

**Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan AAAWM
Annual Implementation Plan FY 2021
Draft Plan Summary**

The Planning Service Area (PSA) of the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (Region 8) is made up by the following nine counties: Allegan, Ionia, Kent, Lake, Mason, Mecosta, Montcalm, Newaygo, and Osceola.

The mission of the Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan is to provide older adults and adults living with a disability an array of services designed to promote independence and dignity in their homes and in their communities. AAAWM's vision is to be recognized by the West Michigan community as the expert in quality person-centered programs, the leader in older adult service development, and the ultimate informational source for the array of adult services.

The AAAWM has a dedicated and experienced staff with expansive knowledge of the aging process and aging network. AAAWM staff and service partners are committed to providing high quality, innovative and person centered services to seniors throughout West Michigan.

AAAWM has long been a “best kept secret” in West Michigan. It is common for older adults and their families to seek out information about services and supports only after facing a crisis situation. In a continual effort to make West Michigan residents more knowledgeable of services available to older adults, AAAWM has embarked on a 12 month partnership with a local television network that has a successful history of engaging older adults. This partnership has facilitated outreach to seniors and their loved ones who otherwise may not have known about AAAWM or it’s service partners.

AAAWM’s primary focus for FY 2021 has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Whether the pandemic is still evident on October 1, we are dealing with limited service because of the vulnerable population we serve or we are transitioning service back to a new normal, service will continue. AAAWM continues to support its service partners as they navigate new and innovative ways to ensure older adults can remain safely in their own homes and communities.

AAAWM will continue to focus on those services that are most critical to the health and well-being of older adults. Nutrition, Transportation, and In-Home Services remain priority as well as Caregiver Support and Care Management. AAAWM will also continue to seek innovative ideas for service delivery.

Highlighted below are some of the challenges, changes, and adaptations AAAWM and its service partners have encountered throughout the COVID crisis.

Before the pandemic, the minimal amount of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) that was used was readily available for those clients who required the use of such equipment in their home. Although in-home caregivers have always practiced safe and sanitary care, more shielding PPE was not required for all tasks/care provided in the home. It is now necessary for all in home care providers to use PPE, regardless of the tasks they are completing, thus increasing the need for PPE for partners. Partners are challenged in acquiring the needed supplies and covering its expense.

Technology has allowed most AAAWM staff to work from home; however some staff are working on outdated computers that will need replacement should the crisis continue or reappear in the future. Telephonic systems would also need improvement to employ a fully functional “work from home” workforce. AAAWM has received similar reports from Service Partners regarding their staff and the ability to work away from the office. Many have been able to adapt, but some technology upgrades would be needed in the future to sustain working remotely.

While many seniors have at least some experience utilizing technology, many others either lack the knowledge or the resources necessary to use technology to gain access to resources or socialization. Platforms that facilitate social connections such as Zoom, Facetime, or Google Meet have allowed for many people to connect with family and loved ones. However, many older adults in West Michigan do not have access to the internet due to financial limitations or lack of internet connectivity in rural areas. For those who do have access but lack familiarity, it can be challenging to teach new skills virtually.

Isolation and loneliness have been an ongoing issue for older adults. This problem has been exacerbated by the COVID outbreak, confining many to their homes with little opportunity for interaction with others. Additionally, family caregivers are also facing new challenges. Those living with their loved one may feel extra stress and have less access to respite opportunities. Those who care for loved ones and do not share a home face the additional stressors of managing care from a distance and navigating a new and changing system of service delivery.

AAAWM Service Partners have adjusted quickly to these challenges. Although there are many unknowns regarding when and how some businesses can return to “normal”, Service Partners are continually developing plans for how to safely return to providing services for older adults. In the meantime, Partners are providing many services in new and creative ways. Highlighted below are some examples:

Transportation partners have adapted and are still providing vital rides for those in needs. Currently rides are limited to one client at a time, with cleaning and sanitizing between each rider. Future plans require all passengers and driver to wear a face mask and limit 3 passengers in vans.

Service Partners are making daily wellness calls to seniors who have requested them. These calls serve to improve the senior's social and emotional well-being. Many of service definitions have also expanded to allow for staff to deliver essential items to a client's home.

Many programs for seniors and family caregivers, including Disease Prevention/Health Promotion, Family Caregiver University, Diversity Academy, and Dementia Friends have adapted and are offering on-line or virtual programming.

Many seniors have opted to not receive the in-home care they were receiving prior to the COVID crisis for fear of contracting the virus. This has left many direct care workers with additional time in their schedules. Some have been able to offer grocery shopping, pharmacy pickups, and other delivery services for seniors in need.

Ensuring older adults have access to healthy, nutritious food has remained a top priority. Meal programs have seen significant changes as a result of this crisis. The system was designed to provide food to older adults in need – those who could get out could visit meal sites and those who could not, could get meals delivered at home. The system was not funded or intended to provide food to all older adults who live at home. COVID has changed that as all older adults are “at-risk” and are encouraged to stay at home. This has significantly increased the number of people who qualify for nutrition services. Meal programs are responding in the following ways:

Home delivered meals previously guaranteed a visual check on clients and social interaction through conversation. Now, food is left at doorsteps and the client is called to make sure they are okay. This helps to keep both the client and the driver safe.

Congregate meals offered social interaction and activities along with a meal. Some counties are now offering grab and go meals or clients have been added to home delivered meal routes. Many congregate hosts are calling clients to provide them with social interaction.

The system has encountered capacity issues both in procuring food as well as delivering increased amounts of food. This has led to some decrease in client choice; however meal programs remain committed to providing meals that offer each food group and meet nutrition meal plans.