

Contact information (whoever wants to be the main contact)

LOCAL GROUPS URGE CONTINUED COVID-19 CRISIS OUTREACH TO OLDER ADULTS

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – With older adults accounting for nearly 90 percent of COVID-19 related deaths in North Carolina, and thousands of individuals over the age of 65 socially isolated for almost two months due to the state’s stay-at-home order, a team of Buncombe-area community organizers, agencies, and providers are collaborating to identify and address the aging population’s increased needs during the COVID-19 crisis.

Buncombe County, in collaboration with Buncombe Aging Services Alliance (BASA), is working to distribute information about available community resources promoting safety and social connection for seniors. Collaborators are calling on our community to keep a watchful eye on family, friends, and neighbors and share the following resources with those who need them.

“We fear that older adults who were already experiencing isolation or having a difficult time with aging are at an even greater risk for depression, neglect, or decline as a result of prolonged social distancing,” said Elizabeth Williams, Executive Director of MountainCare, a local agency offering adult care services. “Providers within the aging community have been working hard to serve existing clients in innovative ways. We are now turning our focus towards outreach for folks who are not on our radar.”

Compared with April 2019, there was a 28.4% decrease in reports to the Buncombe County Adult Protective Services registry last month, raising concerns about underreporting in the area. APS is available 24 hours a day to respond to the needs of adults during COVID-19 and can be reached at (828) 250-5800.

According to the National Institute on Aging in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, research has linked social isolation and loneliness to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer’s disease, and even death.

As of May 8th, older adults comprised 86% of COVID-19 related [deaths](#) in North Carolina. Currently more than [16% of COVID-19 cases in the county](#) and 1 in 5 cases state-wide belong to individuals over the age of 65, with concerns that number may increase as more seniors begin to venture out in public during the first phase of reopening. Even with restrictions slowly lifting, the [CDC](#) continues to recommend avoiding exposure by limiting close contact, washing hands frequently, wearing cloth face coverings, and disinfecting touched surfaces.

Heather Bauer, Executive Director of The Council on Aging of Buncombe County (CoA), notes that this high-risk group may not be aware of the services and assistance available to them.

“We wish to ensure basic needs are met, that unnecessary exposure is avoided, such as going to the grocery store, and that those who lack adequate resources are connected to available help,” Bauer said. For instance, CoA offers nutrition services to low- and middle-income older adults through food delivery programs. Staff and volunteers deliver a food bag of shelf-stable items to your door, serving approximately 4 meals per bag. Call 828-277-8288 for details and a brief eligibility screening (must be 60 or older). You can also connect with a resource coordinator for assistance with SNAP applications, Affordable Care Act help, Medicare counseling, and care management. For a full list of services, visit www.coabc.org.

To address social needs, UNCA, UNC Health Sciences at MAHEC, and Healthy Aging North Carolina teamed to develop the Social Bridging Project, a service pairing older adults with trained student volunteers who provide conversation, check-ins, and technology training to help seniors connect socially with friends and loved ones. Volunteers are also able to provide referrals for additional resources if desired. Please leave a message at 828-771-3445 or send an email to Tasha.Woodall@mahec.net to sign-up or for more information.

The [Area Agency on Aging \(AAA\) at Land of Sky Regional Council](#) is encouraging older adults to continue focusing on their general health and disease prevention.

“With so much outside of our control right now, and increased concern for older adults’ health, it’s important to stay vigilant in managing chronic conditions,” said Stephanie Stewart, Land of Sky Regional Council Aging Program Specialist. “By keeping healthy and active at home, older adults can reduce unnecessary medical appointments and feel more in control of their lives and well-being.”

A program through AAA provides tool kits for a self-led chronic disease education program and offers weekly coaching calls with a group of up to four other participants. The tool kit includes a resource book, an exercise CD, and a stress reduction and relaxation CD. If you are interested in learning more about this free program, please call or email Stephanie Stewart at 828-251-7438 or stephanie@landofsky.org.

If you or someone you know is struggling and unsure of where to begin, one recommended starting point is to call 2-1-1, a community information and social services referral line. NC 2-1-1 is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and provides multilingual assistance and TDD/TTY access for those with a hearing impairment.

ADDITIONAL AREA SERVICES FOR OLDER ADULTS:

- [Jewish Family Services of WNC](#) -- Comprehensive services including mental health counseling (accepting Medicare and other insurances), case management, and caregiver support. Call 828-253-2900.
- [Meals on Wheels of Asheville and Buncombe County](#) – Our capacity for meal delivery has increased in response to the pandemic. Please call (828) 253-5286 for more information.
- [MountainCare](#) – Adult care services, grief support counseling, music therapy, wheeled mobility clinic, and Rathbun House. Contact connect@mtncare.org for more information.
- [Mountain Mobility](#) – Transportation for Buncombe County residents. Call (828) 250-6750.
- [YMCA of WNC](#) – health programming, markets and meal programs, and virtual offerings. Call (828) 210-9622.