



Helping NJ Seniors through Turbulent Times

What Municipalities can do

MELISSA CHALKER, *Executive Director,
NJ Foundation for Aging*



The COVID-19 pandemic has tested our ability to survive and thrive on multiple levels: throughout our nation, around our state, and within our municipalities. Public safety practices, healthcare disparities, transportation troubles, food insecurities, and the future of local businesses have all been impacted by this insidious virus. Our elected and government officials have had to model resiliency, thinking on their feet in response to ever-shifting virus protocols and their impact on the communities they serve.

From the moment that the coronavirus infiltrated our nation and our news media, one population in particular received negative attention: older adults. We repeatedly heard references that the virus “only impacts old people” or “only the elderly die from COVID-19.” Sadly, these remarks reinforce ageism that runs rampant in our society, branding the older generation as disposable entities. Also, sadly, over time, the virus has had an impact on individuals of all ages.

But for now, we must focus on the immediate crisis at hand: helping seniors age well amidst a “new” normal.

As news of the pandemic and its toll spread throughout our state, our vulnerable seniors—particularly those with underlying conditions who were told to stay home and avoid contact with others—wondered how they would get food, medications, and other supplies. Food pantries and other programs saw a tremendous jump in calls from seniors who didn’t want to, or

couldn't, go out to the stores to purchase needed food. Many seniors had never reached out for help before.

When New Jersey first enacted the "stay at home" order back in March, aging service providers were faced with what could have been a life-or-death question: "How do we get services to our seniors?"

Senior centers and nutrition sites were required to shutter their doors, and providers scrambled to find ways to ensure older adults who relied on those programs for meals, still ate every day.

Stepping Up to the "Plate"

Using creative problem solving, forging partnerships, and calling upon volunteers for help, an army of municipal, county, and regional-based service providers jumped into action and helped seniors receive nutritious meals while maintaining safe social distancing.

- The Piscataway Township Office on

Aging provided Meals on Wheels service to older adults who had previously been enjoying onsite meals at the center.

- Age Friendly Ridgewood shifted to providing frozen meals to seniors in need.

We must focus on the immediate crisis at hand: helping seniors age well amidst a "new" normal.

- The South Plainfield Senior Center noted that in the beginning, it was difficult for seniors to get such staples as toilet paper, laundry detergent, milk, eggs, and bread. The center had a surplus of supplies, which they shared,

and a partnership with the local Shop Rite enabled them to provide additional supplies. Additionally, they're also providing "drive-by" meals where, for example, seniors drove through an Italian theme-decorated area for meatball sandwiches to-go, and in July it was a cook-out theme. In a time when everyone was feeling low, doing something fun and interesting not only provided a meal but also a smile.

- SOMA Two Towns for All Ages (South Orange/Maplewood) did bulk food shopping for low-income seniors in independent living. Plus, they arranged to purchase fresh produce from a restaurant supplier who was seeking business when all the restaurants closed, helping both seniors in need and supporting a local business.
- To address food insecurity in their town, Lifelong Montclair partnered with a local soup kitchen to distribute



Roll-Off Dumpster Services

Give us a call for a Free Estimate

(908) 421-1493

Visit us online

www.ChristensenRecycling.com

Find Us On!



@ChristensenRecycling

bags of groceries and prepared foods to older residents. Financial need is not a requirement to participate. The local Kiwanis chapter has been coordinating drivers to distribute the food, and local businesses and organizations have donated their time and resources.

Staying in Touch

Providers also were also extremely concerned about seniors suffering the ill effects of social isolation. Programs such as telephone reassurance calls and well checks were revitalized in such areas as Piscataway and South Plainfield. Towns and organizations throughout the state searched for volunteers who could make phone calls and have friendly chats to check in with older adults.

Active senior centers that traditionally offer a variety of in-person classes and activities were also worried about their older adults who would be stuck at home for an extended period. Alternate methods of delivering programs came to mind.

- Many kept in touch with their seniors via weekly email blasts filled with helpful resources, and daily Facebook posts.
- The Piscataway Senior Center is fortunate to have a relationship with their municipal TV station, which assisted them in filming exercise and dance classes—even a video on how to make a mask—for seniors to watch at home. They also filmed a greeting from the Senior Center staff to let participants know they were missed.
- The Township of Livingston offered 14 online fitness classes via Zoom, which also enabled seniors and even young adults to see and chat with their friends before and after class. They even created theme weeks and had participants dress for the occasions. Livingston also started offering free online guided meditation classes to the entire community.
- SOMA also provided content to seniors via Zoom, such as music and

In Your Town



Here are some ways that municipalities can further support their seniors and those who serve them:

- Include older adults in community activities and encourage their active participation in town meetings.
- Adopt age-friendly or livability initiatives to meet the needs of older residents. Lifelong Montclair is one example. AARP and WHO websites provide more information about these movements.
- Advocate for additional state and federal funding for senior services.
- Create an opportunity for older adults to share their views on community-wide issues.
- Sponsor multigenerational programs.

fitness classes, and reports having a had higher turnout for online fitness than they did in person!


- Lifelong Montclair converted the Montclair Institute for Lifelong Learning classes to Zoom for the semester. The institute's classes range from tai chi and chair yoga to philosophy and Zen art. The Montclair Public Library hosted virtual drop-in sessions to help students become familiar with and set up Zoom. They've also been helping staff with technical assistance.
- Ridgewood Public Library, though closed, helped to meet the needs of residents by offering numerous online services and access to librarians, including sessions on how to use Zoom.
- South Plainfield, in keeping with their "drive-by" theme, offered a weekly book and puzzle mobile and distributed more than 650 masks as well.

Here and There

With local buses and senior bus service suspended, some towns recognized the need to address transportation issues for their older residents.

- SOMA turned to GoGo Grandparent, an online concierge service that helps older adults book ride sharing services.
- For residents who relied heavily on the senior bus service, the Village of Ridgewood financed the services of a local business that provided transportation and would shop and deliver groceries.
- Others continued providing transportation for shopping and medical visits, with drivers wearing masks and disinfecting vehicles after each trip.

These are just a small fraction of the behind-the-scenes stories of unsung heroes who morphed into essential workers to care for the needs of our

seniors. Local officials should take pride in their communities' response. 

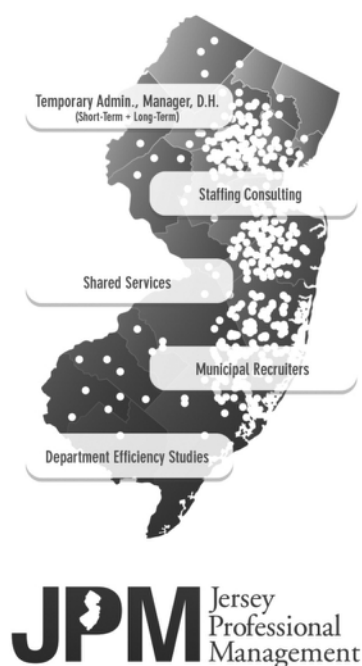
Licensed Social Worker Melissa Chalker is chair of the Aging Specialty Practice Committee for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). She joined the nonprofit New Jersey Foundation for Aging (NJFA) in 2008 and was appointed Executive Director in 2018. She's also the host of Aging Insights, an award-winning monthly half-hour TV program promoting dialogue on critical issues for seniors, which can be seen on more than 70 public access stations as well as <http://njfoundationforaging.org/aging-insights>.

Reference Links:

Here are links for AARP and WHO which are referenced in the text:

<https://livabilityindex.aarp.org>

www.who.int/ageing/projects/age-friendly-cities-communities/en



Jersey Professional Management

5.0 ★★★★★ 8 reviews



Mayor John McCormac
Township of Woodbridge

★★★★★
JPM helped us hire two members of our Senior Management Team and handled everything tremendously.



Mayor Thomas Andes
Township of Denville

★★★★★
Dan and his team at JPM were instrumental in recruiting exactly the right person as our first Executive Director of our newly created Business Improvement District.



Mayor Fred Tagliarini
Township of Aberdeen

★★★★★
JPM provided an outstanding Temporary DPW Director, and completed an outstanding Efficiency Study of our DPW.



Mayor Beth Holtzman
City of Ventnor

★★★★★
Best decision we made; Maria Mento and Joe Verruni are very knowledgeable and always accessible.



Stephen Mountain
Manager, Township of Randolph

★★★★★
JPM was very responsive to our needs and utilized a process that was fair and organized. They helped us select the best professional for the position.



Mayor Richard Onderko
Borough of Manville

★★★★★
Best Municipal Government Advisors I've met in 10 years in elected office. Helped us recruit a fantastic Administrator. Thanks Dan and JPM.



George Jackson
Administrator, Borough of Eatontown

★★★★★
JPM's thorough recruitment and selection process led us to just the experienced professional we were looking for.



Mayor Dina Long
Borough of Sea Bright

★★★★★
One of the best decisions we made after Sandy was bringing experienced professionals from JPM onto our team. Joe Verruni and Debbie Smith provided the expertise and guidance we needed to navigate the recovery and rebuilding.

For more testimonials, visit jerseyprofessionalmgmt.com/testimonials • 908-276-2777 • jpm@jerseyprofessionalmgmt.com