

Thank you to everyone for coming today. It feels great to be together, doesn't it?! First, I would like to take a moment to thank the team that put this event together: Daniel Carey; Edie Weichert; Nicola Singer; Kat Nevel; Michele Linson; and our wonderful board director, Leanne Christenson. I'd also like to acknowledge and thank the rest of our staff and board members who are here today (identify each). And I'd like to recognize and thank all of the 100's of volunteers that it takes for us to serve this wonderful community.

What's the first thing you think of when you hear the term "2020?" For me, the first thing that **used** to come to mind was 20/20 vision. When the calendar turned to the **year** 2020, we reminisced about a decade past and pondered what the future might hold in store. Our **vision** certainly was not 20/20 as the **year** 2020 began.

Just a few short months into the year, our lives were turned upside down. We went from a mode of looking into the future to one of reacting and adapting to every day's new set of information. In the process, we learned a lot about resiliency and the character of this great organization and its passion for serving older adults in Henderson County.

If you'll indulge me, I'd like to take you on a brief journey back over the past year plus. As we do so, perhaps we will gain some insights regarding our path ahead.

Before COVID-19 was a household word, 2020 began for the Council on Aging with a leadership change. Seven-year executive director Trina Stokes announced in early February that she would be leaving for an opportunity at AdventHealth. After three years here as director of operations, I was selected by the board to be the new executive director and officially began on March 9. What a time to take the reins!

Those first few weeks on the job were tumultuous. Every day was an adventure full of new information, difficult decisions to make, and as we used to say in the corporate world FUD: Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt. We had to close the Sammy Williams Center and the thrift stores in mid-March. In order to ensure the safety of staff, volunteers, and most importantly clients, on March 30, we shifted from daily hot meal delivery by volunteers to weekly frozen meal delivery by staff. In addition, we stopped allowing visitors in the building and instituted a rotating shift of employees working from home to minimize the number of people in the office at any time.

While demand for all services dropped dramatically as people hunkered down in March and April, we still had a large waitlist of people desiring Meals on Wheels. We had been planning to bring on AdventHealth as a secondary supplier of meals. Advent was also able to shift over to a weekly frozen meal delivery process and we began in May by switching four existing routes over to them and opening new routes with Pardee. Little by little, volunteers returned to the delivery mix and all routes were again covered by volunteers by the end of June.

Meanwhile, Kat Nevel quickly leveraged relationships in the community and was able to secure meals for Sammy Williams Center clients to pick up several days a week. Thanks to community partners like First Baptist Church, First United Methodist Church, the Hendersonville Co-op, the Storehouse, and Interfaith Assistance Ministry, we were able to provide a combination of prepared meals, shelf stable goods, and fresh produce for our members.

Thankfully, we were able to reopen the doors of the thrift stores in mid-May, albeit with reduced hours and reduced business. Our services remained relatively stable throughout the summer and into the fall.

Thrift store hours went back to normal in October and business really picked up at that point. However, a reduced capacity reopening of the Sammy in late October was short-lived when COVID-19 cases skyrocketed around the US.

When our revenues from the thrift stores were interrupted, the stark realization occurred that we needed to diversify our funding streams as well as have ongoing focus in this area to continue serving and expanding our services. Daniel started as our director of development in October, with the task of overseeing and developing the various sources of funding. This has already reaped benefits as we are coming out of the pandemic in even better position than when it started.

As vaccines started to become available, we began to work to communicate the latest status to our clients and volunteers – and to provide early opportunities whenever possible for volunteers and staff to be able to access them. Increased vaccination led to reduced restrictions and the ability to resume some activities. The Sammy Williams Center is now able to have vaccinated clients dine in. Caregiver and community resource coordinators are able to start meeting with clients in person. And Meals on Wheels is preparing to resume a small number of daily hot meal deliveries in July.

So, what have we learned through all of this? There have been some silver linings. New funding sources have been uncovered. All of our staff got to experience delivering meals to MOW clients. We were able to expand MOW service much more easily as weekly frozen meals did not require as many volunteers to deliver. Between MOW routes and CARES Act shipments, we are now serving 40% more seniors each week than we did at the start of the pandemic. We have found that over half of our clients actually prefer weekly frozen meal deliveries. We have learned just how important being together at the Sammy is for our members. And we have seen that you, our wonderful volunteers, have been incredible at adapting and adjusting with us. While the numbers have dropped a little from prior years, 210 people have contributed almost 19,000 hours and 35,000 miles of delivery routes in this fiscal year!

As we look forward, several things are clear. The need to support older adults in Henderson County will continue to grow. Already, 27% of our population is over 65. By 2040, nearly 40% of our population is expected to be over the age of 60. As our county grows and gets older, the number of people needing support in that aging journey will continue to grow. Since the pandemic, more people want to stay in their homes for as long as possible. Services that help people to remain at home safely and healthily will become increasingly important. Not only do we expect the demand for Meals on Wheels to continue to grow but also services such as in-home care, home repairs and modifications, and transportation. We will need to determine what role we can and should play in some of these growing areas. And we're trying to be responsive to our MOW clients' desires by providing a mix of daily hot meals and weekly frozen meals. We're fortunate to be standing on solid financial footing as we seek ways to continue to grow to meet the needs.

So we expect to continue to grow and adapt as we envision life in a post-pandemic world. Our vision for the future is not 20/20 but we plan to apply the lessons learned from 2020 as we begin to navigate that future. We can only be successful at achieving our vision with the time, talents, and treasures of our entire community. We hope to remain vital and relevant in our community as we work to ensure that *No One Ages Alone*.

Thank you all for being here today. Thank you for what you do to make Henderson County such a great place. Enjoy the fellowship. Have some more food. Play some cornhole. And make sure to pick up a goodie bag on way out.