

# Build

## Better Policies for Our Rapidly Aging Nation Informed by COVID-19 Tragedies and Successes

Ensure that aging and health policy is informed by the lessons learned from COVID-19 and that it evolves accordingly. As we move toward recovery from an historic health and economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic must force policy leaders to reevaluate our collective approach to aging and prioritize the smartest policies, practices and programs.

**T**he nation and our federal policy leaders are facing an historic challenge to defeat the COVID-19 virus and its devastating effects. The early months of the Biden Administration and the 117th Congress

have seen a necessary shift toward responding to this monumental challenge with the seriousness required. However, it is not enough to successfully surmount the ongoing threat of the pandemic and its particularly negative outcomes for the



nearly 70 million older Americans who are at highest risk. We must also ensure that we never again allow for such tragic consequences among older Americans.

To collectively heal and begin to emerge from the darkest days of our national ordeal, policymakers must fully understand the disproportionate ravages of the coronavirus pandemic on older adults—including the human-driven factors that exacerbated the virus' impact. Of the hundreds of thousands of Americans lost to COVID-19, 80 percent were age 65 or older and 60 percent were age 75 or older. Furthermore, older Americans who contract the coronavirus have a five to 13 times higher risk of hospitalization and a 90 to 630 times higher risk of death than younger adults.<sup>1</sup> Older adults of color suffer even greater rates of death, with one study showing African Americans ages 65 to 74 died of COVID-19 five times as often as whites.<sup>2</sup>

But it wasn't just the virus itself that threatened older adults during the pandemic. Long-term and widespread social isolation and loneliness among older adults; racial, economic, and geographic inequities; a caregiving workforce in crisis; and outdated systems of care have all contributed to the pandemic's devastating consequences for older Americans.

***These tragedies strengthen n4a's commitment to reforming and re-envisioning our nation's collective approach to aging to promote maximum safety, health and well-being of all older Americans, including equitable access to services and supports for those who need them the most.***

## **Policy Solutions Must Reflect the Nation's Aging Realities and Opportunities**

The call to action to guarantee COVID-19's avoidable tragedies are never repeated is especially clarion as the country experiences an extraordinary demographic shift. The population of older adults—both in the U.S. and globally—is growing faster than ever before.

Fortunately, many solutions exist—and have for decades—to enable policy leaders to refocus how we respond to a rapidly aging nation; ensure that older adults never again bear the disastrous burden of a pandemic; and to emerge from our shared national tragedy recognizing the assets

---

According to US Census Data, in 2018, 16 percent of—or 52 million—Americans were 65 or older.

With an estimated 10,000 people turning 65 each day:

- » by 2030, an estimated 73 million—or one in five Americans—will be 65 or older; and
- » by 2034, older adults are expected to outnumber children under 18 for the first time in history.<sup>3</sup>

The aging population is also becoming more diverse, with the proportion of non-white older adults significantly increasing in the next several decades.<sup>4</sup> Among this rapidly growing—and increasingly diverse—demographic cohort, there is an overwhelming desire to age in their homes rather than in institutional settings.<sup>5</sup>



and opportunities that have long existed to promote health and independence for older Americans. ***The pandemic not only brought into sharp focus the consequences of failing to sufficiently address the needs of an aging nation, but it has also spotlighted the importance of strengthening the networks and systems already in place to support older adults.***

As society rouses from our national nightmare, the nationwide Aging Network is a critical partner in fully realizing policy opportunities to maximize the health, safety, and independence of older adults so they can live at home and in their communities as they age. Since they were created, AAAs, Title VI Native American aging programs and their Aging Network partners have provided a broad range of supportive services for older Americans, caregivers and, increasingly, people with

disabilities that include, but are not limited to, information and assistance, in-home supportive services, congregate and home-delivered meals, transportation, evidence-based health and wellness programs, and caregiver support.

## **The Aging Network's Contributions During the Pandemic**

These are precisely the supports and services that have been instrumental in national and local efforts to help high-risk older adults and others stay safe and healthy during the pandemic. Furthermore, the longstanding policy, advocacy and investment priorities of Aging Network advocates and stakeholders are the strategies that have supported many older adults and caregivers during the pandemic.



Center for Pan-Asian Community Services

During the many months of the COVID-19 health and economic emergency, AAAs, Title VI programs and other vital Aging Network partners have selflessly served on the front lines responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by meeting the needs of older adults who face significantly increased risks from the virus. Relying on nearly 50 years of expertise providing support to enable older Americans to stay safe and healthy in their homes, this nationwide network has efficiently and effectively accommodated the dramatically changing and growing needs for aging services by deploying [rapid-response innovations](#) to address pandemic-related challenges.

The case is clear for including the insights and expertise of Aging Network stakeholders in executing a robust, long-term and effective strategy to both defeat the virus and recover from the pandemic's

devastation. In a survey of n4a members released last summer, [#AAAsAtWork for Older Adults: A Snapshot of Area Agency on Aging Responses to COVID-19](#), 93 percent of respondents reported serving more clients since the start of the pandemic, and 69 percent saw an increase in demand for their services among existing clients.<sup>6</sup> AAAs are also reporting that a portion of the increased demand is coming from older adults and their families wanting to avoid the dangers of institutional care during a pandemic. In response to the unprecedented and rapid growth in demand for services—such as home-delivered meals, caregiver supports, wellness checks and information and referral assistance—almost overnight AAAs revamped their critical supportive programs to address the expanding needs of their clients and ensure that they were

positioned to meet the new needs of other older adults in their communities.

AAAs, Title VI programs and others in the Aging Network have also been—and will continue to be—vital partners in the rollout and adoption of vaccination strategies. The outreach, education, coordination and wrap-around supportive services that AAAs provide have been essential to implementing successful federal and state-level plans to get life-saving vaccines into the arms of the highest-risk and often hardest-to-reach older adults. Because AAAs are the local leadership entity within the Aging Network and they are required

under existing federal law to prioritize and target outreach and services to those most in need—specifically racial minorities and other populations with greatest social and economic need—the nationwide network of AAAs is best positioned to support efforts that focus on and connect with the older adults most affected by racial and/or socioeconomic health disparities in this pandemic and beyond.

The COVID-19 crisis has also increased the visibility of the Aging Network’s services, and policymakers must realize that the new levels of high demand are unlikely to subside with the end of the current crisis.



## Strengthen Health and Aging Services Systems Using Lessons Learned from COVID-19

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unearth the ramifications of failing to fully invest in home and community-based services (HCBS) for this rapidly growing segment of the population and their caregivers, federal policy leaders must now focus on fixing the endemic misalignment between widespread HCBS needs and existing long-term care options. COVID-19 only exacerbated this imbalance and illuminated new hazards to our country's over-reliance on the less-preferred, more expensive facility-based long-term care. As such, we must reinvest in a national long-term care strategy that meets rising need, respects individual preferences and drives sound fiscal solutions.

In addition to rebalancing long-term care to better reflect the needs and preferences of older adults, n4a urges policymakers to take the following realities and solutions into consideration.

- ▶ **Policy leaders must do everything possible to address the devastating negative health consequences of social isolation and loneliness.** We must take the many innovations developed during the pandemic, as well as tested methods from before, and build a society where all, but especially older adults, are connected to others and to their communities. This should be a critical public health goal.
- ▶ **Family caregivers need more support—and they need it now.** We must invest in these caregivers in myriad ways, to support them in doing these critical jobs.

Without informal caregivers supporting a rapidly aging population, we will face, at minimum, national challenges including increased Medicaid and Medicare spending, and, at worst, the unnecessary suffering of older adults.

Our nation does not have the long-term care workforce it needs. The alarms were raised long before COVID, but the conversation is even more pressing now. We do not have enough direct care workers to support the numbers of older adults we know will need personal, in-home or in-institution support. The pay is low, the work is hard and the career ladder is nonexistent, yet we will need millions more of these undervalued workers in the next two decades.

- ▶ **Technology is a component of a solution, but not a cure-all.** The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the consequences of our national digital divide for people of all ages. The Aging Network used every new tool at its disposal to continue to reach and serve their older adult clients and technology tools made that possible. Yet too many older adults lack the ability to successfully use new technologies to connect to people or services, whether because of physical or cognitive challenges, because it's financially out of reach or because there is not broadband coverage where they live. The Aging Network has pioneered many solutions to these challenges and will, in many cases, continue using the online options they created as older adults and the nation adjust to life once the pandemic wanes, but policymakers must understand that further investment and support will be needed to ensure older adults aren't left behind because of technology.