

VIRGINIA

Department for Aging and
Rehabilitative Services

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Website:

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Number of AAAs:

25

No Wrong Door Partners:

228

In fact, one member in Greene County exclaimed, at the end of a bingo call, *I feel like I am sitting at the table in the Center with all of you, and I feel so happy.*

COVID-19: Creative and Promising Social Connectedness Practices

April 2020

Throughout the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, Virginia's 25 area agencies on aging (AAAs) are [supporting, assisting, and engaging with the Commonwealth's older adults](#) as they stay at home. This paper was developed by [DARS Division for Community Living](#) through interviews, conversations, and a statewide survey reflecting a 100% response rate from our AAAs. We hope this sharing of ideas that have emerged from local communities will inspire new partnerships and creative solutions.



It Takes a Village

The Longevity Project is a university-community collective impact initiative led by [Senior Connections](#), the [Capital Area Agency on Aging](#), and [Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Gerontology](#). In response to increased experiences of social isolation among older adults in the Richmond, Virginia metro area, the Longevity Project is convening a standing virtual meeting between aging services organizations and regional funders to identify patterns of social isolation, COVID-exacerbated health inequities, and emerging best practices. Simultaneously, the Longevity Project is undertaking regional social connectedness assessment that will include surveying and interviewing of older adults, family members, and service providers, as well as [No Wrong Door](#) data analysis. Likewise, at a time when many more people are seeking nutrition services, some who are OAA-eligible and some not, [Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services](#) (Rapp Rap) is communicating with local foundations to close the food access gap. Rapp Rap reports that coordination across service sectors and the community response have been phenomenal. As an example of another creative community partnership, [Mountain Empire Older Citizens](#) is collaborating with their local community college to have nursing students place wellness calls with older adults to discuss general health questions. Also, [Bay Aging's](#) Helping Neighbors Initiatives, throughout the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula is partnering with nine area restaurants to provide meals while supporting local businesses.



An Outpouring of Support

Around the state older adults recognize that AAA staff and volunteers are there for them. It's rewarding for our AAAs to hear thanks such as from a Rapp Rap client who said, "I am so touched with what you all are doing for all of us! Last week I received a wonderful Easter basket with a bunch of goodies, games, information, and a beautiful card. I never expected all of this and am so grateful." Nestled between Virginia's Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains, [New River Valley Agency on Aging](#) is busy delivering fresh veggies, shelf stables, cleaning supplies, and paper products in biweekly deliveries. Through weekly phone calls, staff and volunteers check on food and basic needs and also connect with residents. These calls encourage both staff and home-delivered meal clients. Just to the northeast, in another of Virginia's beautiful mountain valleys, [Shenandoah Area Agency on Aging](#) is partnering with the local United Way and Mercury Paper to make sure older adults have toilet paper and paper towels. These deliveries often move residents to tears. Next, Shenandoah plans to surprise their clients with a car parade. Along the Maury River, [Valley Program for Aging Services'](#) clients are receiving vegetable seeds and Information for planting - an activity that inspires hope!

COVID-19: Creative and Promising Social Connectedness Practices April 2020

If you wash your hands
And wear a mask on your face
The world would be a better place!

So have a heart
Stand six feet apart
And understand when
I don't shake your hand!

Let's be wise
Don't rub your eyes
Always remember to sanitize!

We can kick this virus
Out the door
And get our lives back once more.

Pauline Menefee
Rapp Rap, participant

For more Information contact:
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High Tech and High Touch

In Virginia, myriad technology applications are facilitating social connectedness. For example, [Bay Aging](#) is connecting with residents over Skype and Face Time. Other AAAs report conducting exercise classes, musical events, and cooking classes via Zoom and Facebook Live.

Our AAAs are lighting up the telephone wires, too, with BINGO, friendly checks, and phone-based lifelong learning. At [Piedmont Senior Resources](#), telephone bingo is popular with older adults in the rural Heart of Virginia region. Similarly, in the foothills of Virginia's blue ridge mountains, staff at the [Jefferson Area Board for Aging](#) (JABA) report that telephone bingo is a favorite among their clients, as well. In fact, one member in Greene County exclaimed, at the end of a bingo call, "I feel like I am sitting at the table in the Center with all of you, and I feel so happy."

The Longevity Project and the County of Henrico's Advocate for the Aging Office have joined forces to launch a phone-based lifelong learning program called EngAGE, which after its first week has a waiting list of older adults eager to connect and learn with each other by telephone.

While technology has its place in helping to stay connected, so do time-honored traditions like hand-drawn pictures and cards. [Appalachian Agency for Senior Citizens](#) has added an intergenerational flourish to their home-delivered meals program with the inclusion of art and notes from children enrolled in their day care program.



Elder Voices of Wisdom

Before COVID-19, during, and after one thing will never change. This work is not about giving but about care. Social connectedness may sprout when a meal is delivered or a phone call made, but where connectedness grows is in the exchange between and among caring people. We are learning from our elders that caring will find a way through, even as we are asked to stay physically apart. All across Virginia, older adults are reciprocating connection, support, and care. For example, out in Culpeper County - Virginia's horse country - Pauline Menefee, a [Rapp Rap](#) participant, shared her creativity and humor via a poem crafted to encourage all of us to stay safe and motivated to fight COVID-19. As elders offer wisdom, reassurance, and poetry, staff and volunteers often feel comforted when they hear, "We are safe, so we are good, and this, too, shall pass."