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Considerations for Future Reopening of Senior Centers and Meal Sites

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary for Senior Centers and Older Americans Act Nutrition Program meal sites to consider different ways to meet the needs of older Vermonters. Many have been working hard to provide meals and other supports to older Vermonters in their homes. As centers consider a future of reopening to provide services and programs in different ways with the same goal of keeping older Vermonters as healthy and independent as possible, it is critical to ensure the safety of program participants, staff and volunteers as well as address the risks of social isolation, malnutrition, and diminished ability to self-manage chronic conditions.

Thinking, planning and preparing now is important for any future reopening, though it is not clear today when Vermont will recommend reopening senior centers and meal sites. This document is not a recommendation to reopen, but rather provides information to support congregate sites in planning efforts.

Sites are and will be required to:

- Adhere to the Governor Scott's Executive Orders for reopening (<https://governor.vermont.gov/covid19response>).
- Meet employer responsibilities, per guidelines from the Agency of Commerce and Community Development (<https://accd.vermont.gov/news/update-new-work-safe-additions-stay-home-stay-safe-order>).
- Meet Department of Health guidance on health and safety (<https://www.healthvermont.gov/response/coronavirus-covid-19>), including:
 - Screening visitors
 - physical distancing, at least six feet apart,
 - minimizing groups to no more than 10 people,
 - staff, volunteers and participants wearing face coverings,
 - prevention hygiene, such as frequently washing hands and using alcohol-based (at least 60% alcohol) hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available; make this available at the site to staff, volunteers and participants,
 - routine cleaning of your site's common areas and high touch areas

To assist sites with screening protocol, which includes taking staff, volunteer and visitor temperatures and asking about symptoms, DAIL is providing one no-contact infrared thermometer for each site that needs one.

These strategies are a must, but they are not the only things reopening relies on. Being creative, working together, looking for new partnerships, adapting, sharing best practices, and communicating changes in policies and procedures, all contribute to providing programs and services that meet the needs of older Vermonters. This is a time when embracing change could never be more important.

Each community is unique, and reopening strategies will vary based on the characteristics of the community and the capacity to implement programs and services. Remember, reopening may not progress as planned by State and local officials or by you. Depending on the transmission of the disease, activities may have to be

scaled up or down at any point. Having plans in place to adjust accordingly will help minimize disruptions in operations and services.

Think of operating broadly: onsite, offsite, inside, outside, and virtually. Physical distancing is a strategy that requires assessment of how buildings and spaces can accommodate keeping people 6 feet or more away from one another. As you make assessments and note the changes you will implement, make sure to share these changes and procedures for physical distancing with staff, volunteers, participants, visitors, caregivers, and the broader community. Describe how it will be implemented across program and service locations. And respond quickly to questions and concerns.

Taking steps to meet the basic emotional and social needs of older Vermonters, both those served for years and those new to your organization, begins with connecting. Use social media, phone calls, video calls, newsletters (electronic and print), community partners, volunteers, paid and free print media to establish, maintain and build connection. Besides communicating opportunities and news, this connection, in and of itself, can help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In addition to the public health strategies required above, consider these steps to plan for a future reopening:

- Assess technological resources, social media, and human resource skill to provide virtual access to programs and services.
- Consider adjusting schedules to reduce interactions and practice physical distancing.
- Require reservations for meals and activities to limit attendees and practice physical distancing.
- Stagger mealtimes or add “seatings,” and move tables and chairs 6 feet apart.
- Consider continuing to-go meals or offering outdoor eating options if possible.
- Post signs to guide flow through spaces and to mark distances of 6 feet wherever people congregate or need to be stationary.
- Think about how to cultivate engagement through the activities, programming and services you offer or plan to offer.
- Share best practices with other sites and learn from peers.
- Communicate clearly and frequently with staff, volunteers, participants and the community about your plans and changes.
- Maintain a daily log of the names of everyone who works at or visits your site.

There are **many** ideas for virtual activities and adaptations to programs. Here is a small sampling:

- Spend time on the phone reading a book, playing games, sharing favorite memories.
- Offer virtual tours of museums, parks, and other points of interest.
- Host small support groups via Zoom or teleconference.
- Offer virtual dining by setting up buddies to eat “together.”

These and more can be found in the additional resources listed at the end of this document.

Thank you for all your efforts to support older Vermonters and your communities during COVID-19. Your hard work and dedication are incredibly important and appreciated. If you have questions about these considerations, please contact Mary Woodruff at the DAIL State Unit on Aging at mary.woodruff@vermont.gov.

Additional Resources

Reopening Guidance for cleaning and disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools and Homes
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

Phased Reopening Guidelines For Senior Nutrition Program Operations During The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency <https://acl.gov/COVID-19>

Evolving Senior Center Toolkit from NCOA <https://d2mkcg26uvglcz.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/Senior-Centers-Connect-final-03272020.pdf>

National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging <https://nutritionandaging.org/>

Addressing Social Isolation for Older Vermonters during the COVID-19 Crisis
<http://www.advancingstates.org/sites/nasuad/files/u24453/Social%20Isolation%20Response%20final.pdf>

COVID-19 Resources for Professionals from NCOA <https://www.ncoa.org/covid-19-resources-for-professionals/>

A collection of signs and symbols to help communicate how you would like people to interact. Includes sign for "social distancing" and for "vulnerable person"

https://www.healthvermont.gov/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/social-distancing-%20sign_01k.pdf

Visit <https://www.healthvermont.gov/response/coronavirus-covid-19> to stay up to date on the most recent information and general guidance.

Thermometer Use instructions: <https://youtu.be/zlIIF4h1sH0>