

What the Pandemic Teaches Us, for Today and Tomorrow

By Jo Ann Jenkins

Dealing with the global coronavirus pandemic these past few months is an enormous challenge for everyone, especially older adults and people with underlying health conditions who are most at risk for COVID-19. While these have been difficult times, they have also provided an opportunity for us to pause and consider the future of our global society.

Global crises like COVID-19 have a way of shining a spotlight on our social shortcomings, especially as they impact older adults. They illuminate underlying problems — like isolation and loneliness, lack of affordable and high-quality health care, economic insecurity, and ageism — and the accompanying need for action. Just as the Great Depression of the 1930s surfaced the widespread problem of economic insecurity among older adults in the U.S. and led to the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, this pandemic forces us not only to address immediate needs, but to consider longer-term solutions that will help us all live and age better, lessening the impact of future crises.

AARP has been on the frontlines for over 60 years to improve people's health and economic security and to address the needs and interests of people as they age. As we've seen, older people are much more likely to be seriously impacted by the coronavirus. Many are more dependent on caregivers, friends, and family to help them get the food, supplies, and medicines they need. In addition to the medical risks, older people also face significant social and economic risks from isolation and even scam artists, who take advantage of times like these to steal money or sensitive personal information. That's why during the pandemic, we've continued to work hard every day to be both a trusted friend to people ages 50-plus and a fierce defender of their interests.

Trusted Friend

As a trusted friend, we provide the latest information to make sure older adults and their families know how to protect themselves and remain safe and healthy. Information is available in a range of formats and channels — tips, facts, and stories in English and Spanish, online, through social media, and in our newsletters and publications.

Our website at www.aarp.org/coronavirus has the latest information about government guidelines on personal safety and receiving assistance, as well as relevant information on Medicare coverage, Social Security, and caregiving. We host weekly tele-townhalls with the nation's top health and financial experts who address our members' concerns and answer their questions. And we've created resources for family caregivers to help keep them and their loved ones safe and healthy.

At AARP, we're especially focused on helping our most vulnerable citizens feel a sense of security and social connection, especially those living in long-term care settings (e.g., nursing homes and assisted-living facilities) or living alone. To help protect some of the people most vulnerable to the pandemic and support their families, we published six important questions, covering both health and emotional needs, that family members should address to nursing homes if they have a loved one living in one.

AARP Foundation's Connect2Affect, meanwhile, works with affordable senior housing providers to equip their residents and staff with tools that help seniors maintain vital social connections. We've also created an online tool (<https://aarpcommunityconnections.org/>) to help communities form "mutual aid groups," informal groups of volunteers of all ages that form to

support people most in need in their local community. They pick up groceries, provide financial assistance, or simply lend emotional support.

Sadly, during times like these scam artists prey on our fears and anxieties to steal our money, sensitive personal information, and even our identities. AARP has responded. For more information on AARP's resources, go to <https://www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/>.

Global Responses to Covid-19 Resource

The reach of COVID-19 stretches around the world and has spared no country. Many countries and communities have responded with creative or noteworthy approaches to improve the health and wellbeing of their people. Through research and outreach to global colleagues, AARP has created a new website featuring more than 100 global resources, blogs, and issue briefs from around the world. The site is updated daily to ensure that visitors have access to the most up-to-date information. To learn more, visit: www.aarpinternational.org/covid19.

Fierce Defender

As a fierce defender, we advocate for older adults with national, state, and local lawmakers to help secure sufficient resources to meet people's needs and combat the virus.

One such example came in March, when Congress came together in a bipartisan way to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act — the initial centerpiece legislation responding to the COVID-19 crisis. AARP fought hard to make sure seniors, especially those living on Social Security, will get the same \$1,200

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economic-impact payment benefit that Americans earning \$75,000 a year or less are receiving.

This is only the tip of the iceberg. AARP's advocacy has resulted in billions of dollars in emergency funding for the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop treatments and a vaccine for this virus, and for public health preparedness and response. We have secured a major expansion of tele-medicine through Medicare to more easily enable consumer-provider "phone call appointments," cutting down on doctor's office visits.

Global Advocacy to Prioritize the Needs of Older Persons

We have leveraged the tragic impact of COVID-19 to accelerate our work and shine a spotlight on many of the greatest concerns of the 50+ population.

AARP joined several organizations in calling for global leadership, including signing on to letters to the World Health Organization and to the United Nations Secretary General, urging them to prioritize the needs of older people in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also wrote a letter to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights to offer our assistance and urge her office to issue guidance on addressing the needs of older persons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Largely as a result of our global advocacy efforts, the UN Secretary General António Guterres released a Policy Brief on the impact of the pandemic on older adults, and both he and the High Commissioner for Human Rights have become forceful public voices on aging issues. In July, I sat down for a one-on-one video conversation

with the Secretary General of the United Nations to discuss the release of the Policy Brief on Covid-19 and Older Persons strengthening our collaboration with the United Nations to ensure older persons' issues and voices are addressed in policy globally.

Looking Ahead

Amid this backdrop, we also look ahead. This dark cloud has a silver lining, for it has given us a glimpse into the future, showing us how society must change to accommodate an increasingly aging population, rapid technological innovation, a changing workforce, and an increased demand for health care. Here are some future-focused observations.

Technology can help people stay connected and ease isolation. The experience of physical distancing has led more of us to adopt tools like Zoom, FaceTime, and Skype as a means of staying connected. It has also sped up emerging trends including telemedicine, working remotely, distance learning, and long-distance caregiving. We've learned that while technology doesn't diminish the need for face-to-face contact, it does offer a means of maintaining relationships and easing the isolation often felt by older adults when personal contact diminishes or isn't possible. But in order for these technologies to work, we have to accelerate training for older adults on how to use them. Likewise, we need to be aware of our increased susceptibility to fraud and scams as we do more of our business (e.g., banking) and socializing online.

Our nation and our communities are stronger when generations come together. One of the most positive signs I've seen emerging from

this crisis is the recognition that generations are connected and do look out for one another. Amid the heartache, loss, and suffering that has spread throughout the world, we have also seen dramatic examples of all ages coming together to help those in need, to comfort those who mourn lost loved ones, to aid neighbors and friends, and to care for those who need help with basic needs. In a strange way, physical and social distancing have brought many of us closer together. Being apart no longer has to mean being alone.

The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated innovations in health care delivery. Physical distancing has led more health care providers to adopt telemedicine as an alternative method of delivering care. While telemedicine is not a substitute for face-to-face visits, we're learning it can be another effective tool in the delivery of health care.

The workforce of the future is here. With most businesses and organizations having their employees work from home, we've had the opportunity to experience the workforce of the future on a large scale. This vast, forced experiment has shown us the challenges, but it's also helping companies develop best practices sure to be beneficial going forward.

We must address social, racial, and economic disparities. Here in the U.S., COVID-19 has disproportionately affected certain communities, with Blacks and Latinos hospitalized and dying at higher rates. These disparities are not random; they are the result of a long history of inequality due to a lack of social, economic, and political opportunities.

If there is one thing I would like to see come from this global pandemic, it would be that we take advantage of the opportunity we now have

to build a more equitable global society. All people should have access to the resources, services, and support that empower them to live a life of dignity, good health, and purpose — regardless of age, race, or income.

We must all remain steadfast in our fight against the coronavirus pandemic. By using innovation and our entrepreneurial spirit, we will emerge from this experience stronger than ever, with a renewed commitment to empathy, inclusion, and justice, coming together to create an enduring common good. ●



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