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LOCAL SENIOR CENTERS

The struggle to provide activities safely

By Miriam L. Segaloff

Local senior centers traditionally provide area older adults a much-needed outlet for physical and social activities during what can be a long Central Ohio winter.

But, this year, the highly contagious novel coronavirus, and the dangerous COVID-19 that it causes, has changed how those services are provided. And managers of those centers say those changes are likely going to be around a while.

Most area senior centers closed in March with the initial city-wide lock down. The City of Columbus opened some of their centers in September, only to close them again right before Thanksgiving. While they were open, new sanitizing and other health safety procedures were put in place. Masks became mandatory at all times, temperatures were taken at the door, and everyone had to sign in and out to make contact tracing easier.

"I don't know how soon we will be back to normal," said Monique Mapp, manager of the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department's Gillie 50+ Recreation Center. "Even when things get a little better, we won't be completely back to normal. I know a lot of the safety protocols will linger and I think people will be more careful about keeping their hands clean. People will definitely be more co conscience of their environment."

In Gahanna, senior center recreation coordinator Annette Arundio said she has tried to be creative about ways to serve members, without exposing them to risk, while the center remains closed.

Drive-through meal pickups and Christmas parties have replaced in-person events to minimize risk while staying connected with the centers more than 300 members, she said.

"My worst fear is getting one of my seniors sick," Arundio said. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself. We are trying to be as safe as possible with as much as we can control."

Both Mapp and Arundio said they are hoping to have more to offer their members when the winter sessions

option at all.

At Gillie, Mapp said, popular ballroom and square-dancing classes had to be sacrificed. Instead, instructors may offer circle and line dancing, which don't require dancers to change partners.

Both center managers said they are exploring how

ferings may not work for everyone.

"There are so many things for people to do online, but that's generally not where their skill set or comfort level is," Rosen said. "When people become depressed or lose their routine, like in a pandemic, the things they remember to do most easily typically come from their long-term memory. Technology is not usually part of that long-term processing for seniors, so it becomes even harder for them."

If they can find ways to do it safely, Rosen said she would like to see senior centers open sooner rather than later. In general, she said, older adults often live alone and easily become socially isolated. Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched to nearly a year, the risk is even greater.

"If they don't have a place they need to be, it can impact their sense of purpose and routine," Rosen said. "Without that, you can become even more isolated and even depressed."

"So much of what I do is helping people coordinate their care," Rosen continued. "But what I really do as a geriatric care manager is help people define how they want to live the rest of their lives - how they find joy and connection. When I am with them, I can feel the angst. In the end, all people really want is to feel connected, loved, and valued and right now that is all being taken away right now."

The longer the pandemic lasts, Arundio said, the more concerned she becomes about many of her usual center visitors.

"I just think a lot of them probably don't realized they are depressed," she said. "And I think they are being as safe as possible, but they are looking forward to it not being like this anymore."

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begin in January.

"In February, we get a lot of people asking for tax help," Arundio said. "We are trying to figure out how we can still provide that. There are just a lot of questions. I don't even know how to start, there are so many unknowns. That's the hardest part."

When the Gahanna center does re-open, Arundio said, some activities, like exercise classes, will be scaled back and others, like euchre and bridge, may not be an

to offer more online experiences for their members.

"It's something that is new for us," Mapp said. "I don't know exactly where we are going with it, but we are talking about it. It's something I am excited about. You hate to say there is a silver lining for this, but I think it could increase our outreach, especially to people who couldn't come here even before COVID."

But geriatric care manager Gayle Rosen of AgeWell Options said online of-