

## Tackling the COVID-19 pandemic statewide



**The coronavirus pandemic highlights the critical role SASH plays in our public health system.** Based statewide out of 140 affordable-housing communities for older adults, SASH is in a unique position to protect the most vulnerable Vermonters from the coronavirus, ensure their basic needs are being met, provide an essential human connection to ease uncertainty and isolation, and offer guidance, support and encouragement during this difficult time.

SASH partners are working every day under extremely challenging circumstances to prevent and mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. Neither the risk of contracting the virus themselves nor the staff shortages and difficult working conditions they face compromise their commitment to provide much-needed care, services and supports to older Vermonters.



## SASH Priorities in a COVID-19 World

Throughout the state, 130 SASH care coordinators and wellness nurses continue to provide personalized contact and consistent outreach to nearly 5,000 SASH participants during the pandemic. They are some of the most vulnerable older Vermonters and adults with disabilities, who primarily live in subsidized housing operated by 22 affordable-housing organizations and public-housing authorities. Some highlights:

- Working remotely, SASH coordinators and wellness nurses reach out to each participant daily or weekly (depending on participant preference) by phone or video chat. They review the person's [Individual COVID-19 Plan](#), which identifies concerns, needs, gaps in service, reminders, coaching on prevention, ideas to address social isolation and more.
- This effort is bolstered by the fact that SASH maintains extensive health information on each participant, so reports can be run for SASH staff across the state identifying participants with high-risk conditions associated with COVID-19, such as COPD, asthma, heart disease, diabetes and social isolation. Staff then know which participants, and which issues, to prioritize during check-ins.
- Some staff are on site during the week to check mail, distribute newsletters, post flyers with updates and resources, and perform an overall status check.
- Staff are coordinating with regional food banks and Meals on Wheels programs to ensure access to buildings so participants can get the food they need.
- Regular SASH team meetings with partner-agency staff continue — but by phone or webinar rather than in person. Because the purpose of these meetings is to coordinate services for high-risk participants, they are more important than ever. Longstanding relationships and collaboration among staff from multiple agencies — the team members — ensures that efficient and effective problem solving continues during this critical time.
- Social isolation and mental health are longtime SASH priorities, and even more so now. Staff are laser focused on retaining social connections and group programming with participants. The Lamoille County SASH coordinator is conducting her regular “Bone Builders” class via Zoom and has twice as many participants she normally has in person. Other offerings include Chair Yoga classes via Zoom and twice-weekly mindfulness sessions via Facebook Live.

SASH maintains extensive health information on each participant, so those with high-risk conditions associated with COVID-19 are easily identified and prioritized by staff for intervention.

- An important component of SASH’s mental health work is suicide prevention. Sadly, Vermont has seen an uptick in suicides since the outbreak of the pandemic. Staff are asking specific questions about mental health and suicidal ideation using this [suicide-prevention protocol](#) during their regular check-ins with participants.
- Cathedral Square SASH staff have established a weekly “Resident Connect” conference telephone call for each panel facilitated by their SASH coordinator. Callers go over updates and then have time for open discussion.
- SASH staff continue to support participants around non-COVID-19 issues, including monitoring high blood pressure, managing chronic disease, providing tobacco-cessation support, connecting participants to community resources, and coordinating discharge-planning.
- At the staff level, the SASH administrative team has been hosting weekly COVID-19 webinars for SASH staff statewide since March 16, during which they share the most up-to-date information as well as tools and resources available to staff. Open dialogue and discussion to develop best practices and policies are a key part of these sessions.
- In addition, the admin team has added a robust and constantly evolving COVID-19 section to the SASH intranet with vetted resources and links for staff to access in one place. These include a number of SASH-created handouts for residents, such as [“How to Care for Yourself with COVID-19”](#) should anyone become ill.



Partners represented on SASH teams throughout Vermont include members and affiliates of these organizations:



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