

HMA COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

HEALTH MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATES

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Aging in Place/Aging in Community

Response to COVID-19:

Year Four

PREPARED FOR

THE CITY OF WEST HOLLYWOOD

BY

MEGAN BEERS, PH.D

MARCI EADS, PH.D

CATHERINE GUERRERO, MPA

JOHN O'CONNER

2021

1660 LINCOLN ST #2650, DENVER, CO 80264 | TELEPHONE: 720.638.6700 | FAX: 720.541.7440

WWW.HMACOMMUNITYSTRATEGIES.COM

Introduction

This Year Four report on the West Hollywood *Aging in Place /Aging in Community Five-Year Strategic Plan* is set against the backdrop of an unprecedented global pandemic. In March of 2020, the world began to react to the spread of COVID-19. Community lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders began to be implemented across the United States. On March 16, 2020, the City of West Hollywood approved a local emergency declaration and two days later closed in-person services for all public facilities.¹ City staff were challenged to pivot overnight to establishing and complying with strict public health protocols, adapting services to be delivered virtually where possible, connecting with vulnerable community members, and re-inventing programming and services where new solutions were needed. Since the initial suspension of in-person services, the City has provided a full range of services remotely. These services have included existing programming that could be adapted to a virtual environment, as well as new services designed to support community needs both created and/or worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the coronavirus has been life-threatening to everyone, the risk was particularly acute for older adults and immune-compromised adults, and especially so in the early months of the pandemic and prior to vaccine availability. This heightened threat to the health of older adults made an already unprecedented challenge for West Hollywood's Aging in Place/Aging in Community (AIP/AIC) Initiative even more difficult and raised the stakes on the importance of getting things right.

Background

In 2013, the City of West Hollywood completed its Community Study, which included extensive public outreach and engagement, along with a demographic analysis. The findings of that Community Study clearly articulated a desire among residents to successfully, independently, and safely age in West Hollywood. Subsequently, the City -- in partnership with the community -- developed a strategic plan to support aging and thriving in the community. The City Council approved the *Aging in Place/ Aging in Community Five-Year Strategic Plan (AIP/AIC)* in April 2016. The City completed another Community Study in 2019 which re-affirmed the City's desire and commitment to supporting older adults.

The *Aging in Place/ Aging in Community Five-Year Strategic Plan* guides the City in its efforts to become a community where aging is embraced, and where people can safely remain in the housing and community of their choice for as long as possible. The vision for AIP/AIC is to support individuals of all ages, incomes, and abilities to maintain their independence and safety at home, within their community. This approach offers many benefits including a stable sense of community connection, satisfaction, health, and self-esteem -- all of which are central to successful aging. To realize this vision, a primary goal of the strategy is to drive an integrated approach to making West Hollywood a more age-friendly community by building on existing policies and programs.

Health Management Associates Community Strategies (HMACS) has served as the evaluation consultant team for AIP/AIC, providing implementation and evaluation support since April 2015. HMACS produced

¹ (West Hollywood City Manager's Office)

the Year One Evaluation Report and presented it to the City Council in October 2017. The evaluation utilized a mixed-method approach to answer seven key evaluation questions. The tools included surveys, focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

Following the completion of the second and third year of the Strategic Plan, individual evaluation reports were developed and published for each year to share updates and progress with the community. By design, interim year reports are more limited in scope to maximize resources dedicated to community programs. These evaluation reports can be found on the City's website at www.weho.org/aging.

When the time came to start the Year Four evaluation, the City was heavily focused on efforts to respond to the increased demand for services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the focus of City staff on emergent and urgent needs – and because the traditional in-person community engagement was not possible due to public health protocols and the desire to keep community members safe – it was not possible to utilize the same evaluation tools as in previous years.

In response to these realities, the decision was made to use the Year Four interim report to assess the AIP/AIC Initiative's response to the pandemic in context of the constantly evolving circumstances, as well as utilize the opportunity to explore the extent to which the adaptations and new programs developed to meet the changing needs of older adults were successful in the current context. This report focuses on the collective activities and efforts of the City's AIP/AIC Initiative from July 1, 2019, to December 31, 2020, with a particular focus on the time between the initial local emergency order (March 2020) and the end of the calendar year (Dec 2020). The extended timeline for this report is reflective of the intent to capture the entirety of the COVID-19 response during 2020.

Domains of an “Age-Friendly City”

The City's Aging in Place /Aging in Community Strategic Plan is organized around 10 Domains of Livability; eight domains are from the World Health Organization's Age-friendly Cities Framework and West Hollywood added an additional two domains to capture work around *Alzheimer's & Other Dementias* as well as *Public Safety & Emergency Preparedness*. These domains align with the AARP Livable Communities movement and the City is an active member of the AARP Age-Friendly States and Communities Network. Additionally, in response to the social inequities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the national and local civic unrest following the murder of George Floyd, the City's AIP/AIC Initiative is taking steps to focus and deepen its commitment to advancing racial equity and social justice through the work in each domain at the institutional and community level.

The City of West Hollywood's 10 Domains of Livability are (alphabetical order):



Prior years' evaluation reports have collected and analyzed data by domain. However, the focus of this year's report has shifted (as described in *Background* section); the format of this report has changed accordingly and assessment of activities in each domain are diffuse throughout the analysis.

Methodology

Multiple methods were used to understand the impact of the City's AIP/AIC Initiative's COVID-19 response, including virtual and telephone interviews and focus groups, as well as a review of program documentation.

Key Informant Interviews

HMACS conducted focus groups with the following stakeholders:

- Individual older adults who lived in West Hollywood during the pandemic and had the ability to speak to the City's efforts and the AIP/AIC Initiative.
- City-contracted community-based social service agencies including: APLA Health, Los Angeles LGBT Center, and Jewish Family Services (JFS).
- City staff from the Communications Department, Rent Stabilization and Housing Division, Recreation Services Division, Social Services Division and Strategic Initiatives Division.

Document Review

In order to develop a broad sense of how the AIP/AIC activities and community-based service providers' efforts worked together and aligned with the City's overall COVID-19 response, HMA reviewed background documents on the City's COVID-19 response, communication plans, media articles and other informational records including the following:

- + West Hollywood Communications and Community Engagement Strategic Plan
- + 2019 – 2020 City Manager's COVID-19 Retrospective Report to City Council
- + 2019 – 2020 Social Services Final Report to City Council
- + AARP Age Friendly West Hollywood and Equity Article
- + City COVID-19 Response updates
- + APLA Health's HIVE (HIV-Elders) Program Activities Descriptions
- + Social Service Contractor Quarterly Reports
 - 2019 – 2020 (Oct. 2019 -Sept. 2020)
 - October – December 2020

Review of Social Services Activities

Mid-year progress and year-end reports from City-funded social service agencies were collected and analyzed. These data sets primarily focused on the number of older adults who participated in programs and services.

The City's Response -- Strategies and Adaptations Developed to Respond to COVID-19

To continue providing services to older adults, the City adjusted its contracts, service delivery methods, communications processes and program strategies. The following adaptations and new programming were implemented:

Contracts with Non-profit Agency Partners

Prior to COVID-19 facilities closures, West Hollywood was offering more than 30 different social service programs for older adults including congregate meals, physical and mental health services, senior housing, legal representation and advice, and case management. Once the emergency declaration directed the suspension of in-person services, the City and its partners pivoted to delivering these, and additional new services, remotely. Some programs, like rental assistance programs (including a rental assistance program specifically for older adults), received supplemental emergency funding from the City to ensure that West Hollywood residents could safely remain in their housing, even as COVID-19 created economic impacts to the community, in addition to the public health threat.

Grocery Delivery Programs for Vulnerable Community Members

To fill the need created by the closure of congregate meal programs, and support older adults who were unable, or fearful, to leave their homes to shop, the City developed several creative strategies to provide food and groceries to those who needed them. The City's transportation services were repurposed to

offer grocery and meal delivery services to West Hollywood community members in need. Because the demand for transportation was significantly decreased during the pandemic, this shift allowed the City to preserve jobs while meeting a significant community need. In coordination with the City, community-based contractors, transit providers delivered over 60,000 meals and 3,500 packaged delivery orders to vulnerable community members (those age 55 and older and/or living with a disability) between April and December 2020.

Heat Mitigation Program

In addition to groceries and pre-packaged meals, City transit providers also delivered box fans and bottled water to community members without air conditioning who would ordinarily have accessed the City's cooling centers but weren't able to due to COVID-19 public health directives. The Social Services Division staff organized the delivery of the fans and water while working with the Facilities and Field Services Division to purchase and store the fans. Community members in need of fans and water were identified through multiple City programs and through community-based agencies and partners. More than 110 community members were supported by this program in 2020.

Extended Metro Fare Credits and Emergency Fare Credits for Older Adults

In January 2020, the City committed to a 100 percent subsidy of the cost of the 30-day Metro bus pass for older adults and community members living with a disability. The Social Services Division automatically filled Metro TAP cards of older adults and disabled community members using LA Metro's "TAP to Go" system. Social Services staff were able to generate monthly reports of active users and remotely reload bus passes each month. In addition to the new subsidy, the City provided \$100 in program credits to active participants in the City's On-Call Transportation program, which serves older adults and residents living with a disability. This program provides transportation on short notice or outside of the regular operating hours and routes of City's other transit programs.

Webinar Series and Classes

A series of webinars was delivered to community members that addressed loneliness and social isolation, as well as provided mental health resources and service information. The City also offered a series of classes focused on mindfulness and resilience as part of the Aging in Place/Aging in Community Initiative's "Be Well WeHo" program. These resources were available to all community members.

Wellness Checks

To connect with older adults who had been utilizing recreation services prior to the pandemic, the Recreation Services Division began making phone calls to program participants on a weekly basis. Recreation staff conducted wellness checks, offered information and assessed for unmet needs such as food, rental assistance or heat mitigation resources. City staff used Recreation's constituent database to contact more than 150 older adults on a weekly basis. The response from the community to these weekly check-ins was positive; many constituents expressed appreciation and gratitude and noted that the calls were helpful in combatting isolation and connecting them to the services they needed.

Virtual Recreation Programming

Beyond the weekly outreach calls, the Recreation Services Division also created virtual activities that older adults could access through Zoom or telephone. The #WeRecAtHome series included virtual tutorials for using technology, craft and art classes, games and other opportunities for people to connect.

Recreation Services Division Launches Newsletter

The Recreation Services Division further engaged older adults during the pandemic by developing a quarterly newsletter, *Community Connection: A Guide to Thrive at Any Age*. The newsletter is targeted to residents 55 years and older but embraces the notion that West Hollywood is an age-friendly city that invites residents to connect, both civically and socially, throughout their lives. To help bridge the digital divide and access community members without smartphones, computers, or internet services, *Community Connection* is mailed to the homes of more than 7,000 older adults each season. The newsletter lists classes, highlights available social services resources, offers brain stimulating activities (crossword puzzles and craft projects), and features articles contributed by the Strategic Initiatives Division that address specific areas of concern to older adults such as avoiding scams, the importance of financial planning, and accessing caregiver support for people living with Alzheimer's and other dementias and their loved ones.

Rent Stabilization Counseling and Support Services/Emergency Rental Assistance

The Rent Stabilization and Housing Division continued to provide support for renters and expanded services to include resources regarding local, county, state and federal eviction protections. The Division also established an email information service to increase the accessibility of resources on rights and responsibilities in rental housing for both tenants and landlords. Of the estimated 17,780 renter households in West Hollywood, 16,163 rental units were subject to the Rent Stabilization Ordinance limit on annual rent increases during 2020. Additionally, all rental units in West Hollywood were covered by the City's temporary and permanent renter protections during the same time frame. From April through November 2020, the Division assisted 5,400 renter households in navigating the eviction moratorium rent payment deferment and provided referrals to outside agencies for additional support. Funding was increased to non-profit agencies partners to provide additional legal advocacy and support around housing and evictions needs, and emergency rental assistance to help older adults stay in their homes. As of January 2021, more than \$1.2 million had been provided by the City for emergency rental assistance.

Communications Efforts

In concert with the adaptation and expansion of City services, the City's Communications Department moved quickly to provide critical information to the public about the health and safety measures and City resources. Many of the successes in communications during 2020 can be traced to preparations taken by the department in the development of the City's Communications and Community Engagement Strategic Plan. The department took the following steps immediately after the initial emergency declaration:

- Created a visual standard for COVID-19 communications
- Developed and promoted a web resource page at www.weho.org/coronavirus

- Mailed a multi-language advisory postcard to every household in the City noting the declaration of local emergency and providing specific resources to obtain additional information
- Activated a telephone/SMS/email tool for rapid alerts and advisories
- Installed, in coordination with the Facilities and Field Services Division, electronic variable message boards on major corridors, as well as static yard signs in public medians
- Deployed digital public health and safety advisories on bus shelters and electronic billboards
- Posted frequent social media information, graphics and news-format video
- Distributed regular COVID-19 informational news releases to engage reporters and community members in new details about local, county and state ordinances, health directives and updates²

The department took additional steps to ensure that older adults in West Hollywood were receiving information in ways that were accessible and understandable. Communications to older adults highlighted resources and partnerships with community-based non-profits to help connect residents with needed services. There was also a section created on the City’s website to provide information about COVID-19 for older adults that included information researched by the Strategic Initiatives Division that was specific to the needs of older adults and highlighted services for older adults provided through Social Services Division non-profit partners. In addition, paper postcards were physically mailed to residents to make sure those without computers, internet, or sufficient technology skills, were able to receive vital information. Throughout the pandemic and to date, the department has taken the opportunity to direct messages to those older adults that may be isolated to share information about resources and programs.

The Response of the City’s Contracted Social Services Agencies

Like the City, non-profit agency providers quickly adapted to the emergency declaration, and in partnership with the City, began pivoting service models and developed new strategies to address emergent and urgent community needs.

Expanded Housing Assistance

The Alliance for Housing and Healing was able to expand its rental assistance program to support seniors with increased financial need during the COVID-19 pandemic. The additional funding allocation from the City allowed the agency to serve an additional 66 individuals with rental assistance, adding to the 80 served through the original contract. Accessing this type of rental assistance requires legal documentation that landlords are sometimes hesitant to provide. To address this barrier, the Alliance for Housing and Healing partnered with Bet Tzedek, a legal services provider, to assist individuals and ensure that landlords complied with this requirement.

In addition to the rental assistance and legal support provided, City contracted partners such as Jewish Family Services (JFS), offered emotional and logistical support to older adult West Hollywood residents living in the three buildings operated by the Los Angeles Community Development Authority. Specifically,

² (Shorty Awards: City of West Hollywood COVID Response Campaign)

the JFS Service Coordinator maintained contact with tenants over the phone, virtually case managed clients' needs, and ensured that landlord/tenant concerns were resolved to prevent future evictions.

Adapting Food and Meal Programs

Jewish Family Service of LA was able to transition its pre-COVID-19 hot meals program – which prior to COVID served older adults at several congregate dining locations -- into weekly home-delivered frozen meals. This meant figuring out different meal plans, packaging, freezing capacity and delivery. Consistent with the broad theme of increased demand for basic needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of older adults needing food support increased during this period, as did the number of meals provided to each individual. Together, these factors resulted in Jewish Family Service providing meals to an average of 70 clients per day during the contract period ending in September of 2020, which is a 269% increase over the original contract goal of 26 clients per day. The organization's partnership with one of the City's contracted transit providers, MV Transit, aided greatly in the delivery of these meals.

Similarly, Project Angel Food began an emergency home-delivery meal program for older adults – regardless of health conditions -- in April 2020. This represented a significant expansion from the agency's typical requirements to access the program. Individuals received a delivery of seven breakfasts and 14 frozen entrees every other week. This program served 161 individuals with 23,499 meals during the contract period ending in September 2020. As of September 2020, more individuals were more comfortable to shop, the demand decreased. To date, 45 individuals have remained in the program.

Given the ongoing need, the City has continued additional funding to support this project in the contract year beginning October 2020. One service provider noted the critical role that the City played in meeting the increased need for food support when COVID began, "When COVID hit they were really responsive to nutritional needs. They figured out how they were going to get food to people. Every week they figured out how people would be served."

Addressing Social Isolation

To address increased social isolation resulting from the stay-at-home orders and the high-risk posed by COVID to older adults and those who are immune-compromised, City-funded providers expanded social support programming and worked to creatively design events to engage their clients.

APLA Health's HIV-Elders (HIVE) Program offered a series of online psycho-educational events, including "From Pandemic to PLANdemic: Resetting in the Age of COVID," "Unmasked: Frauds and Scams" and "How to Stay Mentally Healthy during COVID-19". HIVE also offered a four-week mindfulness support group series and HIVE Connections, a regular emotional support group. APLA also supported clients through "Coffee Walks," outside meetups where staff provide coffee and a snack accompanied by a walk.

The JFS Life@Home Program increased its support by streaming more than 20 live activities per week to enhance socialization among home-bound Russian-speaking Holocaust survivors. The Los Angeles LGBT Center's "Hello Club" volunteers provided regular check-in calls to older adults, also to reduce social isolation; there were 75 calls to 33 unduplicated residents from July through September 2020.

All of this programming aimed to bring older adults together - virtually and/or physically distanced - to help community members build and maintain connections. Service providers reported varying results, with some events showing increased attendance in the transition to a virtual environment, while others decreased. Overall, there was recognition among service providers that social isolation remains a challenge, and they expressed a strong commitment to the ongoing evolution of programming in response to client/participant feedback and community need.

Pivoting to Remote Service Delivery While Demand Increased

Social services providers adjusted service delivery to virtual platforms where possible. Case management, housing support, social groups and psycho-educational events were among the City-funded services delivered via Zoom and other platforms. Some providers also maintained a proportion of in-person services, physically distanced and utilizing personal protective equipment, for high acuity situations where virtual environments were not appropriate or accessible. Providers reported an increase in demand for services provided, particularly in the areas of concrete needs (housing, food) and behavioral health. As one provider noted, “It has been a tough year for providing consistent services.” The transition to virtual services, and other factors such as a lack of capacity to utilize volunteers in the same way as they did pre-pandemic, has created incredible stress and strain on providers. This is exacerbated by a high rate of staff vacancies, placing increasing workload on a smaller number of staff.

Nearly every provider noted significant challenges with technology access (devices and internet) and technology skills among the older adults they serve. This presented difficulty in providing virtual services and added significant burden to staff and clients alike as they worked through the administrative demands toward their shared goal to connect. For example, staff supported clients with submitting applications for housing by sending pictures of required documentation that previously were shared quickly and easily in person pre-COVID. Since March 2020, these situations have been navigated remotely, sometimes with limited technology access and/or understanding.

As one non-profit agency staff member noted, “Assisting clients with paperwork was a big challenge. People used to come to the office with their mail to get help understanding what they were getting. Lots of volunteers would be in the office and help people understand and respond to mail and to make phone calls. During COVID, it has all been up to the social workers.” Some clients experienced “Zoom fatigue,” or frustration, resulting in a drop-off in service engagement. Strategies such as Zoom trainings, a Zoom help desk and sending clients a Zoom checklist were utilized to support access to a variety of services and social connections within a remote environment.

Findings

The overall sentiment that emerged from the interviews, focus groups and document review was that the City had several significant successes in its efforts to support older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Clear themes emerged from the key informant interviews and focus groups, and there was significant alignment of these themes and priorities among City staff, community-based service providers and individual community members. While this alignment is a good sign of the City’s efforts to engage partners

and constituents with a shared vision and shared activities, it could also be based in the fact that the individuals interviewed were, largely, people who are well-versed in the services and resources available to older adults in West Hollywood. When the health concerns about COVID-19 are no longer the exigent concern and there is more opportunity for broader community engagement, AIP/AIC future evaluations will target an increase in diversity among participants with the outcome goal of having a better understanding of service access specifically by community members of various race/ethnicities, spoken languages and other demographic identities that have historically been underrepresented. The City's Social Services is currently in the process of seeking a consultant to work on an evaluation of access to social services by community members of color.

Change in Need During COVID-19

COVID-19 brought with it a significant growth in need for services and support during 2020, and as the pandemic continues, the City should expect this need to persist and possibly increase. Despite the significant efforts the City made to support local businesses and vulnerable populations, the economic impact of the pandemic has been substantial.

Multiple interviewees and focus group participants discussed the increase in having basic needs met such as housing stability, access to food and strategies to deal with excessive heat. In turn, the increases in need required increases in services, which then required additional staff resources for data collection by the community-based providers and City staff. All of these challenges reflect the economic, public health and social disruptions caused by the pandemic and highlight the stress placed on previously functioning systems.

Challenges to Adapting to COVID-19

Challenges connecting to people less engaged with the City prior to pandemic

City staff from all departments who participated in the interviews and focus groups were aware, and concerned, that some residents were not being reached despite all best efforts. Staff felt confident they were reaching the engaged residents of the City but were not as clear how to reach those who had not historically engaged with city services or had not reached out for assistance during the pandemic.

Information dissemination was a challenge

Because of the novel nature of the COVID-19 virus, information and guidance came quickly, and often changed quickly as well. Political divides about how to handle the pandemic in the federal government often resulted in conflicting guidance and false, or misleading, information. The sheer volume of information, the speed at which it came, and the changing nature of public health guidance -- combined with limits on interpersonal contact -- made for significant challenges in ensuring older adults received accurate information from trusted sources, as well as for older adults themselves to evaluate the credibility of the information they were receiving. Additionally, a large number of the COVID-related directives -- such as public health orders and state and federal eviction moratoriums were outside the City's control. Many of the community members interviewed for this report described confusion about the differences among city rules and requirements and those of the county, state and federal

governments. City staff reported receiving a large number of requests, questions and complaints about county, state and federal regulations and programs.

The speed of information -- and misinformation -- from media and other sources also created an even more challenging environment for the safety and financial well-being of older adults. Older adults were frequently the targets of scam artists who attempted to gain personal and financial information from older adults, capitalizing on the confusion around COVID protocols, stimulus payments from the state and/or federal government, impacts on Social Security benefits, etc. The City partnered with the State of California and Assemblymember Richard Bloom to offer virtual “Scam Stoppers” programming to support older adults to protect themselves and their private information.

Technology gaps

The need to pivot programming to virtual spaces highlighted significant challenges for older adults stemming from a lack of access to the technological tools necessary to engage, as well as the skills needed to use these tools. This technology gap came up in every interview and focus group.

Many older adults in West Hollywood do not have access to the broadband internet or digital devices (computers, tablets, etc.) necessary to engage in online meetings and classes. Additionally, many older adults do not have the technical knowledge or skills to operate these tools. Interviewees described these gaps as driven by several factors, including lack of economic means, a lack of exposure to technology, and generational differences in the use of technology.

Additionally, many older adults who were able to engage in virtual gatherings found that the connection offered through Zoom wasn’t enough connection or the type of connection they wanted or needed. While the concept of “Zoom fatigue” is commonly discussed, it is also important to recognize the quality and nature of virtual gatherings is not a perfect substitute for sharing physical space, particularly for those less acclimated to a large virtual presence in their lives.

Language barriers increased

A significant portion of the population in West Hollywood speaks a language other than English.³ The most frequently spoken languages (other than English) are Russian and Spanish. While the City has staff and service providers with the ability to provide services and programs in these languages, it faced a challenge ensuring that all the translated communications and information disseminated were reaching older adults in a timely manner.

Mental health and loneliness were significant issues

One of the biggest issues of the pandemic lockdown has been the associated isolation and loneliness. While this is a challenge for all people staying at home, older adults were at a particularly high risk for negative impacts related to loneliness, even before the pandemic. While the City prioritized the need to combat isolation in its response to COVID-19, many interviewees reported it as an ongoing issue for older adults. The increase in demand for counseling services demonstrates the compounding impact of isolation and fear that has accompanied the pandemic.

³ (World Population Review: West Hollywood Population Review 2021)

Beyond West Hollywood residents, staff of the City and community-based service providers have continued to do their jobs, often in the face of rising demands for services and barriers to delivering programming virtually. At the same time, these staff have often also faced isolation, fear, grief and loss of friends and family members. The cumulative impacts of these experiences mean the safety net itself is stressed.

Emergency housing is a challenge

While the efforts to provide housing support services and emergency rental assistance during the pandemic have been significant, it is important to note that issues around housing will continue to be a challenge as the pandemic endures. Because of lockdown orders, it was extremely difficult for housing advocates to move people out of emergency housing units into stable housing. This increased the use of hotels and other temporary strategies to deal with the disruption of the system. As housing costs continue to rise, more older adults are challenged to afford their rent and stay in their homes.

West Hollywood Successes

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been - and continues to be - devastating to communities and populations across the country, in West Hollywood, there were notable successes resulting from the preparation and quick response of the City that mitigated the impact of the virus.

City staff shifted quickly and effectively

After the initial emergency order in March 2020, City staff began to immediately pivot to providing services through Zoom, email and telephone. The staff and community-based partners developed creative solutions for delivering meals and groceries, found proactive ways to reach out to community members, and worked with partners to shift and expand their ability to support older adults in need. A February 2021 *Los Angeles Times* article noted that the winter COVID-19 surge in Los Angeles County did not impact West Hollywood as hard as it impacted other parts of the county. The article noted that the success is, at least in part, due to the well-coordinated and effective communication strategies used by the City, as well as the extensive social programming and services offered.⁴

Virtual engagement opportunities were helpful

While challenges existed with the shift to virtual programming and engagement, there were also benefits for many older adults. Staff from City departments and social services providers reported that some older residents who had experienced barriers to access stemming from mobility and/or transportation challenges, were able to increase participation in meetings, classes, civic meetings and education webinars due to the advent of virtual engagement opportunities.

Deploying transit operators to assist with key deliveries was significant

Repurposing City services was an important strategy for allowing older adults to stay at home and safely have their basic needs met, while also allowing City-contractors to remain employed. The City's efforts to enable people to safely stay at home also meant that the City was contributing to the larger public health mission of the county and state to combat the spread of COVID-19. The success of these efforts

⁴ (Stiles and Smith)

was seen in the lower infection rates experienced by West Hollywood during the winter 2020 surge in Los Angeles County.

Communications push was important and effective

The preparedness of the City's Communications Department allowed it to rise to the challenges of disseminating often confusing and fast-changing public health guidance to West Hollywood residents and stakeholders. The past focus on community engagement allowed the Communications staff to act quickly to disseminate information into the community. Staff recognized that they did not necessarily need to reach everyone, but that it was vital to target the "helpful neighbor" who could serve as an amplifier. Additionally, the proactive nature of City outreach created the opportunity to maintain a connection with many City residents and turn every interaction into a wellness check.

Prior Aging in Place/Aging in Community work helped the City be prepared during COVID

West Hollywood launched its AIP/AIC *Five-Year Strategic Plan* in 2016, which prioritized interventions that allowed older adults to maintain their independence and age safely in their communities. To accomplish the goals of the strategic plan, City staff and partners have centered the experiences of older adults in their work and planning. One interviewee described it as everything from "chairs to stairs." This existing focus on the needs of older adults allowed West Hollywood to integrate and accelerate current strategies into its emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Social Services and Strategic Initiatives Divisions took the lead in working with non-profit providers and individuals in need, the pandemic highlighted the integration of the necessary collaborative work of other City departments and divisions.

Partners learned they could pivot and respond

Community-based service providers engaged by the City also rose to the occasion providing significantly more services to residents. Some programs expanded the age of eligibility to start at 55 to serve more vulnerable residents. One interviewee noted that the successes of these organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted their capability and brought a new sense of confidence and efficacy to the way many community organizations think about their work.

Looking Forward/Thinking Differently

Building on Foundational Work

In 2016, West Hollywood launched the *AIP/AIC Five-Year Strategic plan*, which institutionalized the process of centering the needs, strengths and experiences of older adults.

To realize the goals of the strategic plan, the City began to formally organize long-established programs and services to support older adults to age safely and remain in their community and worked to integrate processes for considering the needs of older adults in all activities and decisions. To support this work, the City created the Strategic Initiatives Division to focus on aging as one of the City's highest priorities, along with addressing homelessness and poverty reduction. The Strategic Initiatives Division has worked closely with Social Services and multiple city departments to address older adult community members' evolving needs - including the impacts of COVID-19.

The work over the last four years ensured the City prioritized the needs of older adults as part of its larger COVID-19 response. Across the board, City staff interviewed for this report believed that West Hollywood was better prepared to support older adult residents during COVID-19 because of the past work focused on aging in place and aging in community.

Community members are tired and stressed

Even with the many successes experienced by the City and community-based partners, the stress of the pandemic is taking a cumulative toll on the workforce and residents alike. In the reporting quarter that includes data from January 1, 2021 – March 31, 2021, the demand for supportive counseling from the West Hollywood Comprehensive Service Center was 192% of the expected goal.⁵ This could indicate a growing need as community residents experience the cumulative impact of the continuing pandemic and the return of lockdown orders and business closures. Additionally, it will be important for the City to recognize that the service providers responsible for providing these services are also fatigued and will need resources and support at the organizational and individual level.

A Hybrid System for the Future

The shift to virtual engagement with older adults brought both challenges and benefits. Still, there was large agreement among stakeholders that allowing for virtual engagement -- even after COVID-19 levels are manageable -- would be important to supporting expanded inclusion for older adults who have transportation and mobility challenges. This would be true for Zoom access, as well as the use of email and telephone calls as outreach tools. As infection rates and vaccine levels allow for in-person meetings, the use of a hybrid system may prove an effective strategy to maximize community engagement.

Increased Access to Technology

Beyond addressing the individual-level of technology challenges regarding equipment and skill sets, providing broadband internet to all City residents could be extremely beneficial in expanding access to virtual resources, online information and educational and social opportunities for older adults.

Re-thinking Public Space

During the spring and early summer, as restaurants looked for strategies to serve meals safely, the City adapted public spaces like sidewalks and streets so residents could dine and gather outside while still observing health protocols. Interviewees conveyed that, overall, these were positive changes that allowed people to gather and combat isolation. However, stakeholders also shared that the City should be conscientious of the ability of older adults and people living with disabilities to navigate these repurposed sidewalks and public spaces with wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

Communications will have to be Adaptive

As challenges around virus variants and vaccines continue as part of the changing landscape of the pandemic, communications and outreach efforts will need to continue to evolve. Individual community members interviewed for this report spoke about the potential number of people who may still not be

⁵ (West Hollywood Human Services and Rent Stabilization Department)

reached through the City's communications channels and who may not be aware of available supports and services.

Additionally, as the City continues to look at the experiences of individuals and communities of color, understanding where there are unique gaps in needs and specific outreach strategies that may be required to engage communities, will be important work going forward.

Continued Demand for Affordable Housing

Affordable housing will continue to be an issue as the longer-term economic impacts of the pandemic grow. Interviewees expressed concern that the decline in the older adult population in West Hollywood was related to the cost of housing in the City.

A City Case Manager for Older Adults

Focus groups and community-based stakeholders interviewed for this report were positive about interactions with the City and the support the City provides them to conduct their work. One suggestion that surfaced from analyzing the focus group data was the possibility of a City case manager dedicated to older adults and the needs of individual residents. As described, the role would focus on centralizing and streamlining referrals and other efforts to address the needs of older adults.

Increase Crisis Response Teams During Emergencies

Another recommendation that arose out of conversations with service providers, and partners of the City was the need for more crisis response teams to operate during an emergency. These teams would help with coordination and logistics to support service delivery and the delivery of food, water, fans and other specific goods to address basic needs for community residents.

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