



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

April 28, 2020

County Service Providers Get Creative to Help Seniors

Traverse City, MI – Since Monday, March 16, 2020, the five Grand Traverse County Senior Center Network locations have been closed and all programming, including the congregate meal program, suspended. The Senior Center Network provides recreational programming and meals to seniors in Traverse City, Acme, Fife Lake, Kingsley, and Interlochen. On March 20, 2020, the Grand Traverse County Commission on Aging (COA) suspended all but the essential services it provides to its high-risk clients. Both departments temporarily stopped most services due to the Governor's executive orders related to COVID-19.

Commission on Aging employees who once provided homemaker services (housecleaning, laundry, meal preparation, and more) were pulled from the field, and the weekday work of Senior Center Network employees staffing programs and events suddenly ceased.

"It was time to get creative in our approach to serving seniors," said Senior Center Network Manager Lori Wells, "especially because isolation can be a serious health threat to them." Once the stay-at-home order prompted by COVID-19 was issued by the Governor, the Senior Center Network and Commission on Aging partnered to provide "new" services to seniors. Now, using County-issued cell phones, 27 staff from both departments are working from home to reach out to and check on 6,000 senior residents. An average of 125 seniors still receive home health services on a weekly basis, and both Senior Center and COA clients have been identified as needing assistance with grocery shopping and prescription pick-up, all being provided by COA staff.

Some of the seniors who have received wellness-check or "reassurance" phone calls, say they are "a godsend", as staff ask questions to determine their physical and mental well-being, and make referrals to those in need. When a senior expresses some basic needs, staff immediately offer to help. "We have staff to shop for them, and deliver food and basic supplies, as requested," said Wells. Referrals to the COA's social worker have consistently increased as the weeks pass. Said COA Director Cindy Kienlen, "This is indicative of mounting psychosocial needs among seniors due to the extended time in isolation."

While telephone outreach is a newly acquired skill for some employees, Kienlen says it is a "natural extension" of their commitment to clients. "Commission on Aging workers are heroes year-round, who make sacrifices to support their clients like it's a normal part of their job," she explained. "They deliver a holiday meal from their home to someone who lives alone. They intuitively know when a client is in need, and meet that need without having to be asked. They care for their clients like they are family."

Since March 23, over 7,300 reassurance calls have been made to seniors in Grand Traverse County. Senior Center Network Office Clerk Jacquie Wilson who, along with Commission on Aging staff, has been making calls during the past five weeks described her experience calling seniors as "gratifying". "When I call and ask how they [seniors on the call list] are doing, I can actually hear them smiling, and they are so grateful when I ask what they might need." According to Wilson, responses are as unique and varied as the people she calls. Some say,

"You're the first person I'm not related to that's calling!" Others, she said, will sigh, and often such a response is followed by a poignant conversation. "Sometimes I'm the only person they've spoken to in three, four, even five weeks."

An ongoing concern, says Wells, is that seniors are too fearful to go out for regularly scheduled healthcare appointments during the pandemic and under the Governor's Executive Orders. Said Wells, "We want to assure seniors that if they have any health concerns or are skipping regular healthcare appointments during this time, many providers are open for business." She urges seniors to call ahead and providers will give guidance.

Any Grand Traverse County resident who is 60 years of age and over may be put on the call list, upon request, by calling 231-922-4911. Those who are on the list can expect to hear from staff at least a few times each month or more frequently, if requested.

Other services being provided to seniors include distributing weekly packages to seniors in a "drive-up-and-drop" fashion in Traverse City, Fife Lake, Kingsley, and Interlochen. Since March 25, 122 seniors have received a total of 1,515 meals. Five frozen meals per person are prepared and provided by Meals on Wheels. To register, call 231-922-4911.

Munson Bereavement is offering teleconference calls for grief support, weekly on Tuesdays at 11 a.m. To join the group and receive instructions for doing so, write an e-mail to HospiceBereavement@mhc.net or call 800-252-2065.

To help keep seniors active, the Senior Center Network has five pre-recorded exercise classes being broadcast on Community Media TV and available on line at all times at www.grandtraverse.org/SCN. According to Wells, the response has been tremendous.

Now, under the latest Executive Order from the Governor, Kienlen says that COA lawn services for clients have resumed. The COA also will resume providing house cleaning services to clients, many of whom have gone two months without essential cleaning or clothes laundering. According to the Commission on Aging Director, all homemaker aides will take every precaution to keep their clients and themselves safe.

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