were distributed in the same way.

Within the funding allocation, there is designated funding under each OAA Title that AAAs must budget, but DAIL does not dictate how the services are implemented at the local level. Per the OAA design, AAAs have the flexibility at their service area level to allocate the funds to their contracted meal providers, generally the senior centers and

meal sites, based on varying local needs and demands, with the goal of serving their target population in greatest economic and social need.

Because AAAs have this flexibility, the service model may look different in different parts of the state. For example, Age Well in the northwestern part of the state, uses a centralized meal provider model, with one contracted for-profit meal provider making meals for people in all four counties within their service area. By contrast, Central Vermont Council on Aging contracts with 12 local senior centers and meal providers who prepare and deliver the meals in their communities. Each AAA works with their own contractors to maximize available dollars and determine meal reimbursement rates and is responsible for overseeing those sites and ensuring quality service.

It is important to note the difference between a senior center and a meal site. A senior center is a community facility that organizes and provides a broad spectrum of services for older Vermonters, including physical and mental health-related, social, nutritional, and educational services, and that provides facilities for use by older Vermonters to engage in recreational activities. Vermont has approximately 40 senior centers, some of which provide meals under contract with the AAAs.

Vermont has approximately 90 “meal sites,” where OAA meals are provided. Some of these sites are senior centers, but many are other community locations (i.e. a church hall) which only provide meals via contract with the AAA but do not provide other services that are typical of a senior center.

Senior centers and meal sites are accountable to report people and meals served to the AAAs. AAAs are accountable to DAIL to report the number of people served in their total service area, meals served, and OAA funds spent. Financial reports are sent to DAIL quarterly; programmatic service reports are sent annually.

Funding Provided and Distributed:

1. Federal COVID-19 Funding:

\$5.1 million in COVID-19 funding from the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act and CARES Act was designated specifically for Older Americans Act services and awarded by intrastate funding formula from DAIL to Vermont’s five Area Agencies on Aging to serve older Vermonters during the pandemic. AAAs draw down this funding on a monthly basis.

- \$1 million was targeted for Title III-B Supportive Services which may include case management, information/assistance/referral, legal assistance, assistive technology, transportation, support of senior centers and more.
- \$3.6 million was targeted for Title III-C Nutrition Services, which includes home delivered meals, congregate meals, nutrition counseling and nutrition education.

- \$500,000 targeted for Title III-E Family Caregiver Support which includes caregiver education/training, counseling, respite, etc.

Below is a chart outlining the federal COVID funding awarded to the five AAAs:

- Age Well
- Central Vermont Council on Aging (CVCOA)
- Northeast Kingdom Council on Aging (NEKCOA)
- Senior Solutions - Council on Aging for Southeastern Vermont
- Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging (SVCOA)

Federal COVID-19 Funding Awarded by AAAs (available for use through 9/30/21)

COVID funding	Age Well	CVCOA	NEKCOA	Senior Solutions	SVCOA	Total
Title III-B	297,854	189,161	143,768	188,137	181,080	1,000,000
Title III-C	1,072,276	680,979	517,562	677,297	651,886	3,600,000
Title III-E	148,928	94,580	71,884	94,068	90,540	500,000
Total	1,519,058	964,720	733,214	959,502	923,506	5,100,000

Although the funding was targeted by OAA Title as outlined above, the flexibility to transfer funding across titles as needed during the pandemic was also an option for AAAs.

In addition, AAAs have until the end of federal fiscal year 2021 (9/30/21) to spend these funds.

\$972,000 in CARES Act funding was designated for VCIL which was able to be used to support a wide range of activities including the home-delivered meals program for Vermonters with disabilities.

2. Older Americans Act Funding:

In Federal Fiscal Year 2020, a total of \$5,958,925 in regular OAA funds has been designated by formula to AAAs. AAAs draw down this funding from DAIL on a monthly basis. Of this total, \$3,665,649 is designated for Title III-C nutrition services. Under the Major Disaster Declaration, 100% of funding is transferrable across all funding titles.

Regular OAA Funding Awarded to AAAs in FFY20 (available for use through 9/30/21)

Reg OAA Funding	Age Well	CVCOA	NEKCOA	Senior Solutions	SVCOA	Total
Title III-C1	724,324	460,004	349,616	457,515	440,352	2,431,811
Title III-C2	367,503	233,394	177,386	232,132	223,423	1,233,838
Total	1,091,827	693,398	527,002	689,647	663,775	3,665,649

No OAA funding is designated to serve meals to people with disabilities under the age of 60. DAIL provides a grant to VCIL to provide meals to this population. The grant

amount for SFY21 is \$484,972. VCIL collaborates with the AAAs and meal providers for meal preparation and distribution to their clients.

3. State Coronavirus Relief Funds:

On August 12, 2020, DAIL submitted a request for Coronavirus Relief Funds specifically to address the needs of senior centers and meal providers who prepared and delivered home-delivered meals during the months of April-June.

The Joint Fiscal Committee approved the request for \$600,000 specifically to cover the costs senior centers and meal providers incurred during that timeframe that were not reimbursed by the Area Agencies on Aging.

4. Other Nutritional Supports

The Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP) is a USDA program designed to support local farmers and food insecure older Vermonters and administered by DAIL. Approximately 60% of SFMNP funds are granted to the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA) for a CSA program for low-income older Vermonters; the other 40% of funds are distributed by the Community Action Agencies as coupons to be used by qualifying older Vermonters at local farmers' markets. The coupon part of the program is administered by the Department for Children and Families as part of the Farm to Family program. Due to COVID-19, the demand for the CSA share versus the coupons grew significantly this year, and NOFA reported a waiting list of 121 potential participants in June. DAIL provided an additional \$6,000 in general funds to the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA) to address the waiting list.

Funding Spent on or Obligated for Meals:

Total Funding Spent on Meals and any Remaining Obligations for Meals (April-June 2020)

	Age Well	CVCOA	NEKCOA	Senior Solutions	SVCOA	VCIL
Total funds spent April-June*	\$582,149	\$452,519	\$499,929	\$364,727	\$379,055	\$122,721.56
Total FF & CARES spent April-June	\$260,387	\$158,816	\$370,669	\$308,906	\$278,842	\$29,263
Total OAA spent April-June	\$275,467	\$210,456	\$1,543	\$16,694	\$3,620	0
Total SGF spent April-June	\$46,295	\$47,844	\$40,000	0	0	\$93,458.56

Total remaining obligations April-June	\$42,272	0	0	\$35,281	0	0
FF & CARES remaining obligations April-June	\$42,272	0	0	\$35,281	0	0
OAA remaining obligations April-June	\$0	0	0	0	0	0
SGF remaining obligations April-June	\$0	0	0	0	0	0

*CVCOA's and SVCOA's total funds spent includes other sources such as foundation grants, donations and participant contributions.

People and Meals Served:

Over 5,500 older Vermonters and Vermonters with disabilities who were unable to buy groceries or cook for themselves received home-delivered meals each month during the first full three months of the COVID-19 pandemic (April-June 2020). This includes 1,483 people new to the program since the start of the public emergency (3/13/20). No meal provider reported having a waiting list for meals.

Approximately 100,000 meals were served each month, including both home-delivered meals and "to-go" meals picked up at senior centers and meal sites. These meals cost almost \$10.00 per meal on average while meal providers were reimbursed an average of \$6.10 per meal. Some AAAs provided meal providers with additional funding beyond meal reimbursement rate to pay for necessities like equipment and increased materials.

It is important to note that the AAAs have not yet developed a consistent statewide approach to calculating the total cost of providing a meal that not only calculates the cost of ingredients and preparation but is also inclusive of all meal providers' costs such as building costs, staffing/labor/volunteer costs, supply costs, etc., and now added costs such as PPE. The numbers provided by the AAAs in the chart below may not be comprehensive nor comparable and this lack of data is a real gap in our understanding of meal funding adequacy. AAAs plan to do more thorough analysis on meal costs this fall.

People and Meals Served by AAAs and VCIL (April-June 2020)

	Age Well	CVCOA	NEKCOA	Senior Solutions	SVCOA	VCIL	State-wide
People Served April	1,125	1,070	1,392	925	751	247	5,510
People Served May	1,100	1,006	1,379	924	745	290	5,444
People Served June	1,081	1,020	1,358	961	768	212	5,400
New People as of 3/13	483	253	199	246	224	78	1,483
Meals Served April	22,913	22,159	17,081	19,025	17,854	6290	105,322
Meals Served May	22,587	22,238	18,710	17,508	15,180	6616	102,839
Meals Served June	21,319	19,333	17,647	18,319	16,198	5799	98,615
Ave Reimbursement Rate across sites April-June*	\$6.00	Apr-May \$3.65; Jun-Aug \$7.30	\$5.42	"To-Go" \$4.68 HDM \$5.81	\$5.59	\$6.50	\$6.10 (during COVID)
Ave Total Cost Per Meal	\$7.62	\$10.57	\$8.75	\$10.50	\$9.95	\$10	\$9.57

*Four of the five AAAs temporarily increased their meal reimbursement rates as part of their COVID-19 response efforts:

1. CVCOA increased its rate from \$3.65 to \$7.30 for all meals. The increased rate did not take effect until June and goes through August.
2. NEKCOA increased its rate from an average \$3.77 to an average of \$5.42.
3. Senior Solutions increased its rates from an average of \$3.60 for congregate or to-go and \$4.48 for home delivered to an average of \$4.68 for congregate or to-go and \$5.82 for home delivered.
4. SVCOA's averaged rate increased from \$4.97 to \$5.59.

Age Well's reimbursement rate to its single vendor stayed the same at \$6.00 per meal. DAIL sets the reimbursement rate for VCIL meals at \$6.50 as part of the grant agreement, so that did not increase.

DAIL Recommendations

Short-Term:

DAIL recommends that:

- 1) No additional State CRF funding is required for AAAs and VCIL to meet current nutrition program costs based on the April-June data above and assuming a consistent level of use within the next year.
 - a) However, in order for some AAAs to maintain higher meal reimbursement rates through December 2020, further CRF funds should be discussed. DAIL estimates that \$565,684 would allow the AAAs to serve approximately the same average number of meals per month from September through December 2020 at the higher reimbursement rates they identified above.

AAA	Ave Meals/Month	Rate Gap	Funding Needed - 4 Months
CVCOA	21,243	3.65	310,148
NEKCOA	17,813	1.65	117,566
Snr Sol	73,136	1.33	97,271
SVCOA	16,411	0.62	40,699
Total			565,684

*no rate gap at Age Well

- 2) If more federal CRF becomes available, AAAs and VCIL be required to share updated data on people and meals served and funding spent from July 2020 through December 2020 by January 20, 2021 to allow for DAIL and the legislature to review for additional funding needs.
- 3) AAAs be required to work together to develop and conduct a thorough statewide meal cost analysis this fall in collaboration with VCIL, senior centers and meal providers, inclusive of all actual meal costs and be prepared to share this analysis with DAIL by January 1, 2021.
- 4) If additional federal funding is appropriated for OAA programs and COVID-19 response AAAs be required to use a designated portion of this funding for the operation of senior centers and meal sites, and DAIL would put parameters around the funding percentage, usage and reporting.

Long-Term:

DAIL recommends that:

- 1) The State Unit on Aging set a minimum meal reimbursement rate to take effect in FFY22 to address sustainability, quality and efficiency of meal programs across the state. DAIL already sets the meal reimbursement rate for meals served through the grant to VCIL, so this would also build more consistency across the service system.

- a) If the minimum reimbursement rate was set higher than current AAA reimbursement rates or pre-COVID rates, some AAAs and meal providers might not be able to serve as many meals per year. AAAs would likely need to consider prioritizing meals for those in greatest need and offering alternatives such as grocery delivery to others.
- 2) In addition to funding support for meal programs, AAAs be required to designate and distribute a percentage of OAA Title III-B funds or state general funds (to be decided) to support senior centers in their service area beginning in FFY22. Funding will support senior center operations, including meal production, based on need, which will strengthen senior centers' abilities to reduce social isolation and promote health and well-being at the local level.
 - a) Currently, AAAs use III-B funds primarily to support case management services and Information/Assistance/Referral services, with some funding also to support transportation and legal services. State general funds are used across OAA and non-OAA programs. In order to also support senior centers, some funds would need to be redistributed to account for this additional expense.
- 3) The State Emergency Operations Center and the Agency of Human Services work together to ensure that grocery options are accessible (both physical stores and online options), that food delivery be made available using EBT, and that food distribution sites, whether crisis related or long-term) of all kinds be made accessible to people with disabilities, including any outreach/awareness and application materials regarding such programs and sites.

Conclusion:

The AAAs, VCIL and the senior centers and meal providers have all done extraordinary work to ensure that older Vermonters and Vermonters with disabilities have received nutritious meals during the COVID-19 emergency. Centers were forced to close for on-site meals, demand for home-delivered meals suddenly increased, and whole new protocols needed to be put into place quickly to address health and safety for staff, volunteers and participants. It was everyone working together across the state that ensured no vulnerable Vermonter was left hungry and alone. DAIL is proud and full of gratitude for our community partners and providers for this outstanding effort.

There are still many unknowns in the trajectory of COVID-19 in our communities and many older Vermonters and Vermonters with disabilities continue to count on home-delivered meals now more than ever. The federal Families First and CARES Act funding, coupled with regular OAA funding and State General Funds, and the flexibilities allowed for transfers, is currently meeting the need for meals. DAIL anticipates that AAAs and VCIL will be able to serve those in greatest need going forward through this funding, though they will eventually need to adjust rates and participation levels. More

funding could be very beneficial in bolstering the nutrition programs and meal providers given that they have had limited funding for many years.