

The Independent



FALL 2021

What's Inside:
Kinship Care pg. 2
Companion Pets pg. 4
At Home-MI Choice pg. 6



A Note from Lynn

Area Agency on Aging CEO

I'm often asked what all the Area Agency on Aging [AAA] does. My short answer? We plan and develop all sorts of services and products to make sure people have the choices they need to live a quality life, no matter what comes with age.

We have our hands in a host of initiatives with many collaborative partners. There's a lot going on in Southwest Michigan. The good news is you don't have to remember it all.

Years ago we opened the Info-Line for Aging & Disability at 800-654-2810 as a public service for brainstorming and answering questions. Averaging about 1,000 calls a month it's been referenced as a godsend by folks from all walks of life. No obligation or cost, just objective information. The Info-Line represents multiple toll-free lines as state and national inquiries are linked to this area for solutions.

Why do I bring up the Info-Line now? Falls brings more than shorter days. Open enrollment for Medicare is upon us; an annual quest for the right prescription drug coverage and many questions about how to navigate www.medicare.gov. See the article in this issue on page 5.

AAA coordinates trained Medicare counselors and often offers classes on Medicare .gov. Check out the Campus for Creative Aging for opportunities to connect on this and other offerings. Be assured – you've got a friend in the Area Agency on Aging.

Be Well,
Lynn

The AAA Kinship Program

This year we began a Kinship Care program. Sometimes called 'relative care', Kinship care is a term used for the raising of children by grandparents, other family members, or adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship, because biological parents are unable to do so. Below is a letter from a program participant about how the program can help.

"As grandparents we thrive to be the best grandparents we can be. With our grandchildren having really only one parent to provide for them, it becomes part of our life as grandparents to step in and make sure that the parents have help wherever they need it to make sure our grandkids have a good education and successful life.

"At times, especially before the school year, it becomes a struggle trying to be sure all our grandkids have what they need for school.

"With the help of the Area Agency on Aging Kinship Program we were able to purchase backpacks and school supplies for each one of our grandchildren.

"This year in particular the cost of items has been so high and with this help we were able to focus more on clothing items instead of supplies.

"The Kinship Program's help with the \$50 gift cards for each grandchild was truly a great help. I would like to thank everyone involved in the Kinship Program for the outstanding job and recognizing that the need is out there for struggling grandparents trying to make ends meet while doing what is best for the grandkids and their expanded families," writes grandparent Robin Cornejo.

Are you raising a child in Kinship? If you are 55 or older and raising a grandchild or child close to you? Let us help! Contact Bianca Nash-Miot at (269) 408-4364 or by email biancanashmiot@areaagencyonaging.org



Weatherize For Winter

Autumn is upon us, and in many parts of the country, there is already a brisk chill in the air. While it is easy to get caught up in the beautiful leaves on the trees and excitement of pumpkin spice EVERYTHING, it is not too soon to begin preparing your home for the winter months. This year's Farmers' Almanac predicts this winter to be very cold, but you can be prepared. Below are some helpful tips to keep your house warm and safe during the winter months.

Check your heating system

Priority one when temperatures drop? Staying warm! This is critical for those seniors who have chronic health conditions that make them more susceptible to cold temperatures. Make sure your home's heating system is in good working order before the mercury drops.

Prep for snow & ice removal

For many older adults living in colder climates, the headache and hassle of moving snow can be overwhelming. Be sure you have usable snow shovels, ice scrapers, and enough salt or ice melter on hand. Do an inventory of these snow removal essentials for sidewalks, driveways, and vehicles before bad weather is in the forecast.

Prepare for power outages

Severe winter weather always carries the potential for power outages. It is critical to be prepared and plan ahead. Make sure to have water, an emergency food supply, and a safe source of heat.

Consider your options

If you are a senior, or a caregiver for a senior, and feel overwhelmed by this to-do list, reach out to an Area Agency on Aging Information & Access Specialist. They can help you determine what services are available and give you resources to get the winter-time help you need to be safe and warm at home. Call (800) 654-2810 to learn more.



Companion Pets Bring Joy and Combat Loneliness for Older Adults



Gerry and his wife Marirose enjoy their pet

In 2015, an innovation team at Hasbro was given the unique challenge to create new ways to focus on health and wellness. Part of this new initiative was fueled by the fact there were not many products to bring fun and play to older adults. That was how they came to create companion pets. The pets not only provide joy and cuddles, but help seniors overcome the struggles of isolation and loneliness they may be experiencing.

These lifelike, voice-activated cats and dogs provide companionship to those who normally couldn't have a pet due to physical limits, or for those living in an apartment or home where pets are not allowed. So far the pets are a big hit with our clients bringing them feelings of happiness and love that owning a pet gives to an individual.

Russell Lunde, one of Area Agency on Aging's 74-year-old Senior Companion volunteers, has given a pet to four of his clients, and one to his 99-year-old father. He says the benefits of these are greater than he could imagine at first.

"Every one of my clients love these pets. They think they are almost real when they see them. I have never seen such an immediate reaction of joy from them on anything else. I call them 'love pets' because my clients fall in love with them right away," says Russell.

Another benefit Russell has noticed is the pets have made his clients more talkative. They play with the animals and pet them, this interaction starts their day with something positive. When relatives and grandkids come to visit, they have fun conversations about their pet and it also provides something exciting for the grandkids when they are over.

"The best part is the smiles. I have a client in a memory care unit who cannot talk, but is very expressive with his beautiful eyes. I can see by the light in his eyes how much joy this pet in his lap brings him," Russell says.

The Area Agency on Aging companion pet program started in summer of 2021 and since then over 130 pets have been given to area seniors. To find out more call 269-983-7058.



Advocacy Update

Early this year, local seniors, caregivers and aging service professionals joined statewide aging partners to give older Michiganians a chance to advocate on their own behalf for the services and supports important to them.

In addition to participating in virtual legislative public forums, seniors from the region sent over 500 letters to state elected officials urging them to support items in the state budget that provide vital services for older Michiganians.

Local media, legislators and their staff and other nonprofits helped to spread the word about these efforts. Through this work, over 290,000 touch points were generated locally where our community learned how to participate and engage in advocacy.

Legislators set spending levels for the budget in August and negotiations between the respective chambers' committee chairs and the executive branch culminated in late September. A finalized budget is expected soon - in time for the start of the fiscal year on October 1.

Key budget priorities include making permanent an increase in direct care worker wages, expanding the MI Choice program and funding for older adult services.

Thank you for being involved in these efforts! If you would like to know more about these or other policy priorities, sign up for our advocacy alerts visit AreaAgencyOnAging.org/advocacy or email advocacy@areaagencyonaging.org.



**Medicare Open Enrollment Starts Soon.
Let us Help You Navigate the Changes!**

2021 Open Enrollment Begins
October 15

2021 Open Enrollment Ends
December 7

2022 Changes Begin on Policy
January 1

Learn more at AreaAgencyOnAging.org/Medicare-Medicaid/

THE ROAD-MMAP TO YOUR BENEFITS

What is Open Enrollment for Medicare?

If you are on Medicare, Open Enrollment is the time you can make changes to your Medicare coverage. Medicare's Open Enrollment period runs from October 15 through December 7, and any changes you make will take effect on January 1, 2022. Open enrollment is a good opportunity to understand the changes you can make to your coverage and review your current Medicare health and drug plans. It is also a great time to refresh on protecting yourself from marketing violations and enrollment fraud. Would you like help understanding your benefits? Contact Mistelle at (269) 408-4354 or email info@areaagencyonaging.org

MMAP (Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program) is a free service provided by AAA and the Michigan State Health Insurance Assistance Program for anyone who needs help understanding their Medicare/Medicaid benefits.

AreaAgencyOnAging.org/Medicare-Medicaid/

Staying in their Own Home Was Possible-MI Choice

Ed makes everyone laugh. Especially his wife, Shirley. That is why it was so important for them stay living together in their home after each suffered massive strokes.

Ed is 69 and Shirley is 62. They have been married for 27 years. In 2008 Shirley had a stroke that left her unable to speak in full sentences and needing help to walk. Area Agency on Aging helped them determine Shirley was eligible for the MI Choice Waiver program. This allowed them to have help in their home for Shirley. Then in 2020, a massive stroke put Ed in the hospital and left him semi-blind and unable to walk on his own.

“This was a really hard time for him,” says Ed and Shirley’s AAA Care Manager, Emily Marshall. “Ed is a pretty happy go lucky guy who makes everyone laugh. He had been very active working nights at a local retailer and taking care of Shirley, but the effects of the stroke had him in rehab and unable to communicate like he used to. He was feeling lonely and very depressed. It was important for us to get him help and get him home.”

Ed needed extensive assistance to get up and go to the shower, restroom, or anywhere. Initially, he could only eat liquids through a tube. He had to go to many physical and speech therapy appointments. Shirley had similar hurdles following her stroke in 2008, needing to learn to walk and talk again, adjusting to a new way of life.

Emily knew Ed was also eligible for the MI Choice Waiver Program and through ‘Self-Determination’, a component of the program that gives recipients the option to self-direct their own care, they were able to choose Ed’s sister Christine, and Shirley’s niece Tiffany, to be their paid caregivers.

Now Shirley and Ed have family to take them to doctor’s appointments and to joke with in the car on the way. He and Shirley watch movies, have their meal, and enjoy word search puzzles, together, in their own home.

Learn more about the MI Choice Waiver program, a program designed specifically for low-income adults age 18 and older who need nursing home level of care but prefer not to live in a nursing home. Call (800) 654-2810 or visit AreaAgencyonAging.org/My-Choice.



Ed and Shirley were able to stay in their own home even needing nursing home level care

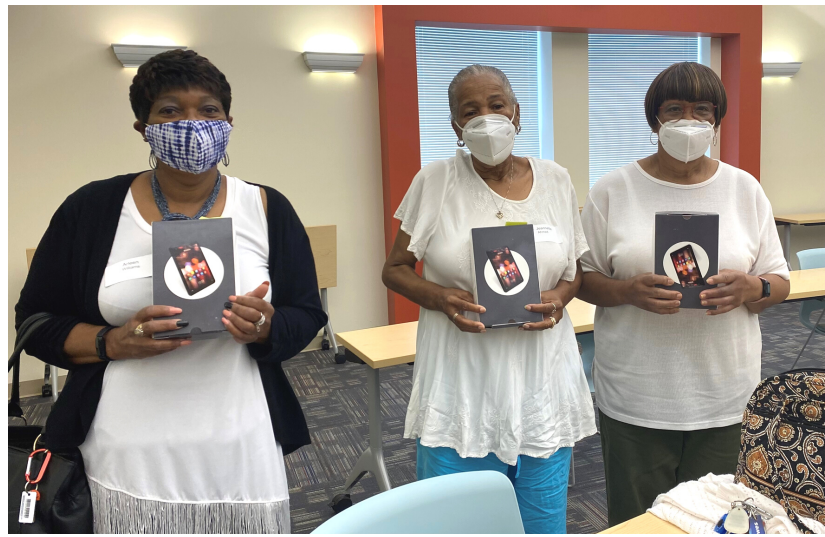
Getting, and Staying, Connected

There were some important lessons to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic. One of those was the need to make sure older adults in our area had access to technology, and knew how to use it.

The team at the Campus for Creative Aging started researching ways to get clients and senior volunteers connected. One of the key components was to have Wi-Fi access built into the device so they could be used even in areas without Internet.

The program started with about 30 various devices we provided for our Foster Grandparents and care managers to test and interact with. After some trial and error, we landed on Samsung tablets. There are now 100 Samsung tablets out in the community so seniors can be online to join classes, Zoom with their families, join their book clubs or attend religious services from home as needed. In addition, our Foster Grandparents can still interact with students through the tablets even though some cannot currently be in the classroom.

Classes are being held in-person and online so once they learn a set of skills, they can grow their knowledge. It is our hope to get as many area seniors online and connected as possible so they are prepared if we experience another situation where they need to remain in their home. This helps alleviate senior isolation on a broader spectrum by providing a way for them to stay connected, even if they cannot see people in person.



Senior volunteers attend class to learn how to use their tablets.



MI Choice Waiver Program

It's your life. Where you receive supports and services should be your choice. The MI Choice Waiver program is designed specifically for low-income adults age 18 and older who need nursing home level of care but prefer not to live in a nursing home.



(800) 654-2810

AreaAgencyonAging.org/My-Choice



Offering Choices for Independent Lives

2900 Lakeview Avenue
St. Joseph, MI, 49085

Return Service Requested

FALL 2021

RIVAAA NEWSLETTER

Make AAA Your First Call



Now, more than ever, older adults and individuals experiencing a disability are choosing to live at home, even if they need nursing home level of care.

Call us to get the help and support you need to live as independently as possible, in the setting of your choice.

(800) 654-2810

AreaAgencyonAging.org

Serving Berrien, Cass & Van Buren Counties

