

**HEALTH & WELLNESS**

# Demand for OC Senior Programs Surges During COVID-19, Pointing to A Bigger Problem Ahead



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Neighborhood food bank volunteers sort through boxes of produce to hand out to residents nearby.  
Credit: JULIE LEOPO, Voice of OC

The demand for senior assistance programs has surged in Orange County, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic nearly two years ago.

Namely, for food programs, according to county officials in response to Voice of OC questions in December.

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"The County Office on Aging programs have seen a 30-50 percent increase in demand compared to pre-pandemic levels, particularly with senior nutrition," said county spokesperson Molly Nicholson in a written response that month.

The numbers were "primarily attributed to COVID emergency response, but it provides a window into the overall need among the older adult population," Nicholson wrote.

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Near the start of the pandemic, between March and April of 2020, multiple food pantries across the county closed, leaving food banks like Second Harvest without a place to distribute, [the Los Angeles Times reported then.](#)

In August that year, Voice of OC met Estephania Najera, 64, at a food bank hosted by the Oak View ComUNIDAD community group in Huntington Beach. At the time, she said her husband recently had heart surgery; her arthritis became a major problem for her the year before, and that she lived "in fear of COVID because I don't have insurance."

"Everything that they [the food bank] give has helped me tremendously. I have lived in this neighborhood for 26 years," Najera said.

She wasn't the only person her age depending on such community resources.

*“Food insecurity rose throughout the county exponentially, almost overnight.”*

Jim McAleer, a former CalOptima board director and CEO of Alzheimer's Orange County, who has pressed for a local strategic response to senior issues such as this

At the time, that demand laid bare just what kind of problem, exactly, the county had on its hands – a problem that would only worsen without a proper strategic response, McAleer said.

Around 20,000 seniors in Orange County also rely on programs offered by CalOptima, the agency which administers the county health plan for the poor, according to agency spokesperson Janis Rizutto, responding to questions in December.

Such programs include PACE, a long-term health care program aimed at helping older adults remain independent which provides preventive, primary, acute and long-term healthcare services.

Some of those poorer seniors also rely on the CalOptima's OneCare Connect and OneCare plans, which combine Medicare and Medi-Cal benefits, as well as Community-Based Adult Services, which are daytime health care services for individuals with chronic conditions, Rizutto said.

Senior food insecurity, as well as issues around health care and elderly-accessible transportation, already existed before the virus, McAleer said.

“Now it's on everyone's radar.”

With noteworthy timing.

Orange County's senior population will surge as early as the 2040s and will continue to in the following decades while younger age groups stagnate – if not shrink – in comparison, according to local and statewide research.

To put it simply: Orange County will feel a senior boom around the mid-century.

“Orange County residents aged 65 and older are the only age group expected to account for a larger percent of the county population in 2060 than in 2019; they will represent an estimated 29 percent of all county residents in 2060,” [reads an Orange County Community Indicators report from 2020.](#)

Such a population age shift begs questions about workforce size and availability.

Who will take care of seniors when there will be fewer people around, who are below retirement age – especially when people like McAleer [have remarked it can take months, currently, for someone experiencing potential cognitive issues to see a board-certified neurologist?](#)

How will local government services and businesses incentivize healthy behaviors and help prevent people from lapsing into cognitive issues as they age?

That's a major point of concern for Dr. Sara Mednick, a professor at the University of California, Irvine's Dept. of Cognitive Science, who says things like parks – “places where people can enjoy their days outside and be active” – can help.

But like food insecurity or health care, it's also an equity issue, she said.

“We must create that opportunity for everyone,” Mednick said in a Tuesday phone interview. “It's clearly there for rich people, but not as much for poor people, in poor communities where there are not as many parks, where it's not

as safe to go for a run in the evening or in the morning.”

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McAleer, who formed a community collaborative to gather political will on creating a local strategic plan to respond to the demographic shift, says much preparation – public services and infrastructure upgrades – is in order.

After a 2019 executive order by Gov. Gavin Newsom calling for a strategic response statewide, the County of Orange is now in the nascent stages of creating its own locally-focused strategic, regional response policy – a local playbook to correspond with the state’s plan.

An “Orange County Master Plan for Aging.”

The county most recently held its first public forum in November to gather input on such a policy, in partnership with the Orange County Aging Services Collaborative (McAleer’s group).

Though “we expect efforts to ramp up more in 2022, starting with an assessment of the community’s needs,” said county Social Services Agency spokesperson Jamie Cargo in December.

This month, the county put out a request for contract proposals from organizations that can conduct a needs assessment for the region – an evaluation of the current, available services and programs offered by the County of Orange.

The purpose of the study: To understand areas of greatest need as well as barriers and shortcomings the county faces in adequately responding to the senior boom.

The contracted organization, whoever it is, would also draft the local master plan, according to the county’s request-for-bid document, [which sheds](#)

**some light on what officials have in mind for it.**

The strategic plan will go into issues like transportation and mobility; services needed to remain in-home; technology access and literacy; protection against isolation, neglect or exploitation; food insecurity, and use of public and community spaces – to name a few – according to the county’s request for proposals.

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