

COVID-19 AND OLDER ADULTS: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MEALS ON WHEELS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has had a profound effect on older adults in the United States and has increased the need for services and resources for this population. Adults aged 60 and older are at greater risk than the rest of the population of serious illness or death from COVID-19,¹ and these risks increase with age. Older adult-serving organizations have had to shift their services and strategies to meet an increased demand for meal services, including home-delivered meals, during the pandemic.^{2,3} Home-delivered meals can help older adults to stay healthy and continue to live independently in their own homes.

In the Fall of 2020, NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) conducted a study on behalf of Meals on Wheels America as part of its COVID-19 strategic research portfolio. The study explored how COVID-19 had affected older adults (i.e., 60+ years of age); older adults' perceptions of and experiences with Meals on Wheels; how older adults anticipated their behaviors would change as the pandemic evolves; and recommendations for improving Meals on Wheels services. To assess these topics, NORC conducted two data collection activities with adults aged 60 and older: a nationally representative survey with 1,535 respondents and 24 qualitative in-depth interviews.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings from both the survey and in-depth interviews – as detailed in the full *COVID-19 and Older Adults: Research Findings and Implications for Meals on Wheels* report – are explored below in accordance with the key areas of interest of this research effort.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON OLDER ADULTS AGED 60 AND OLDER

The survey and corresponding interviews revealed the deep toll the pandemic has been taking on older adults' well-being. Older adults were feeling lonelier, more isolated and more depressed. Their social connections were suffering, as many had had to put their lives on hold.

- Results from the survey and interviews indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected many aspects of older adults' lives and well-being, including their physical and mental health, social connectedness, volunteer opportunities, employment, use of technology and use of services. In particular, respondents reported that the pandemic had negatively affected their social lives and dramatically increased their feelings of loneliness.
- Fifty-two percent of survey respondents reported being worse off at the time of the survey than they were before the pandemic began.
- More than 9 in 10 survey respondents reported wearing face masks, washing and sanitizing their hands often and keeping six feet distance from those outside their household.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, December 13). Older Adults. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

² Wilson, T.L., Scala-Foley, M., Kunkel, S.R., & Brewster, A.L. (2020). Fast-track innovation: area agencies on aging respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 1-7.

³ Brewster, A.L., Wilson, T.L., Kunkel, S.R., Markwood, S., & Shah, T. (2020, April 8). To Support Older Adults amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic, Look to Area Agencies on Aging. Health Affairs Blog. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200408.928642/full/>

- Most interview respondents reported that they were *more* concerned about the pandemic at the time of the survey than at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, most commonly indicating that the primary cause of their concern was the recent resurgence in COVID-19 cases nationwide.
- Among this population, levels of food insecurity were similar at the time of the survey to pre-pandemic levels. Results from the survey indicated that 16 percent of older adults had received or applied for nutrition assistance via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or a food pantry. Older adults with lower annual household incomes were more than twice as likely as those with higher annual household incomes to report being food insecure in the past 30 days, as were Meals on Wheels clients (25 percent vs. 9 percent of non-clients).
- Results from the survey indicated that there were differential impacts of COVID-19 based on income level, rurality, disability status and living situation. Adults with lower incomes and those living in rural areas were less likely to say they were worse off at the time of the survey than before the pandemic. Older adults who lived alone and those with a functional disability expressed the highest levels of loneliness during the pandemic. Older adults with a lower income were more likely to be food insecure both at the time of the survey and before the pandemic.

OLDER ADULT NEEDS

Levels of need were consistent across the survey and interview components, with some respondents suggesting that they had no unmet needs and others describing a need for specific nutritional, social, home safety or other types of assistance.

- Across the surveys and interviews, older adults reported a variety of unmet needs during the pandemic. The majority of older adults surveyed reported at least one unmet need, but types of needs varies overall and by respondent characteristics. Survey respondents who had a lower income, were Black, were age 75 and older, or lived alone were more likely to report having unmet needs during the pandemic.
- Most commonly, survey respondents reported a need for activities to help keep busy at home and stay socially connected while physically distancing from others.
- Sixty-two percent of survey respondents who said things had gotten worse during the pandemic were also more likely to report having unmet needs. In particular, they were twice as likely to need help staying socially connected.

USE OF SERVICES AND ASSISTANCE

Older adults reported receiving a variety of services and assistance during the pandemic. In particular, findings indicated that informal networks (i.e., a family member, friend, relative or neighbor) had been the primary source of assistance to older adults during the pandemic. Findings also indicated that those who used Meals on Wheels services most frequently received meal-related services.

- Many survey and interview respondents reported receiving help from their informal networks, which had been the primary source of assistance for older adults during the pandemic.
- More than half of survey respondents said that they had applied for or received help from other, more formal sources, such as government health insurance or a health coverage plan.
- Analysis of the survey data found differences in the types of assistance sought based on living situation, race/ethnicity, disability status, income level and age. Adults who lived alone were more likely to report receiving help from family or from someone else, and Black older adults were more likely to report receiving help from volunteers. Adults with a disability and those who were 75 years

or older were more likely to report using ongoing living services or assistance. Adults with lower income or disabilities were more likely to say they had applied for assistance.

- Sixteen percent of survey respondents said they had ever used a Meals on Wheels service. Those respondents who were Black or Hispanic, had a lower income, lived in a rural community or had a disability were more likely to be current clients or to have used Meals on Wheels services in the past.
- Meals on Wheels programs provide frequent in-home visits, which offer opportunities to meet older adults' nutritional needs, combat social isolation and address safety hazards. Many Meals on Wheels programs also manage congregate nutrition sites – such as senior centers – which provide more mobile seniors the opportunity to socialize. The most commonly reported Meals on Wheels service used by interview respondents was meal delivery, and most Meals on Wheels clients interviewed reported using at least one other Meals on Wheels service. Most interview respondents reported that the pandemic had not affected the types of Meals on Wheels services that they used, but there had been changes in how volunteers delivered services.

FACTORS AFFECTING OLDER ADULTS' DECISION TO RESUME PRE-COVID-19 ACTIVITIES

The results of the survey and interviews underscored just how much of an impact the pandemic had on older adults' day-to-day lives. While they had resumed some of their more essential regular activities, such as doctor appointments and grocery shopping, most respondents were hesitant to resume fewer essential activities. When they did leave the home, they took precautions to protect themselves and others. They also questioned whether things would ever return to their pre-pandemic state again.

- The survey and interview data suggested that older adults had put many of their regular activities on hold during the pandemic and expected they would not resume again for quite some time. More than half of interview respondents anticipated that there would be a “new normal” after the pandemic.
- Survey respondents with disabilities were less likely to report resuming their normal pre-pandemic activities; however, they were more likely to say that they used ride sharing services and free ride services.
- The vast majority of survey respondents reported taking actions recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to stay safe during the pandemic. However, rurality was associated with less compliance with CDC guidelines, and adults who lived alone were less likely to take actions to avoid contact with others.
- The survey and interview findings indicated that key factors for improving older adults' comfort with resuming pre-COVID-19 activities included: requirements for the use of face masks, staying at least six feet apart and quarantining after exposure to the coronavirus; widespread testing; a vaccine; and reduced prevalence of COVID-19 in the community.
- Analysis of the survey data found differences in the factors that would affect decision-making about resuming pre-COVID-19 activities based on race/ethnicity. Black and Hispanic survey respondents were more likely to say that temperature checks, widespread testing, social distancing in public places, location tracking and quarantine requirements were essential for them to resume their normal social and economic activities.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES WITH MEALS ON WHEELS

Findings from the survey and interviews suggested broad general awareness and positive perceptions of Meals on Wheels. However, the level of familiarity with Meals on Wheels varied by specific groups of older adults, and awareness of non-meal services and eligibility criteria for receiving services among older adults was limited.

- Findings from the survey and interviews suggested broad general awareness with and positive perceptions of Meals on Wheels. Interview respondents described a number of benefits to using Meals on Wheels services, including nutritional benefits and the ability to enjoy meals safely despite physical limitations (e.g., disability or other health conditions).
- Though majorities of White, Black and Hispanic survey respondents were very or somewhat familiar with Meals on Wheels, a significant minority of Black and Hispanic respondents expressed unfamiliarity. 28 percent of Hispanic older adults and 31 percent of Black older adults said they had only heard of the name Meals on Wheels or had never heard it at all, compared with 15 percent of White older adults.
- Survey respondents most commonly described Meals on Wheels meals as convenient, affordable and nutritious; however, few respondents described the meals as high quality, modern, tasty and as having a good selection. Those who used Meals on Wheels services were more likely than non-clients to have positively described the meals across a variety of attributes, though fewer than half described the meals as modern, appealing, having a good selection or high quality.

ANTICIPATED CHANGES IN NEED FOR AND USE OF SERVICES

Most older adults surveyed and interviewed did not anticipate their use of Meals on Wheels services changing during the pandemic; however, there was less certainty surrounding how older adults planned to address their longer-term needs.

- While most older adults reported that they did not anticipate changes in their use of Meals on Wheels services during the pandemic, 20 percent of survey respondents said that they were likely to use at least one Meals on Wheels service in the coming months. Survey respondents with a lower income were more likely to report that they would use Meals on Wheels services in the next six months.
- Most interview respondents indicated that COVID-19 would not affect their use of Meals on Wheels services; instead, the most commonly cited factors that would precipitate a need for Meals on Wheels services were the potential death of a spouse, deteriorating health and a decrease in self-sufficiency (e.g., inability to drive to the grocery store or prepare a meal).
- Survey respondents with lower incomes were more likely to report that they would accept help with specific services or items related to COVID-19, such as receiving face masks, gloves, and cleaning supplies and grocery deliveries.
- While respondents reported varying levels of comfort with technology, more than two-thirds of survey respondents reported using a smartphone, email and/or a computer at least several times a day. However, Meals on Wheels clients were less likely to report using these technologies several times a day compared to non-clients. While 9 out of 10 older adults said that they expected to continue using technology at their current levels once the pandemic ends, older adults who had a lower income, Black older adults and older adults who had a disability were more likely than others to say they would use their technology less when the pandemic is over.

OLDER ADULTS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING MEALS ON WHEELS SERVICES

Findings suggested that respondents lacked awareness of the diverse Meals on Wheels services available to them, how these services related to their needs and eligibility requirements for using Meals on Wheels services.

- Of those interview respondents who offered recommendations for improving Meals on Wheels services, most focused on improvements to meal offerings (e.g., larger portions, greater choice);

additional services that Meals on Wheels could provide (e.g., more socialization programs, help around the house, transportation services); and improvements to Meals on Wheels' outreach efforts (e.g., efforts to increase awareness of services).

IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Key implications and opportunities for Meals on Wheels identified through this research include:

1. **Expand service offerings or referrals/connections to meet key needs.** Findings suggested an increased need for additional socialization programs and services geared towards reducing loneliness and isolation at this time. There is an opportunity for Meals on Wheels programs to support older adults in connecting with others and meeting their social needs during the pandemic. In addition to socialization services, respondents also expressed an interest in and need for activities to keep busy at home; transportation services; help with household chores (e.g., getting the mail, taking the garbage out, cleaning); grocery shopping assistance; and assistance in planning for longer-term needs that arise. Meals on Wheels programs can help seniors to meet these needs by offering these additional services directly, or they may assist clients to connect with other organizations that provide those services.
2. **Conduct ongoing assessments to identify evolving needs and preferences.** Meals on Wheels programs could benefit from conducting rapid and continuous assessments with Meals on Wheels clients to: identify potential improvements to the quality and appeal of meals; plan expanded meal options so that older adults have greater choice in their meals; identify specific needs and how needs change over time; and identify additional services that would benefit older adults.
3. **Improve partnerships with other older adult-serving organizations.** Increasing and deepening partnerships with other community-based organizations could help to address the diverse needs of older adults and could also support increased awareness of Meals on Wheels services and referrals to Meals on Wheels programs. Based on some of the needs described by respondents, potential partners could include housing authorities, healthcare organizations and transportation providers, among others.
4. **Enhance assistance for informal support networks.** Older adults received support from informal networks and also planned to leverage informal support networks to address future needs. As such, Meals on Wheels programs could support informal networks and improve awareness of and referrals to Meals on Wheels and other services in the community. For example, Meals on Wheels programs could connect client households with agencies that provide respite care or provide supportive services for caregivers.
5. **Plan to continue socially distanced offerings.** Given older adults' concerns about the pandemic, Meals on Wheels programs should not plan to resume or offer new physically close in-person services or activities at this time. Further, when Meals on Wheels programs do resume usual in-person services, they should clearly communicate to older adults the safety procedures and preventive measures that are in place to protect them from exposure to COVID-19. In the meantime, virtual services that leverage technology should consider the need for troubleshooting and technological support for older adults participating in activities and should accommodate individuals with varying levels of technological literacy and access to technology.

6. **Enhance supports and resources for local Meals on Wheels programs.** Due to the continued projected increase in the number of Meals on Wheels clients during the pandemic, local service providers may need additional support in developing the infrastructure and making plans to accommodate the influx of new clients.
7. **Improve awareness and perceptions of Meals on Wheels services.** Findings from the survey and interviews suggested that older adults lacked awareness of the diverse Meals on Wheels services available to them and how these services related to their needs. There was also a lack of awareness about the eligibility requirements for using Meals on Wheels services. The findings showed a need to conduct outreach with Black and Hispanic older adults, who were less likely than White older adults to be familiar with Meals on Wheels. These findings indicate a need to improve awareness of Meals on Wheels offerings – especially non-meal services – and of eligibility criteria for services among clients and non-clients alike, and to combat stigma associated with Meals on Wheels use. There may be opportunities for Meals on Wheels programs to leverage clients’ positive perceptions of and gratitude for Meals on Wheels services to increase use of services and awareness of the variety of benefits to use. Outreach efforts could also focus on how Meals on Wheels services can help meet longer-term needs.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 Older Adults research study and corresponding *COVID-19 and Older Adults: Research Findings and Implications for Meals on Wheels* report offer valuable insights into the needs of, and perceptions held by, older adults who were recipients of Meals on Wheels services both pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as others who were not recipients of any type of Meals on Wheels services. The study dove into how COVID-19 had affected older adults, their needs and their use of services and assistance; factors that would affect their decisions to resume pre-COVID-19 activities; their perceptions and experiences with Meals on Wheels; anticipated changes in their needs for and use of services; and opportunities for improvement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on older adults’ lives and well-being. The findings uncovered through this research exploration presented a number of considerations for Meals on Wheels programs and other community-based organizations that serve older adults to enhance services and address existing unmet need through the evolution of the pandemic and beyond.