

AARP LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities

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Age-Friendly Greenwich, Connecticut, Responds to COVID-19

How the town is serving and protecting its older residents

AARP Livable Communities

Located along the north coast of the Long Island Sound, **Greenwich, Connecticut**, is a New York City suburb of about 63,000 residents, 17 percent of whom are 65 or older. A member of the **AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities** since 2016, the town's initiative is called **Age-Friendly Greenwich**.

Community Representative:

- **Lori Contadino, Director, Greenwich Commission on Aging**, explains how the community is helping its older residents during the coronavirus pandemic.

(Information provided to AARP on May 22, 2020)

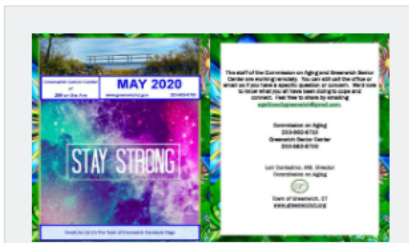
The Challenge

"Our earliest call to action stemmed from how the stay-at-home and social distancing requirements would increase social disconnection and isolation among older residents. We know that a lack of social connection can be as detrimental to one's health as physical and mental illnesses, so we were worried about the lack of connectivity, not only for older residents, but for all of us.

"As responses to the pandemic evolved, we turned our focus to food insecurity. The lack of access to groceries became a concern for older adults who previously did their own grocery shopping but were now being told to stay at home."

The Response

"CARES Act funding created a new and valuable opportunity to provide weekly grocery bags to our homebound older adults. The Commission on Aging assembled a team of partner agencies to identify nutritionally at-risk seniors. This interagency collaborative mobilized a large volunteer force to deliver 215 grocery bags a week. Hand-sewn masks and resource information have been included in the grocery bags as well.



GREENWICH COMMISSION ON AGING

The Greenwich Senior Center's May 2020 newsletter featured a cover with the words "Stay Strong" and a message from the Commission on Aging letting readers know that although the senior center is closed, the staff is working remotely, so members "can still call the office or email us if you have a specific question or concern. We'd love to know what you all have been doing to cope and connect."

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"We took several approaches to address social isolation. The day after closing our senior center on March 11, the staff began calling a roster of individuals every day to let them know about upcoming group shopping trips and other resources. However, after roughly two weeks of taking residents on shopping trips, we discontinued that offering and all transportation services due to safety concerns.

"Before the onset of COVID-19, we had been partnering with Greenwich Country Day School on intergenerational programs. Students would come to the senior center for "Tech-Time," a one-on-one technical support program during which older adults met with their student mentors once a week and learned how to retrieve email, activate privacy settings, send photos, surf the internet and more. The program was a tremendous success in teaching and reinforcing new skills, dismissing stereotypes, removing barriers and empowering older adults by increasing their digital literacy and confidence."

"When the schools moved to remote teaching, the faculty and staff of Greenwich Country Day School reached out to us to develop a virtual program, which we're calling **CONNECTT** (Connecting Our Neighbors, Naturally Enriching Our Community Through Technology).

"We began by hosting daily classes at 10:30 a.m. We taught all interested seniors how to join Zoom through their phone or computer. **CONNECTT** quickly increased to three programs per day, cohosted by the school and our staff. Student teams were mobilized to teach classes and provide technical support to older adults. Residents who don't have access to technology or the internet can connect with the program by telephone.

"Students teach classes, faculty lead seminars, senior center instructors teach virtual classes including tai chi, Zumba, trivia, total brain health, meditation and Pilates. Counselors lead discussions about emotional well-being and maintaining health.

"A new virtual community has emerged. Older adults are now able to see friends they haven't seen in weeks, and they can meet new people from the safety of their homes. The concept of 'community' has taken on a whole new meaning.

"We also held regular community conversations with **Greenwich First Selectman Fred Camillo**, who's the town's chief executive. As a bereavement counselor, he's able to help provide a context for what older adults, and all of us, are experiencing — a loss of the ability to live life the way we used to, a loss of face-to-face interactions with family and friends, a loss of a daily routine and activities that gave us great joy and, for some, the realization of the loss of time. Validation of these losses is tremendously helpful, as is shifting to focus on the activities we *can* still do and the many things we haven't lost.

"Every other week we host a special community night on a Friday or Saturday evening. These events have included a magic show, a dance party, a talent show and a very special performance by Metropolitan Opera House soprano — and Greenwich resident — **Maureen McKay**. Individuals of all ages are invited to participate and enjoy these special community programs. Since COVID-19 already presents a multitude of challenges and obstacles, our goal is to be inclusive rather than exclusive, which has resulted in creating rich multi-generational programming that's available to the larger community.

The Focus Areas

- Food Access
- Social Connections
- Community Outreach

Response Partners

- Greenwich Commission on Aging
- Town of Greenwich
- Greenwich Country Day School
- Representative Town Meeting
- Greenwich High School

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"We also established a program called [Hello Neighbor](#), an initiative to telephone every resident age 70 or older. We recruited [Representative Town Meeting](#) members from our local legislative body, as well as professionals in the field of aging, to make the calls. We provided a sample script that focuses on the person's social connectivity and how to access needed resources and programs. Volunteers log the calls and my staff follows up with residents who expressed a need, such as for home delivered meals.

"After launching the first week with 10 callers we trained an additional 50 and now have more than 100 volunteers. Since we're all working remotely, a dedicated Hello Neighbor telephone line has been created to connect the volunteers directly with our staff.

"We also created the [Bridging the Generations](#) program to connect students at Greenwich High School with local seniors. Participating older adults receive regular phone or video calls from vetted high school students. It's been fascinating to see the relationships develop."

The Results, Thus Far

"CONNECTT enables us to bring meaning and connection to the lives of older adults — and all of us — through increased community connectivity. The intergenerational nature of the program has been incredible. The program enables us to run a virtual senior center.

"We knew that engaging through technology was the way of the future, but it took the pandemic to get us to jump in. Even when we return to our regular in-person programming, we'll continue operating the virtual option. CONNECTT is, and will continue to be, our virtual senior center. It has a loyal following offering six instructor facilitated programs each weekday. CONNECTT is a long-term, sustainable community program.

"The residents who've been called through the Hello Neighbor program appreciate that community members are taking the time to reach out. More than 3,300 households have been called. We feel reassured that needs have been identified and are being addressed, and that older residents are connected to a caring and informed network of neighbors.

"The programs have become a new definition of community for us."

Research by Shosanna Preuss | Article published May 2020

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