

Vermont Senior Centers

**Supporting Social Connectedness through Food, Friends,
and Fostering Opportunity**

**Report of Survey Results
March 2023**

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

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Executive Summary

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.

On March 13, 2020, Governor Phil Scott declared a state of emergency to help ensure Vermont had all of the necessary resources to respond to the COVID-19 health emergency. The restrictions under the Emergency Declaration were fully lifted on June 14, 2021. Under the State of Emergency and the proceeding stay at home orders, senior centers shut down in-person activities. In 2022, most senior centers opened their doors for more in-person participation and congregate meals. Some remained closed and others required masking. Senior centers continued to take COVID-related precautions as they deemed necessary.

DAIL conducted a survey of senior centers and meal sites in July 2018, July 2019, June 2021, and January 2023 (for 2022 data). The following pages outline the results of the 2022 survey in detail. Key highlights include:

- Senior centers reported serving over 12,309 older Vermonters annually and the vast majority 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, many offer health screenings/clinics, educational speakers, and arts/crafts. 66% of respondents offer health and wellness education. Many senior centers offer accommodations for special diets.
- With the dedicated help of volunteers, senior centers offer a wealth of services to older Vermonters that support healthy aging. Volunteers take part in leading most senior center activities and are foundational to their success.
- Most senior centers took advantage of multiple media formats simultaneously, both traditional (ex. newspapers, flyers/posters) and digital (ex. website, social media), to publicize their programs and activities.
- Partnerships and collaborations are a key to sustainability – In addition to partnering with Area Agencies on Aging, many senior centers are partnering with financial institutions and foundations, local farms, restaurants, and grocery stores.
- Many respondents cite providing consistent meals, socialization opportunities, and quality programming as their biggest successes.

The survey also points to some key challenges faced by Vermont's senior centers. The most common challenges and concerns identified include:

- Limited funding to increase the number and diversification of services.
- Lack of transportation acts as a barrier to senior center attendance for many older Vermonters, both in terms of public transportation and senior centers' budget and capacity to provide transportation.
- Few senior centers offer online learning, technology training, and virtual programming.
- More than half of senior centers employ less than 3 staff.

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 frontline 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.
- Include the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP) in statewide efforts to bring attention to older Vermonters' needs and contributions.
- Advocate with various entities for more sustainable support for senior centers.

Survey Development and Distribution

The 2022 Senior Engagement Survey was developed and updated by the DAIL State Unit on Aging and reviewed with recommended revisions by the Vermont Association of Senior Centers and Meal Providers (VASCAMP).

The purpose of the survey was to build upon information yielded from similar surveys conducted in 2014, 2018, 2019, and 2021, 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 was not completed in 2020 due to COVID response.

The survey was distributed by email in January 2023 to 42 identified senior centers across Vermont. Of those sent, 38 were returned, a 90% return rate, and a slight increase from 2021 when 36 of 42 centers responded. 25 reported they were senior centers and 32 reported they were meal sites.

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 12,309 older Vermonters annually. This is an increase from the total reported in 2021.

The range of unduplicated older Vermonters annually served ranged from 50 to 1,700. It is important to break down these numbers by the counties with the most responses, as there was significant variance:

Addison County (from 1 reporting center)

- 75

Bennington County (from 1 reporting center)

- 150

Caledonia County (from 6 reporting centers)

- Range was 50-624
- The average was 262

Chittenden County (from 4 reporting centers)

- The range was 200-500
- The average was 350

Essex County

- One reporting center with no numbers because it was not open.

Franklin County (from 2 reporting centers)

- The range was 51-200

- The average was 125
- Grand Isle
- One reporting center unsure of numbers.
- Lamoille County (from 1 reporting center)
- 250
- Orange County (from 2 reporting centers)
- The range was 100-120
 - The average was 110
- Rutland County (from 2 reporting centers)
- The range was 110-250
 - The average was 180
- Washington County (from 5 reporting centers)
- The range was 168-1500
 - The average was about 554
- Windham County (from 6 reporting centers)
- The range was 11-1200
 - The average was 370
- Windsor County (from 5* reporting centers)
- *One of the reporting centers has not been open for meals so it is not included in this data.
 - The range was 100-1700
 - The average was 711

How do senior centers track participants?

28 of the respondents reported using sign-in sheets. 17 reported using an electronic spreadsheet. 10 respondents reported using database platforms such RecTrac, ServeTracker, and www.myseniorcenter.com.

What days of the week are senior centers open?

18 respondents operate Monday through Friday. 11 respondents have hours limited to less than three days a week.

How many towns do senior centers serve?

The vast majority of senior centers, 37 out of 38 respondents, serve between three and 15 towns.

What would help increase participation?

The most common answers included transportation, more funding, more staff/volunteers, and more awareness.

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, budgets ranged from \$9,600-\$675,299. The average AOB was \$189,943, although that number is higher than more than half of respondents.

The results showed that 35% of respondents had an AOB less than \$100,000.

What are the most popular sources of revenue?

The options provided for revenue sources were:

- Town department funding (i.e. 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 (OAA funding)
- Foundation grants

The most popular reported sources of revenue were:

1. Donors/Events
2. Area Agency on Aging Contract
3. Funding from towns served

Other Funding (i.e. ARPA grant funding, COVID relief funds, Congressional Earmark, etc.).

Most senior centers did not receive any additional funding in the form of ARPA grants or COVID relief.

Do you receive Older Americans Act funds for non-meal related activities? (Wellness, group activities, events, etc.)?

Ten of the respondents to the survey indicated they receive Older Americans Act funds for non-meal related activities. The most common reported activity was transportation.

Services and Programming

Do senior centers have membership fees?

Five of the respondents to the survey reported having membership fees.

What activities and services are offered at senior centers?

Social	86%
Health/wellness education	65%
Educational speakers	57%
Health screenings or clinics	46%
Recreational	81%
Arts and crafts	54%
Organized trips	27%
Adult Learning	22%
Legal/financial assistance	19%
Online learning/technology training	16%
Cooking classes	5%
Other	19%
Foot Clinics	41%
Oral health screenings	0%

Out of centers offering foot clinics, how many appointments are available each month?

Responses ranged from 1 to 35.

Out of centers offering foot clinics, what is the cost to the participant?

Responses ranged from Free to \$35.

Out of centers offering foot clinics, who provides the service (VNA, private nurse, other)?

Most services are provided by private nurses.

What evidence-based programs are offered?

The most frequent responses included Bone Builders and Tai Chi for falls prevention.

Who leads activities at senior centers?

73% of centers reported that they use volunteers to lead activities. 38% of respondents reported that paid staff lead activities. 46% reported that they used outside

organizations to lead their activities. 35% reported they used outside experts to lead activities.

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

The responses to this question were relatively similar. Most common answers included: More classes, clinics, education programming, and organized trips. Examples of classes were art, cooking, exercise, and technology. Examples of clinics were foot, health, and blood pressure screenings. Examples of educational programming were music, art, and culture. Examples of organized trips were site sightseeing and musical performances.

Does your center offer technology device lending and/or classes on using technology?

21% of the respondents reported having some type of technology device lending service and/or host classes on using technology. Of those who reported not having a lending device service and/or offer a class, 16% reported that they would like to be able to start it as a service.

How do centers publicize programs and activities?

The vast majority use social media (84%) and 62% have a website. Many use some combination of newspaper, newsletter, flyer/poster, and Front Porch Forum to publicize, in addition to social media and websites.

Is virtual programming offered?

8 respondents (21%) offer virtual programming.

Meals

Are meals offered at senior centers?

92% of respondents offer meals at least once a week. The most common day where participants are offered meals across the state is Wednesday at 68%. Friday is the second most common day at 54%, followed by Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday at 51%.

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

Of all respondents, 71% indicated that they had a contract with an Area Agency on Aging (AAA).

What is the suggested donation for meals?

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. About 46% had a suggested donation \$4 or below and about 57% had a suggested donation of \$5 or above for those age 60 or older. For those under age 60, 35% had a meal price \$6 or over. 43% had a meal price of \$5 or below. 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?

21% of respondents indicated that participants had choices in their meals. 58% reported accommodations for special diets.

About 74% of respondents reported that they offered home-delivered meals.

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

53% of respondents partner with a local farm, grocery store, or restaurant.

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 they had 1 paid staff and 22% reported they had 5 or more, and these were the highest frequencies of paid staff reported. 19% reported having 3 staff. 16% stated that they did not employ a single paid staff member and 16% stated they employed 2 staff. 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. 35% of respondents reported offering paid leave; 16% health insurance; 19% offer dental; and 24% offer a retirement plan to eligible employees.

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

Most senior centers that responded have a volunteer base that ensures 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 three and the highest was 180. Volunteer hours ranged from 30-47,520 annually.

Transportation

Do senior centers provide transportation to and from their facilities?

16% of respondents reported that they provided transportation for their participants.

Are there regional transit stops at or near senior centers?

39% of senior centers reported that there was a regional transit stop at or near their facility.

How strongly do transportation barriers impact participation?

34% of respondents reported that transportation barriers impact participation “a great deal”, and another 37% reported that it impacts participation “a moderate amount”. 13% reported that transportation impacts participation “a little”. 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 were a concern.

Challenges and Successes

What are the biggest challenges of operating a senior center?

The most reported challenges had to do with funding and budgeting, transportation, and staffing/volunteers. Additionally, some respondents reported creating an environment where people are comfortable post COVID has been a challenge.

Some respondents expressed challenges related to enhancing spaces, staff training, improving partnerships with their community, and creating awareness of their services.

What are the greatest successes?

Respondents reported many successes and points of pride for their centers. Highlights included high amounts of social interaction and program engagement (classes, activities, games) from participants. Several centers reported an increase in participation for 2022. Another highlight was the ability for centers to provide enjoyable, quality meals for participants in both congregate and home-delivered meal settings. Appreciation of paid staff and volunteers was also noted.

Acknowledgments

DAIL wishes to express our thanks and appreciation to the 38 senior centers who completed and returned the survey (in alphabetical order):

1. Barre Area Senior Center, Barre, VT
2. Bellows Falls Area Senior Center, Bellows Falls, VT
3. Bennington Senior Center, Bennington, VT
4. Black River Good Neighbor Services, Ludlow, VT
5. Black River Valley Senior Center, Ludlow, VT
6. Brandon Senior Citizens Center, Brandon, VT
7. Brattleboro Senior Center, Brattleboro, VT
8. Brattleboro Senior Meals, Brattleboro, VT
9. Bugbee Senior Center, White River Junction, VT
10. Burke Senior Meal Site, West Burke, VT
11. Charlotte Senior Center, Charlotte, VT
12. Chelsea Area Senior Citizens Center, Chelsea, VT
13. City Hotel Café/Meals on Wheels of Central VT, Barre, VT
14. Community Senior Center of Bolton, Richmond, and Huntington in Richmond, VT
15. Danville Senior Action Center, Danville, VT
16. Darling Inn Senior Meal Site, Lyndonville, VT
17. Evening Star Grange, East Dummerston, VT
18. Fairfield Community Center, Fairfield, VT
19. Franklin County Senior Center, St. Albans, VT
20. Gilman Senior Center, Gilman, VT
21. Heineberg Community Senior Center, Burlington, VT
22. Historic Homes of Runnemedede, Windsor, VT
23. Islands in the Sun Senior Center, Alburg, VT
24. Meals on Wheels of Lamoille County, Morrisville, VT
25. Montpelier Senior Activity Center, Montpelier, VT
26. Northfield Senior Center, Northfield, VT
27. Orange East Senior Center, Bradford, VT
28. Putney Community Cares, Putney, VT
29. Quin-Town Center Senior Center, Hancock, VT
30. Saxtons River Meals on Wheels, Rockingham, VT
31. South Royalton Area Senior Center, Royalton, VT
32. South Ryegate Senior Meals, South Ryegate, VT
33. St. Johnsbury Meals on Wheels and Meal Site, St. Johnsbury, VT
34. Thompson Senior Center, Woodstock, VT
35. Twin Valley Senior Center, East Montpelier, VT
36. West Barnet Senior Meal Site, West Barnet, VT
37. Winooski Senior Center, Winooski, VT
38. Young at Heart Senior Center, Poultney, VT

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