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Community Care Corps Symposium: Supporting Older Adults, Caregivers and Adults with Disabilities Through Innovative Volunteer Models

Introduction

Increasingly, volunteers are becoming a critical component of the care continuum that supports older adults, adults with disabilities and caregivers. Community Care Corps is a national initiative, funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), that fosters innovative models that leverage volunteer engagement to support caregivers and provide older adults and people with disabilities with non-medical care. To achieve this, Community Care Corps awards grants to community-based organizations across the country to help them establish, enhance and grow volunteer models that support community living. Community Care Corps is administered by Oasis Institute in partnership with the Caregiver Action Network (CAN), USAgging and the Altarum Institute.

In November 2021, the Community Care Corps partners, led by USAgging, held a virtual Symposium to highlight the work of Community Care Corps grantees, elevate the importance of Community Care Corps' work with key stakeholders and provide a national platform for shared learning. Across two afternoons of learning and engagement, the Symposium, titled *Supporting Older Adults, Caregivers and Adults with Disabilities Through Innovative Volunteer Models*, drove discussion about the value of volunteers and how to replicate innovative models across the country to address the needs of older adults, caregivers and people with disabilities at the community level. The Symposium featured a full lineup of federal and congressional leaders, researchers, Community Care Corps grantees and other Aging Network leaders who provided robust discussion around key resources, lessons learned, successful models and actionable steps for the Aging Network. The Symposium concluded with a panel of Community Care Corps leaders who each called on attendees to continue to develop and enhance innovative models, get involved with Community Care Corps and push for permanence by increasing the visibility of successful volunteer models with lawmakers.



Day One

Day one of the Symposium opened with speakers from the Community Care Corps partners, federal agencies and Congress. Sherri Clark, Aging Services Program Specialist at the Administration for Community Living, kicked off the day with a warm welcome to the Symposium's more than 1,100 registrants. Juliet Simone, National Health and Program Director at Oasis Institute, shared an overview of the Community Care Corps initiative, grounding her remarks with personal stories that exemplified the national caregiving crisis. In highlighting the accomplishments of Community Care Corps grantees during a challenging time, Simone crafted a compelling case for the permanence of the Community Care Corps initiative—a message that would resonate throughout the Symposium.

USAging Chief of Programs and Services Deborah Stone-Walls, then welcomed to the virtual stage two of the Aging Network's most fierce advocates in Congress. Representative Debbie Dingell (D-MI) who, in sharing her own caregiving experience, recognized the importance of Community Care Corps' work supporting volunteer models that support older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers in community-based settings where they can live with dignity and respect. Representative Dingell asserted that the nation's rapidly growing population of older adults gives us a mandate to invest in the care workforce and highlighted the [Better Care Better Jobs Act](#),ⁱ a bill she introduced into Congress. The Symposium was then joined by Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), the Senator of America's oldest state and a longtime advocate for the Aging Network. Senator Collins, as a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, was one of the outspoken supporters of the funding that established Community Care Corps and as a member of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, she helped lead the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act in 2020. Senator Collins highlighted the numerous legislative initiatives she has championed, including the [RAISE Family Caregivers Act](#)ⁱⁱ and the [Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act](#),ⁱⁱⁱ to illustrate how she is contributing to the weaving together of a national strategy to strengthen support for caregivers across the nation. Senator Collins remarked upon the importance of Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), including the five in her home state, and noted that the success of local work requires strong federal partnership.

Atalaya Sergi, Director of AmeriCorps Seniors, delivered the day's keynote address. Sergi brings more than 20 years of community engagement to her role leading AmeriCorps Seniors and has spent part of her career bringing together private and public organizations to address the needs of people in underserved communities. As Director of AmeriCorps Seniors, Sergi leads three separate programs that recruit and engage volunteers age 55 and over to solve critical community challenges: the [Foster Grandparent Program](#),^{iv} the [Senior Companion Program](#)^v and the [RSVP Program](#).^{vi} Through these three programs alone, AmeriCorps Seniors engages over 170,000 older adults. Sergi began by highlighting key statistics from her agency's [Volunteering in America](#)^{vii} report that demonstrate how volunteering is a part of American culture and noted there is still untapped potential. In her remarks, Sergi reflected on the many challenges of the past two years, describing how AmeriCorps Seniors programs fundamentally change in the face of a dramatically different landscape. In her reflection, Sergi drew out lessons from the experiences of the Aging Network, caregivers, older adults and people with disabilities. While local programs

were able to adapt to meet the changing needs of older adults and people with disabilities, Sergi noted that the past two years of the pandemic have pulled back the curtain on the need for a national intergenerational volunteer network. Sergi asserted that organizations in the aging and disability networks must place equity in the center of their approach to addressing barriers to volunteerism and tapping into the potential of volunteer programs. Sergi's keynote address concluded with a challenge to attendees to seize the lessons they have learned during the pandemic to create and expand opportunities for volunteerism in the aging and disability networks.

Day one of the Community Care Corps Symposium continued with *Activating Volunteers in Local Models Supporting Older Adults, Family Caregivers and People with Disabilities*, a panel that brought together aging and disability experts with local service providers to explore how organizations are engaging volunteers to address community need. Juliet Simone led the panel and was joined by Judy Anderson, Director of Community and Volunteer Services at Aroostook Agency on Aging; Maggie Ratnayake, Executive Director of Lori's Hands; and Tobi Johnson, President and Founder of VolunteerPro. Aroostook Agency on Aging and Lori's Hands, both Community Care Corps grantees, provided their on-the-ground perspective while Johnson, an internationally recognized authority on volunteer engagement, shared her practical expertise.

Aroostook Agency on Aging set out with two main goals for their Community Care Corps model: to reduce social isolation and to increase the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to live independently in their own homes. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the agency had to make some changes to its model. Their "friendly visitors" were quickly converted into "friendly callers." Anderson said it was important to meet volunteers where they were, adapting to differing levels of comfort with engaging in activities during the pandemic. Lori's Hands' volunteer model provides intergenerational engagement, connecting college students and community members living with chronic illness. College students provide practical assistance while getting to learn from individuals who have lived experience. The model naturally plays off each group's strengths, connecting two distinct groups in a way that is mutually beneficial. Ratnayake, through her experience with this volunteer model, has learned how important it is to focus on volunteer needs and goals. Understanding a volunteer's goals, allows one to better tailor the design of a model to increase engagement.

Johnson remarked on the new continuum of engagement and how it relates to the continuum of risk acceptance during a public health crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteer engagement was often dependent upon time constraints or other factors like transportation access and availability. For instance, a busy college student with no personal vehicle might not have considered volunteer engagements that required time and travel commitments. Now, with more programs adopting technology that allows for virtual engagement, volunteers can engage on a broader spectrum. Busy college students can open their laptops or phones and meaningfully engage with older adults and people with disabilities in a safe, easy and accessible way. Societal trends tend to be a precursor to volunteer trends and Johnson is seeing a movement toward digital maturity. While data collected by [VolunteerPro's Volunteer Management Progress Report Survey](#)^{viii} suggests that digital engagement peaked during the pandemic, anecdotally, models that have leveraged

the power of virtual communication have seen significant success. In one case, Johnson described an organization operating virtually that is having difficulty finding the demand for all the volunteer interest it has received during the pandemic. But it isn't always so easy. Aroostook Agency on Aging, which serves a rural community in Maine, cited issues with broadband and lack of access to reliable internet in parts of their community as major challenges. The AAA has often had to rely on more traditional methods of connecting with members of the community—calling them on the telephone, connecting when delivering meals to their homes and sending letters in the mail.

Both grantees described barriers they faced in creating successful volunteer models. Anderson, from Aroostook Agency on Aging, said that hesitancy to volunteer—especially among older adults—was an inhibiting factor. The agency created models that ensured participants' health and level of comfort by leveraging virtual platforms. Ratnayake noted that communication was a challenge for its model. Lori's Hands needed to discover the best mode of communication for each volunteer to meet volunteer needs and preferences, be it by phone, email, text message, or their organization's app. Recruitment, previously a leading challenge for volunteer models, became slightly easier as the continuum of engagement opportunities widened during the pandemic. Johnson notes that, in surveys, recruitment has fallen to the third-most common reported challenge. Both Aroostook Agency on Aging and Lori's Hands are engaged in continuous improvement to adapt and address these challenges.

Day Two

The second day of the Community Care Corps Symposium began with a warm welcome from USAging CEO Sandy Markwood, setting the stage for the afternoon's agenda. Markwood then welcomed the day's keynote speaker to the virtual stage: Alison Barkoff, Principal Deputy Administrator and Assistant Secretary for Aging at ACL. Barkoff opened with a success story that was close to home, describing the fulfilling and independent life of her brother, who lives with a disability. Barkoff shared her perspective on how the nation's 53 million family caregivers are a large and very critical component of the system of care for millions of older adults and people with disabilities. Though they provide necessary assistance that many older adults and people with disabilities rely on, family caregivers often lack support.

In highlighting ACL's continued and growing efforts focused on supporting caregivers, Barkoff noted that expanded efforts are possible because of the increased recognition and investment in caregivers by the Biden Administration. Through the [RAISE Family Caregivers Act](#),^{ix} the [National Family Caregiver Support Program](#),^x the [Lifespan Respite Care Program](#),^{xi} the [Alzheimer's Disease Programs Initiative](#),^{xii} and the [Native American Elders Caregiving Program](#)^{xiii} and Community Care Corps, ACL plays an integral part in supporting the development of a national caregiving strategy. This can only be achieved by leveraging the strength of America's 20,000 community-based organizations (CBOs), family caregivers and volunteers. Barkoff then turned her remarks to an issue that has been front-of-mind for many over the last two years: the COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden administration's whole-of-government approach to tackling the pandemic in part relies on the expertise of ACL, the aging and disability networks and new services like [DIAL—the](#)

[Disability Information and Access Line](#).^{xiv} DIAL, administered by USAgings in partnership with a consortium of organizations serving people with disabilities, helps connect people with disabilities with COVID-19 vaccinations, with some shots being administered in one's own home. ACL recognizes that equitable vaccine access is both a moral imperative and legal mandate. Barkoff says the one silver lining of the pandemic is that it has revealed the true depth of the need for a national urgency to strengthen home and community-based services and the caregiving infrastructure. As the country works to address this national emergency, Barkoff stressed the importance of creating a care system that supports community living.

At the conclusion of Barkoff's remarks, the first panel discussion of day two of the Symposium, *Needs of Caregivers at the Community Level*, was led by the CEO of Caregiver Action Network (CAN) John Schall, who engaged experts from local, state, national and federal perspectives. Joining the panel was Abigail Cox, Director, Georgia Department of Human Services, Division of Aging Services; Diane Cohn, Supervisor, Caregiver Support Program, Northern Colorado Services, Volunteers of America Colorado; C. Grace Whiting, former President and CEO, National Alliance for Caregiving (NAC); and Greg Link, Director, Office of Supportive and Caregiver Services, ACL. Whiting opened by describing an array of statistics that illustrated the fact that across the nation, there are more caregivers doing more work and feeling more burnt out and stressed by their intensive caregiving roles. Link shared with the panel that in addition to assistance with activities of daily living, according to [ACL's 2019 National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants](#),^{xv} 87 percent of caregivers are assisting with complex medical tasks that were typically in the hands of medical professionals. Seventy-nine percent of caregivers report caring for their loved one 24 hours per day, resulting in 59 percent feeling socially isolated.

But when caregivers are given support, those statistics start to change. ACL found that more than 60 percent of caregivers receiving caregiver support services report having more time for other activities, 71 percent report lower levels of stress and about 80 percent said that the support they received allowed them to be better caregivers. Link noted that the more we understand about caregivers, the more evident it becomes that the needs of caregivers should be approached holistically, providing support for various parts of their lives.

Moving to the state level, Cox described how Georgia works with the aging and disability networks in the state—specifically AAAs—to address the various needs of caregivers and the older adults and people with disabilities for whom they provide care. She explained the relevance of the [RAISE Family Caregivers Initial Report to Congress](#)^{xvi} as a guide for the multi-pronged approach the Georgia Department of Human Services has taken to support the needs of caregivers in the state.

At the local level, Volunteers of America Colorado, a Community Care Corps grantee, shared the community perspective on the needs of caregivers. Adding a layer to the conversation, Cohn explained how her model is expanding its services to focus on the unique needs of LGBTQ caregivers. The LGBTQ community harbors a justified skepticism of systems as these systems have not always served the LGBTQ community in the ways they have served others. Cohn reported the following statistics about LGBTQ older adults:

they are five times less likely to seek medical care or social services than the general public; 75 percent of this population lives alone and the vast majority do not have children. As a result, the problems that this community faces are heightened. Cohn noted that working more closely with LGBTQ older adults has been a learning experience for Volunteers of America Colorado. The agency formed a committee to identify action steps to appropriately address the unique needs of this population. In addition, the organization is soliciting services from culturally competent organizations, like Area Agencies on Aging, and evaluating their data collection and outreach methods to ensure equitable community engagement. “The fear of not doing things perfectly can mean that we don’t do anything at all,” Cohn said when discussing the dangers of inaction.

The second panel of the day, *Addressing Community Needs of Caregivers, Older Adults and Adults Living with Disabilities Through Innovative Models*, was led by Anne Montgomery, Director, Center for Eldercare Improvement at the Altarum Institute. This panel focused on spotlighting successful and replicable volunteer models as well as programmatic insights and considerations for the Hispanic population. The panel included three Community Care Corps grantee speakers: Dana Howarth, Program Director at New Mexico Caregivers Coalition (NMCC); Javan Mangum, Community Outreach Manager at Ascension Saint Agnes Hospital Health Institute; Jennifer Carson, Administrator and Compliance and Privacy Officer at Hospice and Home of Juneau, a division of Catholic Community Services. The panel was further enhanced by the presence of Yanira Cruz, President and CEO of the National Hispanic Council on Aging (NHCOA).

Each Community Care Corps grantee described their models in detail. Howarth shared with the panel that NMCC serves a diverse population of family caregivers in urban areas, rural communities and tribal lands. Through regularly scheduled virtual educational sessions on non-medical interventions, NMCC’s model seeks both to help caregivers increase knowledge of and proficiency in the tasks they perform and convene groups to combat social isolation. The sessions cover topics such as stress management, self-advocacy, communication skills and online safety. NMCC also partners with Senior Medicare Patrol to present on Medicare coverage and another community-based organization to present on caregivers caring for people living with Alzheimer’s or other forms of dementia. NMCC listens to participants and adapts programming according to what caregivers need and want. NMCC experienced unsurprising challenges in implementation. During the pandemic, the agency—like so many others—had to revamp its model to operate virtually. For some participants, especially those living in rural or tribal areas, virtual adaptation was far from easy. Technology literacy and broadband access surfaced as challenges. In spite of the difficulty, Howarth remarked that, as a result of the pandemic and hosting trainings online, the agency actually expanded its reach. Trainings no longer required in-person attendance, which meant caregivers no longer had to coordinate transportation or care for their loved one to allow participation.

Mangum, from Ascension Saint Agnes, shared details of the *Trusted Ride Program*. The model, which serves older adults and people with disabilities in Baltimore, MD, provides non-medical volunteer chaperones that help transport participants to and from medical appointments. The model also assists with transportation needs across a medical campus

as older adults often need to attend several appointments in one single day. For those who struggle with mobility, a chaperone can help reduce the risk of injury and ensure timely attendance at appointments. Mangum calls the model's volunteers, who also perform wellness checks and appointment reminders, the program's "eyes and ears" on the ground. During wellness checks, volunteers often identify risk factors in a participant's home and subsequently connect the participant to the necessary services to remedy the issue. Mangum said the pandemic acutely impacted his organization's programming and participation fell both among volunteers and those they were serving. At one point, the model was reduced to two chaperones. However, with resourcefulness, the model was revitalized. The pandemic forced Ascension Saint Agnes to implement creative solutions and reinforced the need for a comprehensive volunteer recruitment and retention plan. It is Mangum's hope that this model is adopted and integrated by hospitals across the country.

The Hospice and Home of Juneau model was borne of the COVID-19 pandemic. Carson noted that the abrupt end of many community services assisting older adults left a gaping community need. Hospice and Home pulled together volunteers under Catholic Community Services' Senior Services Division to meet the overarching goal of helping older adults age safely and independently in their homes, which had recently become a salient need as long-term care facilities bore the brunt of the pandemic. Volunteers under this program perform everything from light housekeeping to safety checks, trips to the grocery store and other essential activities. Volunteers also help older adults increase technology literacy, allowing them to attend telehealth appointments or engage virtually with loved ones living in the "lower 48." Beyond routine activities, volunteers engage in proxy hunting and fishing on behalf of homebound older adults. For Alaskans, these activities are part of the culture. Hospice and Home, moving forward, is exploring more opportunities that preserve the culture of Alaskan natives.

Finally, the panel turned to Dr. Cruz, from NHCOA, for reflections on how programs can best address the needs of the Hispanic population. Dr. Cruz remarked that even within the same region, racial and cultural differences are an important factor when considering how to address community need. Dr. Cruz referenced disparities in technology literacy and access to transportation among racial and ethnic populations and noted that without careful consideration of a targeted population's needs, one might miss the mark. By partnering with local leaders or nontraditional community entities, Dr. Cruz asserted that organizations can more effectively deliver culturally competent programming. For example, NHCOA is partnering with the embassies of Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador to conduct outreach to Latino populations in Washington, D.C.

Call to Action

The final day of the Community Care Corps symposium concluded with a panel of leaders from the Community Care Corps partner organizations in a session titled *Call to Action: Opportunities for Future Engagement*. Panelists brought together the energy and momentum from the two-day symposium and distilled it into key action steps. The panel included final remarks from Deputy Director of Eldercare Improvement at the Altarum Institute, Sarah Slocum; National Health and Program Director at Oasis Institute, Juliet

Simone; USAging CEO, Sandy Markwood; and Caregiver Action Network CEO, John Schall. Slocum set the stage for the discussion, remarking that the growing caregiving needs of older adults and people with disabilities require effective and sustainable care options and making Community Care Corps a permanent program is a path towards a national strategy for caregiving.

Oasis Institute's call to action relies on the innovation and creativity of community-based organizations across the country. Simone said implementing unique models and new and different approaches are ways that the aging and disability networks continue to adapt. Simone called upon symposium attendees to continue to forge new ways of approaching the national caregiving crisis and to uncover innovative solutions.

Markwood recounted the importance of Community Care Corps, remarking that the initiative complements the work of the Aging Network as both share a mission to support older adults, caregivers and adults with disabilities so they can lead healthy and independent lives in their own homes—where most of us prefer to be. She went on to note that the pandemic has uncovered and reinforced the importance of home and community-based services provided in individuals' preferred locations. However, this requires supporting caregivers, too. Just as the population of older adults is growing, so is the population of caregivers. Caregivers need help and Community Care Corps offers a community engagement solution that integrates with and extends the existing services and supports the Aging Network already provides. Markwood concluded her remarks about the importance of this initiative with her call to action: get involved with Community Care Corps.

Schall ended the session by noting that Community Care Corps is a five-year demonstration program and expressing his hope that Community Care Corps will become a permanent initiative. He remarked that the country is at a critical juncture where the immense need of older adults, people with disabilities and their caregivers is matched only by the energy around creating a comprehensive solution. Community Care Corps is a critical component of addressing these needs through volunteers providing non-medical supports and the information and examples highlighted in this Symposium demonstrate innovation and opportunities for replication across the country.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ *S.2210 – Better Care Better Jobs Act*, 117th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/2210?s=1&r=65>.
- ⁱⁱ *RAISE Family Caregivers Act*, 115th Congress, <https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/about-acl/2018-10/PLAW-115publ119%20-%20RAISE.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act*, 115th Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ196/PLAW-115publ196.pdf>.
- ^{iv} *AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent Program*, AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/serve/fit-finder/americorps-seniors-foster-grandparent-program>.
- ^v *AmeriCorps Seniors Senior Companion Program*, AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/serve/fit-finder/americorps-seniors-senior-companion-program>.
- ^{vi} *AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP*, AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/serve/fit-finder/americorps-seniors-rsvp>.
- ^{vii} *Volunteering in America*, AmeriCorps, <https://americorps.gov/newsroom/news/via>.
- ^{viii} *Volunteer Management Progress Report*, VolunteerPro, https://s3.amazonaws.com/kajabi-storefronts-production/sites/60619/themes/1474670/downloads/82iwWpowQF2tvnsquqep_2021_VMPR_Report_FINALv3_1_.pdf.
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- ^x *National Family Caregiver Support Plan*, Administration for Community Living, <https://acl.gov/programs/support-caregivers/national-family-caregiver-support-program>
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- ^{xiii} *Services for Native Americans (OOA Title VI)*, Administration for Community Living, <https://acl.gov/programs/services-native-americans-ooa-title-vi#:~:text=Other%20supportive%20services,-,Caregiver%20Support%20Services,and%20grandparents%20caring%20for%20grandchildren.&text=Rather%2C%20it%20provides%20support%20that%20strengthens%20the%20a%20family’s%20caregiver%20role>.
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- ^{xvi} *RAISE Family Caregivers Act Initial Report to Congress*, Administration for Community Living, https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/RAISE-InitialReportToCongress2021_Final.pdf