Senior Citizens Advisory Council

1300 South Grand Avenue, Building B
Santa Ana, CA 92705
(714) 480-6450 ♦ (714) 567-5021 FAX
www.officeonaging.ocgov.com

May 11, 2021

The Orange County Senior Citizens Advisory Council is charged with the responsibility of advising the Orange County Board of Supervisors and Office on Aging on matters affecting Senior Citizens in Orange County. The 40-member council is comprised of volunteer citizens, local elected officials, representatives of health care and supportive service provider organizations, persons with leadership experience, and the general public. (source: ocgov.com)

Orange County Senior Citizens are the only age group that is growing as a proportion of the population, while all other age groups are shrinking. The growth rate in Orange County is greater than the rest of the nation. It is anticipated that in the next 20 years, 1 in 4 Orange County residents will be age 65 or older. *(source: 2019 American Communities Survey)*

To serve the needs of current Senior Citizens, and to prepare for the seismic growth of this demographic, the Orange County Senior Citizens Advisory Council has identified the following five top priorities.

Housing – Homeless

Approximately ten percent, or 677 out of 6860 homeless individuals identified in the 2019 Point in Time count were older adults *(source: 2019 OC Point in Time Count)*. In 2020, older adults represented **over** 10% of the total individuals in Orange County shelters *(source: 2020 OC Point in Time Shelter Count)*. Lack of appropriate living conditions accelerates the aging process and exasperates medical conditions. In consideration of these factors, every effort should be made to shelter homeless older adults as soon as possible. Further, homeless older adults who have been hospitalized require a supportive discharge plan which includes shelter plus the delivery of wrap around services to ensure adequate follow-up care and reduce the rates of re-hospitalizations and emergency room visits.

Transportation

Transportation beyond cars remains a key priority for Orange County older adults. While the increase of walkable communities would relieve some of the need for driving and public transportation services, some attention needs to be focused on infrastructure to accommodate the growing need of older adult drivers. For example, cities should be encouraged to evaluate the need for increased disabled parking spaces in shopping centers and other places of business. Also, enforcement of Disabled Persons Parking Placards should be closely monitored.

At the same time, although longevity may increase, that does not always translate to increased driving years. It's important to keep in mind that many older adults will depend on public

SCAC Board

Elaine Gennawey, Chair ♦ Gene Hernandez, Vice-Chair ♦ Elizabeth Busick, Secretary
♦Phil Mandeville, Member-at-Large ♦ Dave Tetzlaff, Member-at- Large
♦ Cynthia Thacker, Member-at-Large ♦ John Pointer, Past Chair

transportation – both fixed bus route and paratransit services. It is recommended that the Board, particularly those in leadership positions with the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), use their voice to raise awareness regarding how changes to the delivery of transportation services in Orange County impact older adults.

Bus routes have been cut due to decreased ridership, limiting the availability of OCTA ACCESS. While OCTA is a separate organization, the leadership voice of the Board is valued and advocacy is recommended for the reinstatement or maintaining of OC ACCESS bus routes that have been cut, or provision for similar alternate transportation.

Mental Well-Being
As older adults begin to re-engage with activities "post-COVID", it's important to acknowledge that many will be hesitant due to trauma experienced by over a year of isolation. In that time, many older adults have displayed rapid rates of mental and functional decline. Although state guidance for re-opening senior and community centers has not yet been released, we can anticipate that older adults will have varying levels of social re-engagement comfort. Assessment tools/checklists for service providers to understand current needs will help to plan and facilitate connection to programs that can assist. Of greatest concern are those older adults who live alone and remain isolated. Initiatives developed during COVID such as the "Check on your Elderly Neighbor" campaign should continue to be advertised. The Be Well OC campus provides a much-needed resource for those struggling with mental health crises, and programming should be inclusive of older adults.

Food and Nutrition
Since March, 2020, the Elderly Nutrition Program in Orange County has seen a 40% increase in serving levels for home delivered meals and Grab & Go meals distributed by senior centers. Over 50,000 meals are provided to nearly 15,000 older adults throughout the county on a weekly basis. At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, over 9,000 older adults were actively enrolled in Orange County's Great Plates Delivered program, and all five districts in Orange County had developed Nutrition Gap Programs that offered senior food boxes and food delivery. Orange County, through the support of the Board and the Office on Aging, has done a tremendous job responding to this critical need. Although the pandemic may have been the accelerant for the increased demand, it's likely that many older adults will continue to rely on nutrition support long-term. Additionally, nutrition gaps remain as not all older adults meet the eligibility requirements for state and federal programs. Expecting that these increased serving levels may become the new baseline of need in Orange County, additional funding and programs will be needed to close the gaps.

Technology
Technology is the common thread that is woven throughout all of the above-mentioned priorities. It has been shown that those who regularly use the computer/devices are healthier because they are: communicating with medical providers, scheduling appointments, easily refilling prescriptions, seeking health information, and finding opportunities to socialize. *(source: OC Strategic Plan on Aging)* The value of using technology to communicate cannot be underestimated, particularly during the pandemic and beyond. Investments in technology for older adults should address education and training, connectivity, and accessibility to devices.   Discussions at the state level indicate that tablets and reliable broadband connectivity will be made available to older adults and will require local planning and implementation. These resources will help to bridge the "Digital Divide" and assist older adults

with re-engagement and socialization. As re-opening plans for senior centers begin, it is expected that many will continue to offer some level of virtual programming for classes and activities.

In addition to the benefits of a healthier lifestyle associated with regular use of technology, access to timely information provides alerts about the latest scams, fraud schemes, and abusive tactics targeting older adults. Receiving information in a timely manner is key to thwarting those attempting to take advantage of older adults.

To encourage increased use of social media by Orange County's older adults, it is recommended that the County develop a weekly notification on senior-related information to be sent to all residents who have voluntarily signed up. The notification should also be sent to senior centers, care providers, and cities. These messages should include current scam alerts as fraudsters are finding ways to take advantage of seniors at an increasingly rapid rate. The consistency and regular delivery of the message would increase awareness among seniors.

SCAC conducted a Technology Survey in 2019/2020. The survey was administered to home-bound older adults throughout Orange County. Survey results indicated that while many older adults are regularly using technology for a variety of reasons, many still do not own a device or feel comfortable using technology on a regular basis. Further research is needed to understand other technology needs of all older adults beyond those who are home-bound.

###