

NEWS

In the age of coronavirus, seniors and the people who help them are in need

Food, medicine — even someone to talk to — are hard to get.



Irene Roche gets a bag of food from Madyson Costa at the Brookhurst Community Center in Anaheim, CA on Thursday, March 26, 2020. Meals on Wheels O.C. was meeting clients at their cars to keep to COVID-19 social distancing protocols. (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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Most days, before the pandemic, Norma More, 94, and Barbara Radovan, 92, could make their way down the elevator from their second-floor apartments to catch the bus for lunch at the nearby senior center.

The sisters have been next door neighbors at Leisure World Seal Beach, in one of the gated senior community's apartment towers, for about three years, since Barbara was widowed and sold her home in Oceanside. Norma has been in Leisure World for 20 years.

Their weekday trips to the Lunch Café program for seniors were as much about socializing as food. But a little over a week ago, when the state essentially shut down and public gatherings were temporarily called off, the sisters — along with tens of thousands of older people in Orange County — had to give up their social excursions. For them, exposure to coronavirus is life threatening; staying home, less so.

Unable to go out or receive visitors — even their own relatives — seniors in the age of coronavirus are relying more than ever on the support of social services and community programs run by county agencies and local nonprofits. The help they get ranges from delivery of food and necessities, to a warm voice on the phone.

And during the epidemic, those calls for help from seniors — for food, for necessities, for comfort — have skyrocketed.

In the span of a week, Meals on Wheels Orange County saw phone queries zoom from about 150 to nearly 700. And after the March 19 “stay at home order,” the Orange County Office on Aging, the primary agency overseeing government-funded services to residents age 60 and up, saw calls jump from 100 (on a busy day) to 300 — a call load that hasn't let up, said Director Ericka Danczak.

Mostly, older people — or family members, neighbors and friends worried on their behalf — are calling about accessing food, Danczak said. To meet demand, her office added 20 new phone lines and expanded call center hours into the evenings and on weekends. Her five-member call center staff also ramped up with county employees from other areas, such as public libraries or parks and beaches, whose regular duties are suspended because of the pandemic.

The Office on Aging isn't the only group that's working overtime to meet new demand for help. 2-1-1 Orange County, the county's central phone and website clearinghouse for information on social services, asked for and received money from Orange County United Way to buy 100 additional phone headsets. The nonprofit, which typically has a staff of 32, has accepted 50 recent volunteers who've signed up for training on how to take calls. The agency also has set up two-way texting for people who are uncomfortable speaking on the phone.

Besides referring older people to food programs, 2-1-1 is helping clients learn how to use commercial food delivery apps, such as Instacart, DoorDash and Postmates. The agency also is working with the Orange County Food Bank to create a program for home-delivery of senior food boxes, which are also more in demand.

After food, the second most sought-after commodity from local seniors is authoritative information about the virus.

"Obviously, there's a lot of anxiety," Danczak said. "They do feel isolated."

Feeding the need

Ramping up so quickly has been a challenge for care and nutrition providers. And, administrators say, the support network for the county's older population needs to stay nimble enough to pivot and expand as demand shifts. What's more, they add, they'll need sufficient funding.

But with an unprecedented level of public-private collaboration agency leaders feel a solid foundation is in place to fill the void created when everyday life essentially was put on hold by the epidemic. When it comes to food, existing programs have adjusted for the new normal.

Many of the centers where older people would go for the sit-down weekday congregated meals are now the spots where those seniors, or their families, can pick up a week's worth of meals. Danczak — who maintains daily phone communication with the Office on Aging's nonprofit partners, along with a weekly conference call — said that in the first week her team switched to grab-and-go meals they saw a 20% spike in demand from seniors (or their surrogates) who are new to the program.

Home-delivery, and grab-and-go frozen meals (created in-house), are being handled by Meals on Wheels Orange County, Age Well Senior Services (for south county), and the city of Irvine's Meals on Wheels program. Like many nonprofits, [Meals on Wheels OC](#) and [Age Well](#) have revamped their website landing pages to include information about their operations during the epidemic.

Meals on Wheels OC serves seniors in 23 cities. It's the biggest provider of government-funded prepared meals in the county, both to individuals in need and to partner programs that purchase meals and distribute them to their clients.

Since the statewide shutdown, the organization's commercial kitchen in Anaheim has added an extra Friday night shift to help handle additional food prep. In the two weeks since the community centers closed, on March 16, the Meals on Wheels OC kitchen crew has produced more than 27,500 meals, a three-fold increase from the prior two weeks, said Chief Executive Officer Holly Hagler.

Along with the requests for food came offers of help. Over the past couple of weeks about 350 people have asked Meals on Wheels about volunteering.

"We've received an outpouring of support from the community," Hagler said.

In addition to delivering food to homebound clients too frail to leave their homes, Meals on Wheels volunteers are dropping food off to older people — like sisters Norma More and Barbara Radovan in Seal Beach — who previously were mobile enough to make it to a senior center for lunch, but have a hard time carrying away the once a week grab-and-go pickup.

Karin Peterson, Norma's daughter, reached out to Meals on Wheels OC on the sisters' behalf. She got an immediate response. Before coronavirus, Peterson regularly took the women to doctor and hair appointments, and she helped with shopping and other tasks. But, at 66, the part-time test coordinator also is sticking to her home, in Coto de Caza, as much as possible. That's meant no visits with her daughter and grandchildren in Irvine.

Both sisters, Peterson said, are in good health for their ages, outside of eyesight and hearing problems, and both can live independently. But cooking, other than breakfast, is a challenge.

“It has been a blessing,” Peterson said of the weekly meal delivery. “It has helped me tremendously.”

Meals on Wheels OC is managing the delivery to the sisters and to other older residents in their area by partnering with the city of Seal Beach, whose staff is handling the food drop-off to those in self quarantine. In other areas, county employees are helping with deliveries.

While some money from the recently passed \$2 trillion coronavirus federal relief package may make its way to local food programs, representatives of the nonprofit organizations — which typically rely on fundraising, grants and donations for a good chunk of their funding — say they’ll need more community money to keep up with the new surge in demand.

“If you’re fortunate enough, then we certainly could use your financial support because there are many seniors out there in need,” said Steve Moyer, chief executive officer of Age Well Senior Services, based in Lake Forest.

Orange County Food Bank Director Mark Lowry anticipates needing to spend \$385,000 a week to buy food staples because, during the lockdown, food donations have virtually stopped and demand has exploded. He said the ocfoodhelp.org website saw a 40-fold rise in traffic in one week.

For older people who still handle their own grocery shopping, Alzheimer’s Orange County, also known as AlzOC, is posting a daily [updated spreadsheet](#) of senior-only shopping hours at local supermarkets, along with information about food banks, pantries and other resources. That list also gets distributed to other members of the Orange County Aging Services Collaborative to disseminate to their clients.

“Over 40 food pantries in Orange County have closed,” said Jim McAleer, president and CEO of AlzOC.

“You can imagine what that does to the folks who were getting their food from those places,” he added.

“If you’re hungry, and 80, and you call and they’re closed, that’s not just frustrating, it’s scary.”

Comfort and protection

Food is not the only growing need during this epidemic.

AlzOC has provided gallons of sanitizing gel and hospital masks to several six-bed residential care homes and to the Meals on Wheels programs. The agency also provided alcohol swabs, wipes, thermometers and toilet paper that social workers can drop off at older client's doors. The organization also makes regular check-up calls to people who, pre coronavirus, spent some time in the adult day care centers that have been closed as part of the statewide shutdown, McAleer said.

In south Orange County, Age Well provides transportation to older people who don't drive, helping them pick up prescriptions or taking them to dialysis treatments and other medical appointments. Like other nonprofits, Age Well is trying to anticipate other needs during the shutdown.

"We really don't know where this is going," said Moyer, who guides Age Well. "Everything is changing and the demand is ever increasing."

One frustrating issue that's popped up during the epidemic — coronavirus-related scams. Older people often are targeted for fraud and the Council on Aging – Southern California, which provides services in Orange County and the Inland Empire, has started a blog to warn people about the latest schemes.

"The best thing we can do is alert them," said Lisa Wright Jenkins, the nonprofit's president and chief executive officer. "They can be vigilant. And their families can be vigilant."

The Council on Aging also created a newsletter, fashioned after its "Answers" annual printed resource guide, that will be available at its website starting next week. It'll provide information about the virus, government steps to stop the virus, and other key data.

"We are staying on top of it and meeting the need," Wright Jenkins said of the work her organization and others are doing to respond to the crisis.

"My concern is what's going to happen as we see a peak in the coronavirus cases?"

All who work with the aging population encourage regular phone contact from family, friends, neighbors and volunteers. Many older people are lonely and the rules of social distancing makes that worse.

That issue, in fact, is the target for a new group of volunteers — medical and nursing students from UCI School of Medicine. With no classes to attend, those students are working with Meals on Wheels OC in the newly created ASSIST program, an acronym that stands for Assisting & Supporting Socially Isolated Seniors through Telephoning.

The program is simple: Seniors are paired with a student and can get up to a 30-minute call daily, every other day or weekly, as they desire.

Karen Williams, who heads up 2-1-1 OC, encourages anyone who knows a senior citizen isolated at home to give them a call.

“It doesn’t take much,” she said. “All you have to do is pick up the phone and say, ‘Hi.’”

Where to get help or volunteer

2-1-1 Orange County: 211oc.org or dial 2-1-1 from within Orange County

Age Well Senior Services: myagewell.org or call 949-855-8033

Alzheimer’s Orange County: alzoc.org or call 844-435-7259

Council on Aging – Southern California: coasc.org or call 714-479-0107 in Orange County; 909-256-8369

Meals on Wheels Orange County (formerly SeniorServ): mealsonwheelsoc.org or call 714-823-3294

Orange County Food Bank ((Community Action Partnership of Orange County): ocfoodbank.org or call 714-897-6670

Orange County Office on Aging (O.C. Community Resources): officeonaging.ocgov.com or call 800-510-2020

UCI ASSIST phone program: call 714-584-4630

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Theresa Walker is a Southern California native who has been a staff writer at The Orange County Register since 1992. She specializes in human interest stories and social issues, such as homelessness. She also covers nonprofits and philanthropy in Orange County. She loves telling stories about ordinary people who do the extraordinary in their communities.

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