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Media Contact:

Patrick Schwartz

330.933.9825

Service Coordinators are Unsung First Responders in Fight Against COVID-19

COLUMBUS, Ohio – The Ohio Statewide Service Coordination Network is a statewide network of service coordinators serving Ohio’s affordable housing and aging services providers. Members of this network have been instrumental in coordinating a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and have ensured that vulnerable older adults remain connected to vital services and supports while sheltering in their own homes.

Service coordinators assist elderly and disabled residents and families living in affordable housing communities and identify, locate, and acquire the services and supports necessary to become and remain self-sufficient.

Members of the Ohio Statewide Service Coordination Network include LeadingAge Ohio, the American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC), the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging (o4a), as well as a statewide alliance of aging services and senior housing providers, which include: Episcopal Retirement Services (Cincinnati), Graceworks Lutheran Services (Dayton), National Church Residences (Columbus), St. Mary Development Corporation (Dayton), and United Church Homes (Marion). These organizations work together to cover the entire state of Ohio.

“COVID-19 has placed the role of service coordinators under a microscope and the resulting view highlights their importance,” stated Kathryn Brod, President/CEO of LeadingAge Ohio. “The trusted relationships they build with aging Ohioans becomes crucial in times of uncertainty and fear. Service Coordinators have tackled social determinants of health solutions and addressed social isolation issues inherent with social distancing by crafting a lengthy list of resources for both the elders and their families.”

“Ohio’s Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) have been working hand in glove with their communities to address the increased needs of older Ohioans including those living in congregate housing settings,” added Larke Recchie, CEO of the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging. “The AAA service coordinators, as well as care managers, are addressing a myriad of physical needs, but also the strain of loneliness and social isolation created by the physical isolation required to protect against infection and transmission of the coronavirus. The pandemic has necessitated new ways of addressing the already prevalent issue of loneliness and social isolation.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, service coordinators have partnered with Meals on Wheels and local food banks to supply shelf-stable meals to a rush of new recipients in addition to regular clients. Aging services providers have worked to reduce the exposure of older adults to the harmful virus by using service coordinators to eliminate resident trips to the grocery store, connecting older adults to home- and community-based services, and ensuring they are aware of programs for which they qualify under new coronavirus-relief measures.

"The only way to meet the needs of older people during the COVID-19 crisis is to partner with other organizations," stated Tim Bete, Director of the St. Mary Development Corporation. "St. Mary Development routinely works with more than a hundred non-profit and for-profit organizations to meet the healthcare, transportation, and dietary needs, among others, of our residents. During the stay-home period, we've also partnered with churches and volunteers to deliver more than 2,000 food boxes and other items to our residents."

Some of the services being provided by the service coordinators of the Ohio Statewide Service Coordination Network include:

- Meal and medicine delivery and donation coordination, many times from local faith communities;
- Transporting residents to grocery stores and other essential appointments;
- Creating hotlines and communication plans to educate seniors on the latest COVID-19 updates;
- Monitoring the health of residents and expanding on-site health services;
- Ensuring frequent and ongoing sanitation of affordable housing common spaces and ensuring infection control is followed carefully, especially in regard to the move-in process for and education of new tenants;
- Manufacturing and distributing personal protective equipment (PPE) and ensuring residents and staff have masks and sanitizers;
- Contacting and providing case management for tens of thousands of seniors served by the state's Area Agencies on Aging (AAA); and
- Working daily to ensure access to long-term services and home supports as individuals age in place.

In addition, service coordinators have been instrumental in connecting older adults to technology that can assist clinical care and the residents' mental health. Telephonic and virtual care assessments have been assisted through service coordination, including connecting with the COVID Amazon Echo App to track health changes. Service coordinators also assist seniors in arranging and conducting video chat meetings with family and friends during social distancing.

"The pandemic has revealed the growing importance of telehealth solutions and the need for continued growth in senior living-focused technologies," continued Brod. "Telehealth solutions not only mitigate the transportation issues and risk associated with moving about in public, but can also bring resources and professional expertise to areas that may previously have been without adequate care options."

Founded in 1937, LeadingAge Ohio is a nonprofit organization that represents over 400 long-term care organizations and hospices, as well as those providing ancillary health care and housing services, in more than 150 Ohio towns and cities. The continuum of care reflected by the member organizations serve an estimated 400,000 elderly Ohioans daily and employ more than 35,000 persons statewide.