



GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL ON AGING

2024 Report to the Governor FULL COMMITTEE REPORTS Prior to the Release of the All Ages, All Stages, NC Plan

From January-September 2024, the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging had five committees with unique focus areas. Each committee studied relevant issues and challenges, and proposed specific solutions it believes are beneficial, achievable, and worth the investment. The GAC recognizes that its recommendations do not address all the problems or concerns of North Carolina's older adults, nor do the recommendations necessarily address them in a comprehensive manner. Still, we believe that implementing these recommendations would move our state forward toward meeting the needs of an increasing population of older North Carolinians in a meaningful way.

Adult Protective Services Committee

Adult Protective Services (APS) is a statutorily mandated service that provides for the protection of older and vulnerable adults. North Carolina General Statutes Chapter 108A, Article 6 gives county departments of social services (DSS) the authority to evaluate reports of abuse, neglect, and exploitation of these adults and to provide or arrange for services to protect them from maltreatment. Given the significance of this important service, the Governor's Advisory Council (GAC) has for many years chosen to dedicate one of its standing committees to focus exclusively on this aspect of NC's service delivery system.

Significant gaps between funding and resources needed to provide APS in North Carolina (NC) remain an issue as DSSs across the state continue to show significant increases in the number of reports of adult maltreatment received and corresponding growth in caseloads for APS workers. The growth in the number of APS reports is noteworthy given that NC continues to rank ninth nationally in total population and in the number of people aged sixty-five and older. In 2024, one in five North Carolinians is age sixty-five and over. NC's older population will almost double in the next twenty years with adults eighty-five and older comprising the fastest growing demographic.

Considering the ongoing increase in the number of APS reports and NC's changing demographics, the NC Division of Aging (Division) launched a comprehensive initiative to significantly strengthen the delivery of APS in NC. Known as the APS Program Improvement Plan (APS Plan), the Division engaged its many stakeholders across the state to design this APS Plan. The APS Plan advances solutions that foster and promote safety, independence, and the improvement of health and well-being for older and vulnerable adults. It strengthens APS laws and policies to address the unique health and wellness challenges which older and vulnerable adults face. The APS Plan focuses on APS workforce capacity issues to support ever increasing caseload sizes and the complexity of needs and services required for older and vulnerable adults. It recognizes the lack of state and federal funding to develop consistent training curricula for APS workers. And finally, the APS Plan acknowledges that more education is needed to inform local communities about the needs of older and vulnerable adults and APS services.

In the 2022 and 2023 Reports to the Governor, the APS Committee and the GAC recommended fully supporting the core components in the Division's APS Plan to reinforce the importance of transforming NC's APS Program statewide.

The core components include:

- Increasing funding for APS staff in county DSSs
- Maintaining the APS Essential Services Fund to provide older and vulnerable adults with food, housing, medications/medical care, and other basic needs on an urgent basis
- Updating NC's outdated APS General Statutes
- Establishing consistent APS practice across all one hundred county DSSs
- Engaging and educating local communities to better protect older and vulnerable adults

As the work of NC's All Ages, All Stages Plan continued there was clear recognition that the APS Plan met an important goal of All Ages, All Stages which is keeping older adults safe and protected. The APS Plan was incorporated into All Ages, All Stages to achieve this desired outcome and to recognize that APS is an important aspect of NC's response and commitment to an age-friendly state. The GAC continues to strongly recommend full implementation of the APS Plan as a key goal of All Ages, All Stages to support older and vulnerable adults and their families.

Communications and Digital Equity Committee

The Communications and Digital Equity Committee proposes the following recommendations to improve digital equity and digital literacy among older adults in North Carolina.

Older adults increasingly seek to access information and resources through the Internet. The Pew Research Center noted that "in 2000, the gap between the oldest and youngest groups of adults in internet use was 56 percentage points; it now is 24 points" (Favario, 2022).

This same report finds significant disparities in device ownership of tablet computers according to age group with 6 in 10 (61%) of those aged 30 to 49 owning a device, compared to 44% of those aged 65 and older (Favario). This suggests that older adults, particularly those with constrained financial resources, are likely to lack access to devices that facilitate internet use.

The committee recognizes extant initiatives to improve internet and broadband access and digital literacy. It further considers wraparound initiatives and support to ensure that once digital literacy is accomplished, older adults will have the necessary support to remain abreast of the frequent changes in software applications for sustained participation and access to digital resources.

The NC Institute of Medicine's 2023 Healthy Aging report title "*A place to thrive: Creating opportunities to age well in North Carolina*" serves as a guide for the recommendations below. (Numbers are from the report's numbering system.)

1. Ensure digital equity for older adults. In North Carolina, Governor Cooper and his administration implemented programs through the NC Department of Information Technology to expand affordable high-speed internet and broadband access across North Carolina. The NC Digital Equity and Inclusion Collaborative focuses on policy recommendations and digital equity strategies to educate residents. We recommend that recurring funds be established to continue this work beyond the availability of federal funding and incorporate two NCIOM Healthy Aging report strategies. (NCIOM Recommendation #3, Strategies 9 and 10b)
 - Strategy 9: Older adults are the largest group in the United States without connection to the Internet. We highlight the importance of applying an aging lens to highspeed internet, broadband access and digital equity initiatives. We expand on the Healthy Aging recommendations to incorporate explicit examination and consideration of

social and economic status frameworks in this work. Low resource communities may require targeted programs to ensure digital equity.

- Strategy 10b: Increase awareness of digital literacy services for older adults offered at various community locations. At present, there are several organizations providing digital literacy services across the state. We recommend the development and hosting of a directory of digital literacy services tailored to older adult learning needs. The directory will aid older adults in locating programs within or near their community. Promotion of the directory should be made to programs and organizations serving older adults (e.g. Meals on Wheels, Senior Centers, Social Security Administration offices, Libraries, Cooperative Extension, Utility Services, Teachers and State Employee Retirement System).

2. Create a community culture that supports healthy aging. Domains of livability are those that when available support the well-being and quality of life of older adults and people of all ages. Digital equity and inclusion require the ability to keep devices up to date as software patches are released and related updates are necessary. We recommend that the identified domain of communication and information include geographically distributed help centers to assist older adults with routine software updates. Devices begin to malfunction, and some website resources become inaccessible when browsers and portable document reader software is out-of-date. Community organizations such as Cooperative Extension in collaboration with others may be a resource to develop volunteer networks to support older adults. (NCIOM Recommendation #4)

These recommendations recognize that older adults deserve support in gaining the skills to use technology and the ability to access technological devices. Once digital skills are acquired, technology support services will be important to older adults for maintaining access to digital resources. Thus, a comprehensive strategy that addresses all aspects of digital equity in the aging population, including access to broadband, access to devices, person-centered training, and ongoing technical support is essential to addressing the digital divide.

Important to daily living, Internet resources can be central to social connection and solving everyday problems from installing a storm door, preparing a meal, or assembly and troubleshooting a wide range of products and equipment. Older adults are discovering the value of internet-based practical education resources. The Pew Research Center (2022) reports “from 2019 to 2021, the share of Americans ages 50 to 64 who said they ever used YouTube increased from 70% to 83%. Among those 65 and older, YouTube use increased from 38% to 49% – gains of 13 and 11 points respectively.”

Full access to the NCIOM Healthy Aging 2023 Task Force report is available here: <https://nciom.org/a-place-to-thrive-creating-opportunities-to-age-well-in-north-carolina/>

Share of those 65 and older who are tech users has grown in the past decade, per Michelle Faverio, is available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/13/share-of-those-65-and-older-who-are-tech-users-has-grown-in-the-past-decade/>

Home and Community Based Services Committee

In the 2023 Report to the Governor, the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging (GAC) recommended convening a NC Senior Hunger Summit to the Governor. The Governor accepted the recommendation and instructed the GAC and the NCDHHS Division of Aging to convene such a summit in Executive Order 280: North Carolina's Commitment to Building an Age-Friendly State, issued on May 2, 2023. The overarching ideas, themes, and recommendations that emerged from the summit are included in this summary report which is available upon request.

The event – the Summit to Coordinate Nutrition for Older Adults – was held Tuesday, March 12, 2024, at the North Carolina Museum of History. Thirty-five participants represented 14 diverse state agencies and organizations with key roles to play in senior nutrition. The goals of the summit were to:

- Create new connections between key state agencies working in senior nutrition.
- Identify opportunities for collaboration and envision new ways to address senior hunger.
- Raise awareness of the work and programming that is already happening.

The Division of Aging contracted with the Culture of Results (CoR) Initiative at the North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness (NCCHW) at UNC Asheville to assist the GAC Home and Community Based Programs Committee in conducting an interactive exercise designed to help summit participants envision results, measures, and strategies related to providing equitable nutrition access for all older adults in North Carolina.

Summit participants made many new connections and identified several key opportunities to address senior hunger.

- First, participants pinpointed the need for improved community design to support aging across the lifespan, designing communities in “age-friendly” ways.
- Next, participants highlighted the importance of accessible, equitable access to nutrition resources. This could include increased benefits or access to services for individuals and a “one door” or “no wrong door” approach to services in which older adults can be connected to all the services they may be eligible for from one agency or one digital application.
- Finally, the need to educate (including through technology) older adults, and people of all ages, about aging and resources to support healthy aging surfaced as a key potential focus area as well.

Subsequently, the GAC continued to focus on food security for older North Carolinians. Konnie Tran, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps) Outreach and Education Coordinator at the Division of Child and Family Well-Being, presented to the GAC in November 2024. The aim of this presentation was to raise awareness of SNAP outreach efforts already underway in North Carolina and identify areas where the GAC may support this work.

SNAP outreach implementing agencies, with funding from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, work to reach people who are not currently participating in SNAP but may be eligible. Older adults are a priority population for SNAP outreach. The November presentation outlined ideas to improve Food and Nutrition Services (SNAP) participation by older adults, including:

- Make permanent North Carolina’s Simplified Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) for older adults
- Encourage community-based partners in the aging network to become SNAP outreach partners or Business Account holders to assist older adults in enrolling via ePass, the online SNAP enrollment portal
- Provide funding to SNAP outreach implementation agencies as the program requires at least 50% of the programs’ funds to come from non-federal sources

These ideas align with the All Ages, All Stages goal to identify opportunities for collaboration among state and local agencies and envision new ways to address senior hunger. Community-based partners in the aging network could play a stronger role in promoting the benefits of SNAP to older adults and assisting those eligible to enroll. The digital application can be challenging to navigate, yet greater participation of the aging network in SNAP outreach could provide an effective strategy to reach this priority population. Continued development and expansion of the SNAP application platform is essential to the continued coordination of state and local agencies to achieve greater SNAP participation among older adults and their families.

The GAC strongly recommends the development of a digital platform using the SNAP experience (ePass) to provide access to all senior and family nutritional programs. Creating such a platform, once tested and implemented, will greatly simplify the application process, reduce administrative costs, and most importantly, provide a “no wrong door access” to all eligible applicants. Not only will access improve the resulting efficiency in service delivery, it will also magnify the improvement in the health and wellness of all seniors and families throughout the state and achieve one of the major goals of the All Ages, All Stages State Plan.

The Committee also recommends the expansion, marketing and usefulness of NC 211 and NCCARE 360. Both are needed to enhance access to health services and are underutilized, especially NCCARE360. The Committee would like to research deficiencies and address identifiable issues limiting the usefulness of each digital program. NCCARE360, in three focus groups sponsored by the GAC, demonstrated ineffective and underutilization during the implementation of the Healthy Opportunities Pilots (refer to prior GAC reports). NCCARE360 could benefit by completing the referral cycle, i.e. referral, acceptance of referral, scheduling patient/provider, and outcome reports to NCCARE360 referral source. Completing the feedback loop allows for statistical analysis on the effectiveness of the system and will allow continuous improvement programming to assure utility of the system and efficiency in the delivery of care.

In summary, these recommendations support key goals of the All Ages, All Stages Plan designed to support older adults and their families.

Integration of Medical and Social Services Committee

In 2018, the Governor’s Advisory Council on Aging began to explore how the integration of medical and social service programs can improve the health status of older adults in North Carolina. Since then the committee has convened health care and social service professionals across the state in virtual (due to the pandemic) discussion groups to identify the challenges and current barriers to implementing an integrated approach to care. In 2020, we sought the insights of providers in the Triangle area of the state. In 2022, we met with professionals in western North Carolina. In 2023, we concluded our study with small group discussions in counties spanning much of eastern North Carolina and included two Healthy Opportunities (HOP) pilot areas.

Although each region of the state has unique assets and challenges, we discovered common issues that, if addressed, could greatly improve the delivery of integrated service to older adults in our state. These are (and remain):

1. Expanding the number of PACE programs (Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly) and capacity of existing PACE programs with additional funding.
2. Transitioning to a value-based payment system that would fund the integration of medical and social programs. The design of the payment program would be similar to the PACE program and policy.
3. Continuing to promote digital equity across the state which would require the improvement of broad band access, digital literacy of the population and allow for everyone to reap the benefits of telehealth and virtual care.
4. Providing local funding for the improvement of transportation, particularly in rural areas of the state.
5. Providing incentives for education and culture change within and between professions so that health care providers and social service providers begin to inculcate the learning and habits of interdisciplinary collaboration early in their respective training programs.
6. Developing opportunities for Senior Centers to expand services to include periodic health screening to prevent emergency and critical care overuse.

For additional and more detailed information regarding these recommendations, please refer to the committee's 2023 report, which addresses transportation, senior centers, social supports, PACE, professional education, patient/client education, and a value-based payment system. It also lists the resources needed to implement the above six recommendations.

Long-Term Care Committee

The Long-Term Care Committee of the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging is focused on addressing issues pertaining to long-term care services and supports for older adults and persons with disabilities in North Carolina who need care and assistance. The Committee works to examine the challenges and opportunities that currently exist in ensuring that there is a strong continuum of care – from care provided at home by unpaid family members and friends to that which is community based or given in assisted living facilities or nursing homes.

The Committee's 2024 efforts, for the most part, focused on staying abreast of efforts related to the development of AAAS, particularly the aspects of AAAS related to enhancing long-term care services and supports and strengthening the health care workforce. The Committee has and continues to offer, to the Governor and DHHS, the following recommendations that our state should consider undertaking to strengthen this continuum of care. (For additional details, see the Committee's full 2023 report.)

1. Studying the capacity of health care delivery system to serve increased numbers of people

With Medicaid rolls expected to increase by approximately 600,000 people due to expansion, the Committee encourages a comprehensive study of the health care delivery system to determine its capacity to adequately serve those in need, including those who need long-term services and supports.

2. Addressing the long-term care workforce crisis

- Study the cost of providing care in long term care facilities and look for ways to reimburse facilities for services that more adequately reflect the cost of providing care.
- Explore the development of a state loan forgiveness program and a grant program for nurses and direct care staff administered through the state Community College system.
- Support employee assistance policies and practices such as childcare vouchers and family leave provisions that can be implemented in the short and the long term to support workers.
- Take steps to recruit immigrants and other new citizens to our state to work in long-term care facilities including exploring ways to streamline the portal of entry for immigrants to health care and direct care worker careers.
- Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to convene stakeholders, including long-term care providers and advocates, to explore and address the impact of the State's existing long-term care facilities survey procedures and outcomes on the recruitment and retention of staff.

3. Addressing how the state can better prepare for improving access to long-term services and supports and tackle the issue of affording long term care

Between 2020 and 2040 the 85+ population in North Carolina, those who are more likely to need long-term services and supports, will increase from 198,000 to 423,000 people, a 116% increase. At the same time the cost of services will increase significantly. Having an adequate array of long-term services and support, ensuring people know how to access them, and identifying how these services are to be paid for, both publicly and privately, present challenges that we need to begin to address now. The Committee recommends that the state take steps to convene consumers, providers, advocates, policy experts, and elected officials to collectively start discussions about this.