

Formerly NJ Foundation for Aging



To the Assembly Aging & Senior Services Committee May 5, 2021

Hello.

I am Cathy Rowe and I am happy to join you as the new Executive Director of New Jersey Advocates for Aging Well (formerly known as NJ Foundation for Aging).

I know NJAAW has had a long and supportive relationship with this committee, and I look forward to working with each of you on issues that matter most to NJ's older residents. I recognize several friendly faces of my colleagues in age-friendly initiatives.

In my recent work at SOMA Two Towns for All Ages, the age-friendly initiative of South Orange and Maplewood, I have worked to enable residents to age in place as active, engaged and respected members in the communities they not only know and love, but have helped to build.

One of our priorities last year was to keep the Senior Freeze tax program, and we appreciate the help of this committee and Committee Chair Vainieri Huttie in ensuring it continued. Many of our older adults could not afford to stay in their homes without this important program.

Our mission at NJAAW is to allow seniors to age at home or the setting of their choice. Much has been reported around the COVID cases and unfortunate deaths in residential care, but we must not overlook those at home who faced many challenges during the worst of the pandemic. Services they relied on were disrupted, such as senior transportation. Isolation hit older adults living alone very hard, especially those not able to go online. People who never asked for assistance before suddenly needed help for basic needs. And the data on them is municipality-based so we don't have a comprehensive view of the number of people seeking assistance, for what, and the resolution.

The local response to COVID, as in many NJ communities, was a rapid immersion into learning about need, services and finding gaps in between. Not only did a record number of residents seek assistance for basic needs like housing and food support, this need came at a time agencies and programs struggled to adapt to new approaches in delivering services with severe disruption to their usual way of doing business.

So, as we “come out” of COVID and return to a new normal, I want to focus on what was learned under the disruptions. Many older New Jerseyans were not only seeking assistance but they were doing so for the first time. Many older residents are simply not aware of services that are available or how to apply for them.

Trying to navigate the multiple agencies, departments and programs is complicated, especially for people unaware of what is offered, what qualifies them for service and how to apply. In addition, many of our residents are not tech savvy or do not go online to find what they need.

Finally, many towns simply do not have the resources to do it on their own. To go back to Katie York’s comments – neither South Orange or Maplewood had staff for homebound vaccinations, and when County plans for vaccinations fell through, each town had to scramble to find a service to do it for them.

This surge in need under COVID emphasizes the need for simple, comprehensive ways to access services.

- A single point of entry for services would not only make it easier for residents to find services, but increase efficiencies. A clearinghouse approach could screen callers and educate them about available services, as opposed to calling multiple offices, which is time consuming and confusing to the resident, and takes staff time to respond to inquiries from people who are not eligible.
- Maintain multiple methods to apply, recognizing the lack of technology by some.
- Promote the services available to older adults as well as adult children and people who care for them with comprehensive materials describing all services for adults and their caregivers.

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