

County of Orange Social Services Agency (SSA) Connections: Ensuring the Health and Well-Being of Seniors and Disabled During COVID-19

Overview: SSA's In-Home Supportive Services program serves aged, blind, and/or disabled residents who cannot care for themselves and are unable to live home safely without assistance.

Challenge: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in California and statewide Stay-at-Home Order, SSA closed its offices to the public on March 17, 2020 to mitigate the spread of illness to staff, clients and the community. The closure of offices and waiver of in-person redetermination visits with our elderly and disabled In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) clients prompted SSA Director Debra Baetz to task IHSS staff with an important challenge: to implement activities during the pandemic that help maintain connections with our 35,000 Orange County IHSS clients to ensure their overall health and well-being and assess immediate unmet needs.

Solution: On March 16, SSA mobilized its Department Operations Center (DOC) to focus on ensuring SSA continues to meet the needs of clients during the pandemic, continues to meet program mandates and provides services and supports in the safest manner possible to mitigate the spread of illness. To address the challenge, IHSS program managers worked with DOC leadership to mobilize more than 150 SSA staff volunteers from all classifications across various Agency programs. In a joint effort, SSA volunteers conducted welfare calls with all IHSS clients, providing a soothing voice and open ear and letting them know that help was available if needed, all while assessing for critical unmet needs. The initial round of outreach calls began on March 20, 2020. Subsequent calls filtered out clients who had chosen to opt out and over time, calls have evolved to focus on SSA's most vulnerable IHSS client populations. Namely, targeted calls are being made to clients who are severely impaired and living alone, are 85 years and older or have 200 or more authorized hours with an IHSS provider. Eleven rounds of these calls have been completed to date.

As a result of this initial outreach effort, and in order to continue to provide valuable resources and services to all IHSS clients during the pandemic, on April 17, 2020, SSA also activated a seven-person IHSS hotline for the community to call with requests for essential and immediate needs (e.g., food, supplies, assistance with obtaining medication, etc. within three days of the call).

Further, to support both the outreach calls and requests that come through the IHSS hotline, a 10-person triage team was mobilized to assess and address urgent, unmet needs for food, assistance with obtaining medication, supplies and other services. The triage team vets the need, coordinates to secure items or provides referrals, and arranges for

County of Orange Social Services Agency (SSA) Connections: Ensuring the Health and Well-Being of Seniors and Disabled During COVID-19

delivery of items to client homes. In the meantime, the day-to-day work continues, with SSA staff continuing to serve our IHSS recipients and providers daily.

In addition to addressing the unmet needs of clients, SSA has helped coordinate donations of crucial personal protective equipment (PPE), cloth face masks and supplies that help mitigate the spread of illness on behalf of IHSS providers who work on the front lines — caregivers who work in the homes of at-risk clients and continue to do so in the face of the pandemic. Most notably, from June to July, SSA helped secure a very generous donation of 30,000 cloth face masks from the Orange County United Way.

Innovation: SSA outreach services provided during the pandemic are considered innovative to us in a number of ways. First, the Agency sought out and mobilized staff volunteers agency-wide to assist with the effort, versus limiting participants to a specific unit or program. Further, what began as an in-house, grassroots effort transformed into a coordinated countywide partnership. County agencies, contracted partners and other community partners such as Second Harvest Food Bank of Orange County, OC United Way, the Senior Santa and Friends giving program and the County of Orange Emergency Operations Center Care and Shelter Branch (manned by the SSA Emergency Management Team), among others, have collaborated closely to source and secure critical items such as non-perishable food boxes, adult diapers and wipes and nutritional drinks for our vulnerable clients, as well as PPE for the dedicated IHSS providers.

Results: As a result of this outreach effort, nearly 65,500 welfare/outreach calls have been conducted to date, over 350 deliveries of food and necessary items have been facilitated and thousands of referrals to community resources have been made. These efforts are over and above the critical daily work our SSA IHSS social workers continue to perform, diligently processing an average of 3,000 reassessments and approximately 690 intakes each month.

Replicability: SSA outreach activities to frail and vulnerable IHSS clients could easily be implemented by any county. The success and foundation of this effort has been based upon the integration that was facilitated through SSA DOC leadership and IHSS program management and well as our valued partnerships and collaborations with community-based organizations — and most of all, plenty of willing staff volunteers!

Project or Program Contact: Laura Turtzer, Public Information Officer, 500 N. State College Blvd., Orange, CA 92868, (714) 541-7734, email: laura.turtzer@ssa.ocgov.com