

Looking Ahead to 2022 with Stronger Aging Services in Place



The year 2021 was a year of renewal. For older adults, it meant older adult center reopenings, COVID-19 vaccine availability, and taking part in new Department for the Aging services and initiatives.

This year will be known as another challenging year for our City, but it was also a year of hope and renewal. Great strides were made, and we began to see our City bounce back from a pandemic that upended our lives.

At the Department for the Aging, we continued our work in ensuring older New Yorkers received the critical services they needed during this crisis. And we did this while also keeping an eye towards the future and preparing for a post-COVID New York City.

I'm proud to say that it has also been a period in which we achieved significant goals. Not only were we able to physically reopen more than 280 older adult centers and welcome back center members gradually, we also expanded our services with new initiatives and introduced a groundbreaking Community Care Plan that is changing the landscape of aging services in our City for the better.

Below are some examples of the work we have accomplished in the last two years with the support of our providers, partners and the older New Yorkers we proudly serve:

Increasing Department funding: One of the first things I noticed when I joined Department for the Aging as Commissioner is that many of our services hadn't changed in 20 years. Meanwhile, New York's older population had grown by 38% since 2000 and is expected to continue growing, with one in five New Yorkers over the age of 60 by 2040.

To address this population growth, it was vital that we increase funding for our services. This required reversing budget cuts the Department for the Aging had received between 2000 and 2013. Thanks

to Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration, we were able to reverse all budget cuts and secure substantial increases in funding that has been instrumental in executing numerous initiatives for older New Yorkers.

Community Care Plan: COVID was especially devastating for older adults in institutional care settings. Older adults who lived at home and close to family and friends fared better. Yet, to age at home requires community support and resources. Without them, families and older adults sometimes find no other recourse than institutional care

The Department for the Aging worked on a plan that would build a network of support services that enable older New Yorkers to age in their homes. From this work came the [Community Care Plan](#), a groundbreaking five-year plan that will benefit older New Yorkers, families and future generations.

In the next five years, this strategic plan will connect existing City programs and expand aging services, including transportation services, virtual programming, caregiver support, and in-home care services. For the first year of the plan, the City has invested \$58 million. This investment will add 31 additional older adult centers or naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) in underserved neighborhoods. This will be the largest expansion of aging services New York City has had in more than 20 years!

Ageism: Another top goal of mine was to combat ageism, which is insidious and rampant in our society. In spring 2021, we launched [Ageless New York](#) a multimedia campaign that featured real older New Yorkers who defy stereotypes and

asked individuals to rethink their views on aging. This fall, [Ageless New York](#) was featured in MTA subways and was translated to Spanish, Russian and simplified Chinese.

Addressing Food Insecurity: The physical closure of older adult centers at the start of the pandemic meant that thousands of older New Yorkers no longer had a place to socialize or receive a hot meal. We quickly worked with private vendors to set up a meal delivery system that distributed more than 1.2 million meals from mid-March to April. As demand for emergency meals grew, our meal service merged with the City's emergency meal program, GetFoodNYC.

With the City reopening, our network of older adult centers reopened their doors this past summer, welcoming back older New Yorkers and serving daily nutritious meals.

Home Delivered Meals: During the pandemic, we saw an uptick in the need for our traditional Home Delivered Meals program, which for the past 30 years has served homebound older New Yorkers. This uptick in service need was coupled with rising food costs. But we were able to secure additional funding, which will defray costs to our providers and allow them to continue providing high-quality, ethnically diverse meals.

Limiting Social Isolation: Even prior to pandemic, social isolation in older adults was a serious issue, causing health problems like depression, cognitive decline and heart disease. COVID-19 exacerbated social isolation in older adults who were asked to stay indoors. To limit social isolation, our network staff began placing wellness check-ins, case management and social engagement phone calls to older adults. They continue and to date over 6 million wellness calls have been placed.

We also aired a radio PSA campaign voiced by Broadway star Lin-Manuel Miranda in summer 2020. This was successful in increasing volunteerism for our Friendly Visiting program, which matches volunteers with homebound older adults for weekly check-ins. To expand on this success, we launched a new volunteer initiative called [Friendly VOICES](#), which is based on the Friendly Visiting program model and is available to all older adults who are feeling socially isolated.

Bolster Mental Health Programming: Five years ago, the Department for the Aging obtained funding to provide on-site mental health engagement, assessment, and clinical services at 48 older adult centers. This program has been a game changer in reaching and helping older adults with mental health challenges. With support from the Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health and the federal grant funding, we plan to expand the program in 2022 and offer it at 118 older adult centers!

PSA Campaigns to "Get the Word

Out": In the past two years, we also launched public service announcement (PSA) campaigns related to key issues affecting older people, including elder abuse, caregiver support, ageism and social isolation. Such campaigns not only educate the public, but also raise awareness about available services. Recently, we launched a [COVID-19 PSA vaccine campaign](#) which focuses on engaging and empowering older adults. The campaign introduces "Rampage" a sly menace that is waiting to infect vulnerable older adults

Aging Connect Call Center: One of our first major accomplishments of 2020 was launching our in-house contact center, Aging Connect. When the pandemic hit and the City was under quarantine, our Aging Specialists were well positioned to take calls from concerned older adults and their family and provided important information on available City resources and services. To date, Aging Connect staff have helped more than 100,000 callers and they continue to help. Anyone with questions about aging services and resources can call them at 212-Aging-NYC.

Expansion of virtual services and technology resources for older adults: To keep older New Yorkers active and engaged during COVID-19, our provider network offered virtual programs and classes. Being connected online to virtual services, family and friends was a lifesaver for many older New Yorkers. Unfortunately, not all older New Yorkers have the technological resources to be connected online. To counter this, [we began distributing 10,000 free Wi-Fi-equipped tablets](#) in November to older New Yorkers in need. This initiative was based on the partnership with NYCHA in 2020 to distribute 10,000 tablets to isolated older NYCHA residents. We have also started working with the Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer to launch a virtual service finder app that will easily connect older New Yorkers with a whole world of virtual programming. We plan to have the app available for download next year!

In the last two years, all New Yorkers have had to readjust their lives to a new normal. It's been challenging to say the least, but it has proved, once again, our resiliency and adaptability.

I hope you join me in looking forward to the new year. I also want to take the opportunity in welcoming Mayor-elect Eric Adams and his new administration, who have already been hard at work getting ready for 2022. It has been a privilege to serve older New Yorkers. Happy Holidays and best wishes for the New Year.



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