

Silver Linings in the Darkest of Clouds

by Cheryl Deep

In its first few months, Covid-19 upended much of the Institute of Gerontology's important community outreach and engagement work. Events for older adults, trainings for health care professionals, student workshops—all cancelled. The IOG's work revolves around older adults and the professionals who serve them so in-person activities were completely out of the question.

The transition to safe, [virtual interactions and digital newsletters](#) began. One year later, we're a little astonished at how successful that transition has been. What have we learned from the Covid-19 pandemic? Crises happen. It's how we respond to them that defines our character.

Quality outreach knows no bounds.

When the IOG transitioned all its programs online, geographical and transportation boundaries disappeared -- and our numbers skyrocketed. We're training professionals in Michigan, North Carolina, Virginia, Wisconsin, Ohio, California, Tennessee and Florida.

In 2019, our last year pre-Covid, we presented 83 programs and educated 3,567. In the year after Covid hit, [we hosted 88 programs and educated 14,774!](#)

"I didn't realize how much we had grown," said Outreach Director Donna MacDonald. "We know the need for education on issues that impact aging is huge, and certainly not confined to Michigan. I'm grateful our programs can now help fill that need across the US." Even after in-person events resume, the IOG will maintain a mix of virtual and live presentations so distant learners continue to benefit. "The pandemic motivated us to master an online approach, something we'd talked about for years," Donna said.

[Successful Aging thru Financial Empowerment](#), known as the SAFE program, also got a boost from its remote format. SAFE provides no-cost financial education, coaching and recovery services to older adults and caregivers. Some clients want to learn about money management; others have been victims of financial fraud or exploitation and need serious help sorting through multiple problems. "When SAFE started, I wanted to meet with clients in person to help build trust and could go through their financial records together," said SAFE Director LaToya Hall, MSW.

"Since Covid, I've learned we can establish that same kind of trust through phone or Zoom calls. We can screen share files and they can see who I'm contacting and how. There are ways to make everyone comfortable without the burden of traveling to the IOG," she said. Now that SAFE is virtual, LaToya's been able to provide services in rural areas of Michigan including the Upper Peninsula, plus North Carolina and Illinois, reaching more people and recovering more than \$120,000 of funds for fraud victims. SAFE presentations have been watched by nearly 4,500 people.

When it seems like nothing can be done, do something.

The [Healthier Black Elders Center](#) (part of a joint grant with the U-M and MSU) is a group of African Americans, ranging in age from 55 to at present a 100-year-old, willing to consider participating in research projects. These 1,200 or so volunteers supply regularly updated demographic data and are notified of research projects they may qualify for. They can turn down a recruitment offer at any time for any reason. All research is pre-approved by a special HBEC community board before being allowed to recruit from the group. The members are a special group of people, willing to take part in research with the hope it will improve the health and well-being of minority older adults.

"Then Covid hit," said HBEC Coordinator Vanessa Rorai, MSW. "Most of these people were isolated in their homes. As the weeks dragged on, we had no idea how they were doing." So the HBEC team decided to find out. They recruited 15 callers and started dialing. Questions included asking how they were doing, if they needed help, and if they had access to supplies, healthcare, and technology. It took nine months to call everyone on the list. Answering the survey was optional. The team completed 557 surveys.

In addition to connecting with HBEC members, the calls provided a resource pipeline. Callers shared at least 81 resources for mental health services, masks, grocery delivery, financial services, and caregiver support. Overall, members were handling the crisis pretty well, a resilience that did not surprise Vanessa. "It was important to me and the HBEC program to be able to formally capture those coping strategies and that resiliency to share on a broader community and academic level," Vanessa said.

"There was a growing narrative surrounding older adults at the beginning of the pandemic that painted this generation as extremely vulnerable and high risk. While that was certainly true in terms of contracting Covid," Vanessa said, "spiritually and psychologically our members persevered in ways other generations can learn from." [Read more Healthier Black Elders news HERE.](#)

Never underestimate older adults.

Those stories we told ourselves about older adults not attending online IOG events, because mastering the technology would be too challenging, proved false. When the world pivoted post-Covid, older adults embraced FaceTime, Zoom, Facebook Live and a host of other digital platforms for video connecting. Pew Research Center surveys confirm this. About 80% of adults ages 65 and older now own smartphones. Seventy-three percent of seniors use the internet – a 60-percentage-point increase in two decades. And 66% of older Americans now have broadband at home.

We saw it firsthand. Our Zoom Caregiving Conference last November had over 100 participants. Folks signed on and off, muted and unmuted appropriately, used the chat box and engaged with the speakers with few or no problems. IOG Director Dr. Lichtenberg likes to remind people of the many [research studies finding exceptional resilience in older adults](#). "Resilience results from successfully adapting to adversity," he said. "Age and experience give us more opportunities to hone that adaptation. Older adults also have a strong sense of well-being. They are motivated to work out ways to survive and thrive."

There's always room for gratitude.

At a time when the economy was uncertain, job losses mounting, and several major industries reeling, many supporters of the IOG still found [a way to donate](#) toward our mission. We are so deeply grateful. Our IOG Endowment, a way to insure future funding for student training and other important programs, continues to grow. The generosity of older adults, caregivers, senior residences, service providers, and other organizations dedicated to successful aging is overwhelming and humbling. We thank you.