

Vermont Senior Centers

Supporting Social Connectedness through Food, Friends
and Fostering Opportunity

Report of Survey Results and Recommendations
September 2019

Survey conducted by
the State Unit on Aging of the Department of Disabilities,
Aging and Independent Living

Contact:
Angela Smith-Dieng
Acting Adult Services Division Director
(802)-241-0309
Angela.smith-dieng@vermont.gov

Executive Summary

Many people think of senior centers as the place where frail elders go to eat and play bingo. But that old image of senior centers is not the reality in many places in Vermont. Vermont senior centers are a vibrant network of agencies offering a diversity of opportunities to engage older Vermonters, support healthy aging, and prevent social isolation. These senior centers are essential in the state's effort to prevent or delay institutionalization. Together with the five Area Agencies on Aging and the broader aging services network, they serve thousands of older Vermonters with nutritious meals, wellness activities, and social events at little or no cost to participants. With a growing national understanding of the importance of social connectedness for health outcomes and quality of life, the role that senior centers play in our communities becomes even more critical.

The Older Americans Act, federal legislation which funds a variety of supportive services for older Vermonters, calls on states and communities to develop and promote the use of "multipurpose senior centers" to maximize collocation of supports and services for older people, especially those "in greatest economic and social need." Within Vermont's current State Plan on Aging, the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) has identified the need to strengthen a high-quality, sustainable network of centers that can meet the growing and changing needs of older Vermonters.

DAIL conducted a survey of senior centers in July 2018 and again in July 2019. The following pages outline the results of the 2019 survey. Key highlights include:

- 31 senior centers (74%) responded to the survey.
- Senior Centers who responded to the survey are serving over 13,000 older Vermonters annually.
- Over 65% of senior centers are open Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and most centers serve people from multiple towns.
- Senior centers offer a wide range of activities and services to promote socialization, health and well-being. In addition to nutritious meals, 87% offer exercise classes and 87% offer health and wellness education. 70% offer recreational activities and organized trips.
- Senior centers provide communities with a significant return on investment. Most operate with an average of two staff and median budgets of \$133,000, but with the dedicated help of dozens of volunteers, offer a wealth of services to older Vermonters that support healthy aging. Volunteers are foundational to their success.
- Partnerships and collaborations are a key to sustainability – In addition to partnering with Area Agencies on Aging, thriving senior centers are partnering with financial institutions and foundations, farmers, chefs, and grocery stores,

schools, hospitals, small businesses and towns/municipalities. They are developing multigenerational programming, expanded meal choices, and are breaking down the walls of the center in the community.

The survey also points to some key challenges faced by Vermont's senior centers. It is telling that the same critical challenges identified in 2018 remain at the forefront for senior centers in 2019 as well. The most common challenges and concerns identified include:

- Limited budgets and limited ability to bring in new revenue, preventing centers from hiring staff, diversifying offerings and providing transportation to participants.
- An aging staff and volunteer network; limited ability to recruit new and younger staff and volunteers
- Difficulty addressing the needs and desires of multiple generations of older Vermonters; in other words, how can centers provide a welcoming, engaging senior center for older Vermonters from age 60 to 100?
- How to reframe the conversation around healthy aging, address the stigma associated with a "senior center" as a place for the "elderly," and increase participation overall.

To meet the needs of a growing and changing older cohort of Vermonters, senior centers need the support of the State, Area Agencies on Aging, towns and municipalities, business sector, healthcare systems, and local communities. Recognizing the significant cost of social isolation on our health and human services systems in the long-term, we all have a role to play in supporting these front lines providers of healthy aging supports, whether it be through coordination, technical assistance, financial support or volunteerism.

DAIL remains committed to seeking creative solutions to support the sustainability and transformation of senior centers in Vermont. We continue to work to:

- Raise awareness about the critical link between preventing isolation and strengthening senior centers, including the work being done at centers currently to address social isolation and support healthy aging,
- Support senior center leaders in the field to develop tools and resources, such as a toolkit of best practices and innovations for the network,
- Include the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP) in statewide efforts to bring attention to older Vermonters' needs and contributions, and
- Advocate with various entities for more sustainable support for senior centers.

Survey Development and Distribution

The 2019 Senior Engagement Survey was developed, circulated, and analyzed by staff of the DAIL State Unit on Aging, and was reviewed and revised by the VASCAMP steering committee.

The purpose of the survey was to build upon information yielded from similar surveys conducted in 2014 and 2018, to analyze trends, changes, challenges, and opportunities and to better understand the current capacity and needs of the network of Vermont senior centers. The survey collected information regarding governance, programming, meals, staffing, volunteers and transportation.

The survey was distributed in July 2019 to 42 identified senior centers across Vermont, 31 by email and 11 by mail. Of those sent, 31 were returned, a 74% return rate, and an increase from 2018 when 28 of 46 centers responded. Both mailed and emailed surveys were identical, with 47 questions organized into 8 sections. Those who completed the survey were primarily senior center Directors, Executive Directors, Assistant Directors, and Program Managers.

The following pages include a break-down analysis of the data yielded from the survey.

Participation and Access

How many unduplicated older Vermonters are served annually?

Senior Centers reported serving a total of over 13,066 older Vermonters annually. This is a slight decrease from the total reported in 2018, which may in part be due to the closing of two centers (Gilman Senior Center in Gilman and Missiquoi Valley Senior Center in Newport Center, and the lack of response from a couple centers which had reported significant numbers of people served in 2018. The range of unduplicated older Vermonters annually served ranged from 25 to 2,500, showing the significant variation in senior center reach across the state.

How do senior centers track participants?

65% use sign-in sheets for meals and activities, and 16% keep track based on how many newsletters are mailed out, how many households meals are delivered to, or how many people attend congregate meals. The percentage of centers who reported using online resources like *RecTrac*, www.myseniorcenter.com, and Google Docs increased from 18% in 2018 to 35% in 2019.

What days of the week are senior centers open?

Over 60% of senior centers are open Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Almost 55% of senior centers are open Monday through Friday. Only 6% are open throughout the week plus at least one day over the weekend, no centers reported being open seven days a week. Just 3% of senior centers have hours limited to less than three days a week.

How many towns do senior centers serve?

The vast majority of senior centers, or 83%, serve between three and ten towns; while 10% reported serving over fifteen. One senior center reported serving seniors from a total of 22 Vermont towns.

Budgets and Revenue

What are senior centers' annual operating budgets?

Senior center budgets vary significantly and impact how much programming they can offer, how many meals they can provide, how many employees they can pay, and whether or not they can provide any sort of transportation for participants.

Analysis of the survey data showed that Vermont senior centers have drastically varying annual operating budgets (AOB). Of those reported, annual budgets ranged from \$7,000-\$650,000. The average AOB was \$133,000, although that number is higher than over 45% of senior centers in the state. That average also represents a 16% decrease from the average reported in 2018 (\$159,000).

The results showed that almost 39% of senior centers had an AOB less than \$100,000 and 26% had an AOB less than \$55,000. Six senior centers are funded through municipal and town recreational budgets, so their AOB is lower, although the real cost would not be represented with reported AOB.

When asked what the biggest challenges of their centers were, 60% of respondents mentioned challenges related to the costs of operating their facility, paying their employees, or funding overall. This is up from 36% in 2018.

What are the most popular sources of revenue?

Centers were asked to rank revenue sources from greatest to least, and the options provided were:

- Town department funding (for example, part of a Parks and Rec department budget)
- Funding from towns served solicited via town meeting day petition
- Donors/events
- Participant contributions

- Area Agency on Aging contract
- Foundation grants
- Some other source of revenue

The most popular reported sources of revenue were:

1. Area Agency on Aging Contract
2. Funding from towns served
3. Participant Contributions

Governance

What form of decision-making body do senior centers utilize?

77% of senior centers utilize a board of directors, while 16% utilize an advisory board or council.

Do senior centers have 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status and are they incorporated?

77% of centers indicated that they had 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status and 79% of those are incorporated. In total, 61% of senior centers indicated that they were incorporated.

Services and Programming

Do senior centers have membership fees and are they based on residency status?

About 23% of senior centers have membership fees. The cost of membership fees ranged from \$5 to \$50 a year. One senior center reported that their membership fees ranged from \$15 to \$50 based on participant town of residency.

What activities and services are offered at senior centers?

Social	97%
Exercise classes	87%
Health/wellness education	87%
Educational speakers	77%
Health screenings or clinics	71%
Recreational	68%
Arts and crafts	67%
Organized trips	54%

Educational classes	32%
Legal/financial assistance	29%
Online learning/computer classes	25%
Cooking classes	23%
Other	19%
None	0%

In the 2018 survey respondents were asked to elaborate on what activities or services they considered to belong to each category. Most senior centers mentioned that all of their activities promoted socialization and could fall under the “social” category. This included but was not limited to: sing-a-long live music, dancing, food socials, holiday parties, Christmas tree decorating, TED talks and subsequent reflections, talks on current events, card and board games, luaus, beach parties, knitting, bingo, and coffee hours.

Over 87% of returned surveys indicated that their senior center offered ‘exercise classes. These often include a combination of tai chi, chair yoga, or bone builders. Other activities offered at some centers include jazzercise, marital arts/self-defense, snowshoeing, stand-up paddleboard lessons for seniors, stretching, qi gong, water aerobics, and pickle ball.

Arts and crafts is one of the more popular categories of programming offered at many Vermont senior centers, including painting, knitting/crocheting, jewelry making, birdhouse painting, adult coloring, photography, drawing, pottery, expressive arts, journaling, quilting, and wood working.

Most respondents indicated that their senior center had consistent organized trips for their participants.

Most senior centers, 67%, reported offering recreational activities to their participants, such as sports, tai chi, Wii bowling, boating, hiking, bird-watching, kayaking, indoor walking, singing groups, hydro massage, walks around town, dancing, pickle ball, tennis, ping pong, whiffle ball, softball, bocce ball, basketball, swimming, and horseshoes. Educational speakers are also readily utilized by senior centers on a wide variety of topics.

Who leads activities at senior centers?

100% of centers reported that they use volunteers to lead activities. Only 45% of respondents reported that paid staff led activities. 48% reported that they used outside organizations or experts to lead their activities. One senior center reported that members of their Board of Directors led activities.

If resources were not an issue, what programs would senior centers like to add?



The responses for this question were relatively similar year to year. Most common answers included: Daily transportation to and from center, transportation for trips, free programming, expanded operation hours, cooking classes, more health and dental screenings, more foot clinics, yoga, and tai chi. Some senior centers reported that they would like to add recreational activities like snowshoeing, kayaking, water aerobics, swimming, and hunting. One senior center mentioned that they would like to have a Medicare and insurance counselor on staff. Other centers mentioned that they would like to add a family movie night and mental health/emotional support groups. Additional answers included: well-being checks, consistent congregate meals, onsite LNAs/RN, onsite psychology/counseling professional, more music performers, legal clinics, and a big-screen television for their center.

Meals

Are meals offered at senior centers?

77% of senior centers offer meals at least once a week. The most common day where participants are offered meals across the state is Wednesday at 64%. Tuesday is the second most common day at 58% followed by Monday and Friday, 54%, and Thursday came in at 48%. Survey data showed that 9% of senior centers did not offer any meals.

How many meals per day are offered?

Most senior centers offer only one meal per day, but most would like the option to provide more as meals are often the most popular service provided by senior centers. Centers cited financial barriers as challenges in expanding their meal programs.

Do senior centers have contracts with Area Agencies on Aging to provide meals?

Of all respondents, 64% indicated that they had a contract with an Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

How much do meals cost?

Per Older Americans Act rules, a meal provider cannot require that a person age 60 or older pay for meals but must offer the person the opportunity to contribute to the cost of the meal. Most centers have a suggested donation amount for meals. Nearly 69% had a suggested donation from \$4 to \$5 for those age 60 or older. For those under age 60, 82% had a meal price between \$5 and \$7.50. There was some variation reported. For example, one senior center had a price of \$8 for monthly dinners and offers free lunch and brunch. For most of Vermont senior centers, donations supplement the cost of providing meals but do not cover total costs, and centers must fundraise to make up the difference.

Are there choices in meals, medically tailored meals, meals for special diets or home delivered meals?

Only 20% of returned surveys indicated that participants had choices in their meals. 20% reported having a vegetarian option. Most centers make some sort of accommodation for some special dietary restrictions. About 28% of senior centers offering meals reported that they made accommodations for diabetics, 17% for participants adhering to a gluten free diet, 10% for low sodium diets, and 10% said they offered soft or pureed options.

About 48% of responding senior centers reported that they offered home-delivered meals.

Do senior centers partner with local farms, grocery stores, or vendors?

Close to 29% of senior centers partner with a local farm in some capacity and 41% partner with local grocery stores or vendors. Although they were not asked to elaborate, some senior centers indicated that they received donations from local restaurants and stores for their meal programs.

Staff and Volunteers

How many paid staff members are working at senior centers, what are their roles and how many hours do they work?

22% of senior centers reported that they had paid staff of four or more, and this was the highest number of paid staff reported. About 38% reported having two-three paid staff, the most common number reported. Nearly 13% stated that they did not employ a single paid staff member.

The most common paid staff positions are administrators and kitchen/food preparation staff. Most administrators do multiple jobs. Many of them help with transportation, meals, maintenance, activities, meals on wheels coordinating and volunteer recruiting, among other duties. The average number of hours that administrators work is 30 hours a week, although many reported working over 40 hours. The average number of hours that kitchen staff work is 26 hours a week and 27 hours a week for activity personnel. Due to financial constraints, most staff members end up performing multiple job duties over numerous hours.

How many volunteers do senior centers utilize, how old are they, and how many hours do they volunteer?

Most senior centers that responded have a volunteer base that ensure programs run smoothly and meals are served. In many cases, senior centers would not be able to operate without volunteers. The lowest number of volunteers reported was one and the

highest was over 180. 42% of senior centers have a weekly volunteer base between 10 and 50 people. Most volunteers serve between 0 and 5 hours a week, in total the senior centers who participated in this survey reported over 70,000 volunteer hours provided annually.

Most volunteers at senior centers are over 55 years old. The average age of volunteers at senior centers is between 65 and 75 years old.

How are volunteers recruited at senior centers?

Most centers (83%) recruit volunteers by word of mouth. Additionally, many volunteers are recruited by using their local Front Porch Forum, 54%, and Senior center Newsletter, 51%. Social media posts have proven to be a decent volunteer recruitment tool with almost 48% of respondents reporting that they use the social platforms for volunteer recruitment. Very few volunteers are recruited because of radio or television ads, 10%. Other forms of volunteer recruitment include newspaper ads, sign-up sheets at senior centers, and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP).

Transportation

Do senior centers provide transportation to and from their facilities?

48% of senior center respondents reported that they provided transportation for their participants. This is an increase from 37% in 2018. 52% do not, which is a decrease from 63% in 2018. The survey did not ask for details regarding how transportation was provided (for example, was it through volunteer drivers, a town or senior center owned vehicle or via contract with a transit provider); this may be something to explore in future surveys.

Are there regional transit stops at or near senior centers?

54% of senior centers reported that there was a regional transit stop at or near their facility. There was not a significant correlation between having a regional transit stop at or near a facility and number of older Vermonters served annually; nor was there a correlation between a regional transit stop and the senior center budget.

How strongly do transportation barriers impact participation?

Almost 68% of senior centers reported that transportation barriers impact participation “a great deal”, while 19% reported that it either impacts participation “a little” or “a moderate amount”. Both rural and urban areas feel the impact of inadequate transportation. When asked what the biggest challenges for their centers were, many senior centers reported that transportation issues, including parking, were a concern.

Publication of Programs and Activities

How do senior centers publicize their programs and activities?

The most common method of publicizing programs and activities was by word of mouth, at 80%, followed by newspaper advertisements at 77%, Front Porch Forum and flyers/posters at 74%, newsletters and social media at 67%, and senior center websites at 54%. Other methods of publicizing programs and activities were seasonal program guides, quarterly program schedule releases, and monthly calendars.

Challenges and Successes

What are the biggest challenges of operating a senior center?

The most commonly reported challenges had to do with financing, transportation, and space. Many senior centers feel that if they had a bigger budget, they would be able to provide more programming, more trips, and more meals for their participants in addition to being able to hire more full-time staff.

Many senior center directors voiced concerns about their aging volunteer base and staff and worry about program sustainability. Many senior centers face challenges recruiting younger participants (age 60-70), while struggling to meet the needs of their oldest participants (85-100) and an aging population as a whole.

Most senior centers reported challenges in publicizing their events, programs, and activities. One senior center mentioned that one of their challenges is in grant writing, a key potential revenue source for senior center growth.

Most senior centers have some participants with extremely low incomes and worry that their suggested donations or membership fees may deter participation.

What are the greatest successes?

Nearly every senior center reported how amazing it is to see seniors out of the house engaging with peers. They love the laughter, comradery, and socialization that occurs within their walls. Successful senior center directors are proud of their reputation around their communities and as leaders in their field. Many senior centers have seen significant growth in recent years in terms of activities, participation, and meal attendance. Some senior centers have even expanded in recent years.

The senior centers that are able to provide organized trips are incredibly proud for their accomplishments and the lives that they've impacted.

The smaller senior centers love some of the things they've observed including: participant weight loss, improvements in behavior, and the growth of their centers.

Conclusion

Social isolation has become a key area of focus for the federal and state government a growing body of research shows the impacts of isolation and loneliness on the health and well-being of older people. Senior centers have a critical role to play in our communities to combat social isolation and increase social connectedness. This becomes even more critical given Vermont's rapidly changing demographics. DAIL recognizes this important role that senior centers play and the need to strengthen and sustain them as part of the broader aging service network to support older Vermonters of all ages. As mentioned in the executive summary, DAIL will continue to raise awareness about the importance of senior centers, increase opportunities for connecting centers among each other and across providers and forums, and work with centers to develop tools and resources to support their success.

Acknowledgments

DAIL wishes to express our thanks and appreciation to the 31 senior centers who completed and returned the survey (in alphabetical order):

1. Bayside Activity Center in Colchester, VT
2. Bellows Falls Area Senior Center in Bellows Falls, VT
3. Brandon Senior Center in Brandon, VT
4. Brattleboro Senior Center in Brattleboro, VT
5. Bugbee Senior Center in White River Junction, VT
6. Castleton Community Seniors in Castleton, VT
7. Champlain Senior Center in Burlington, VT
8. Charlotte Senior Center, Charlotte, VT
9. Chelsea Area Senior Center in Chelsea, VT
10. Community Senior Center of Bolton, Huntington and Richmond, VT
11. Godnick Adult Center in Rutland VT
12. Forever Young Club in Poultney, VT
13. Franklin County Senior Center in St. Albans, VT
14. Good Living Senior Center in St. Johnsbury, VT
15. Greater Randolph Senior Center in Randolph, VT
16. Heineberg Community Senior Center in Burlington, VT
17. Islands in the Sun Senior Center in Alburgh, VT
18. Johnson Senior Center in Johnson, VT
19. Mad River Valley Seniors in Waitsfield, VT
20. Middlebury Parks and Recreation Department in Middlebury, VT
21. Montpelier Senior Activity Center in Montpelier, VT

22. Northfield Senior Center in Northfield, VT
23. Orange East Senior Center in Bradford, VT
24. Quin-town Center for Senior Citizens in Hancock, VT
25. South Royalton Area Senior Center in Royalton, VT
26. Springfield Senior Center in Springfield, VT
27. Thompson Senior Center in Woodstock, VT
28. Twin Valley Seniors, Inc. in East Montpelier, VT
29. Waterbury Senior Center in Waterbury, VT
30. Winooski Senior Center in Winooski, VT
31. Young at Heart Senior Center in Poultney, VT

For more information about this survey, please contact:

Angela Smith-Dieng

Angela.smith-dieng@vermont.gov

(802)-241-0309