

SONOMA SENIORS TODAY

A Lifeline at Risk: What Sonoma County Stands to Lose in 2026

By Denise Johnson, Director of Senior Nutrition and Health, COA & Christy Davila, Executive Director, WCCS

Sonoma County is in the midst of a profound demographic shift. By 2030, adults 60 and older will make up 35% of our population—an unprecedented number of older adults living alone, and struggling to access the behavioral health care they deserve. Social isolation and a shortage of early intervention age-appropriate services leave too many vulnerable to depression and loneliness, even though we know that depression is not a normal part of aging. In Sonoma County, suicide among adults 75-84 has surged 52%, the highest of any age group.

These statistics make the impact of losing West County Community Services and Council on Aging's Senior Peer Support/Counseling programs even more profound. As funding ends in June 2026, we are not just closing out a contract—we are confronting the possible loss of a cost-effective model rooted in compassion, connection, and humanity. For decades, these programs have been built on one simple truth: healing happens in connection. Older adults supporting older adults through grief, isolation, life transitions, and moments of profound vulnerability—one conversation, one shared cup of coffee, one listening ear at a time.

Without renewed support, both organizations will be forced to dismantle teams of about 26 trained volunteers. These are people who have shown up week after week, not for compensation, but out of compassion. Last year alone, they provided 758 counseling sessions to 115 older adults—758 moments of comfort, presence, and hope.

- 95% of referred older adults engaged in services, a remarkable testament to trust and quality.
- 80% reported meaningful improvements in their emotional well-being.

Yet behind every percentage is a story:

- A widow who hadn't stepped outside in months agreeing to meet her peer counselor at a small café—and smiling for the first time in weeks.
- A devoted caregiver whispering, "I'm overwhelmed," and receiving empathy instead of judgment.
- A woman in a support group discovering that grief becomes lighter when held by many hearts instead of one.

In both programs, Peer Support Groups continue to run at full capacity with waitlists—a clear sign that the need for connection has only grown. Even as funding winds down, volunteers continue to attend training sessions, monthly classes, and weekly supervision because they want to be ready for the people who count on them.

And this program doesn't just transform clients—it transforms volunteers. Many share that this work gives them purpose, belonging, and renewed meaning in their own later years. It is a reciprocal model of care, one that lifts both the giver and the receiver.++

Losing this program is not a line item in a budget. It has real human consequences. It means fewer lifelines for older adults who may have no one else. It means losing a community of compassionate volunteers who have built something extraordinary together. And it means stepping away from one of the most cost-effective, humane, and heart-centered models of emotional support our county has ever had. Sonoma County can write a different ending. If we value the emotional well-being of our older adults, we must ensure this work continues. We invite county leaders, funders, and community partners to come together and safeguard a program that has been a lifeline for so many.

Contact Denise Johnson at 707-525-0143 ext. 119 or djohnson@councilonaging.com to make a difference.



Photo by Cottonbro, Pexels

Ongoing Support Group

Council on Aging will be hosting an ongoing support group through our Senior Peer Support (SPS) program. This group is open to older adults who have previously participated in SPS and feel they would benefit from continued connection, encouragement, and shared support from their peers. The group provides a safe, welcoming space to build relationships, reduce isolation, and support one another through life's challenges.

For more information or to learn how to participate, please contact the SPS program at 707-525-0143, extension 106.

Caregiver Corner: Parkinson's Disease, Dementia, and Support for Caregivers

By Jamie Escoubas, President & CEO, COA

April is Parkinson's Awareness Month

Parkinson's disease affects not only the person diagnosed, but also the family members and friends who walk beside them as caregivers. As symptoms change over time—particularly when dementia becomes part of the picture—caregiving can feel overwhelming. During Parkinson's Awareness Month this April, we pause to recognize the strength of caregivers in our community and to highlight local resources that can help Sonoma County families navigate this journey with support, dignity, and hope.

What Is Parkinson's Disease?

Parkinson's disease (PD) is a progressive neurological disorder that affects movement, balance, and coordination. Common symptoms include tremor, stiffness, slowed movement, and changes in posture or walking. Parkinson's can also cause non-motor symptoms such as sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and cognitive changes.

Nearly one million people in the United States are living with Parkinson's disease, and that number is expected to grow as the population ages.

While not everyone with Parkinson's develops dementia, cognitive impairment is common over time. Studies suggest that up to half—and possibly more—of people with Parkinson's will experience Parkinson's disease dementia in the later stages.

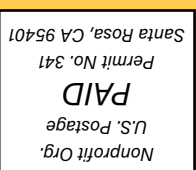
Understanding Parkinson's Disease Dementia

Parkinson's disease dementia affects memory, attention, problem-solving, and visual-spatial skills. Individuals may have difficulty following conversations, become easily confused, or experience hallucinations or delusions.

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These symptoms can be especially challenging for caregivers, as they often fluctuate from day to day.

It is important to remember that these changes are part of the disease—not a reflection of the person’s character or intentions. Compassion, patience, and education are essential tools for caregivers.

Tips for Caring for a Loved One with Parkinson's and Dementia

Caregiving looks different for every family, but the following strategies may help:

- Keep routines simple and consistent. Predictable daily schedules can reduce confusion and anxiety.
- Communicate calmly and clearly. Use short sentences, allow extra time for responses, and minimize distractions.
- Focus on safety. Watch for fall risks, medication errors, and changes in judgment or perception.
- Respond, don't correct. If hallucinations or confusion occur, gently reassure rather than argue or insist on facts.
- Take care of yourself. Caregiver stress and burnout are real. Regular breaks and emotional support are not luxuries—they are necessities.

Local Support Makes a Difference

Sonoma County is fortunate to have a variety of programs and services that support people with Parkinson’s disease and their caregivers. Connecting with local organizations can reduce isolation, improve quality of life, and help families plan ahead.

Support Groups

Several organizations offer Parkinson’s-specific education and support groups for both individuals living with the disease and their care partners. Local options include the Sonoma Support Group, which meets on the 4th Friday of each month from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm. For more information on topics and location, call or text Joy Bennett at (209) 915-1270. Another option is the Parkinson’s Support Group of Sonoma County, held at Christ Church United Methodist on Yulupa Avenue in Santa Rosa. More details can be found online at www.parkinsonsonomacounty.org.

Rock Steady Boxing

Rock Steady Boxing classes are available at multiple locations in Sonoma County, including Santa Rosa, Sonoma, and Petaluma. These non-contact, boxing-based fitness programs are designed specifically for people with Parkinson’s disease and focus on balance, strength, coordination, and confidence. Care partners often note improvements not only in physical ability, but also in mood and social engagement. More information can currently be found on the web at www.rocksteadyboxing.org.

Adult Day Programs

Adult day services provide structured activities, supervision, and social connection for adults living with cognitive or physical challenges. In Sonoma County, programs such as Council on Aging’s

Adult Day Program (with locations in Santa Rosa, Sonoma, and Sebastopol) offer daytime care, therapeutic activities, and supervision for those living with Parkinson’s. These programs give caregivers essential respite while ensuring their loved ones are safe and engaged.

For more information, contact Council on Aging at 707-525-0143 ext. 103.

Caregiver Perspective

“Some days are harder than others, especially when memory and confusion come into play,” shared a Sonoma County caregiver. “What’s helped most is knowing we’re not alone. The support group and adult day program gave both of us a place to breathe and feel understood.”

You Are Not Alone

Families can also turn to Council on Aging for Care Navigation to provide respite referrals, information about nutrition programs, and additional resources to support both the caregiver and their loved one. Reaching out early—before a crisis—can make caregiving more sustainable over time.

Caring for someone with Parkinson’s disease and dementia can be deeply meaningful—and deeply challenging. This April, as we recognize Parkinson’s Awareness Month, we honor the caregivers who show up every day with resilience and love. If you are on this journey, know that support is available right here in Sonoma County.

Sonoma Seniors Today

A bi-monthly publication by



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Editor's note: Publication of all material is at the discretion of the editor; originals become the property of SST and cannot be returned. Mail all submissions to *Sonoma Seniors Today* c/o Council on Aging, 30 Kawana Springs Road, Santa Rosa, CA 95404, or email to SonomaSeniorsToday@councilonaging.com.

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PUZZLES & GAMES

Puzzle solutions are on page 8

WORD SCRAMBLE "Towns Around"

1. NTASA RASO	-----
2. PAEMAUTL	-----
3. LDBAUSHGRE	-----
4. NMOSOA	-----
5. INSROWD	-----
6. OBPAOTSSLE	-----
7. HRTNREO RKPA	-----
8. TTCIOA	-----
9. LEOVALDECR	-----
10. LVEENGURILE	-----
11. LSOTVFRELEI	-----
12. KDONWOE	-----

SUDOKU - Medium

		6	4	8	1	5		
					6	8		
	7	3				6		
5		7		4		1		
		4	1	2	3			9
		1		7		4	6	8
			5		7			
7			8		4			
	6		3	1				7

SUDOKU - Hard

	1			7	8	5		
		6	3			1		
				1	9			
		9				7	8	
			4	8		9	3	
	8							5
				5				
3		2						7
4	7			8	9			

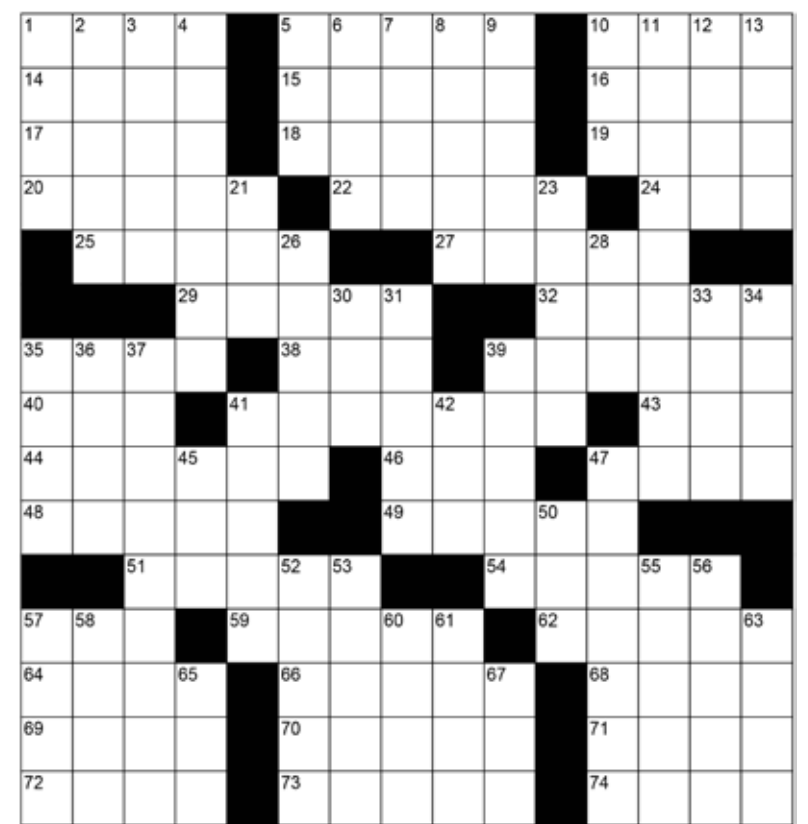
WORD SEARCH "Spring Showers"

Rain	Umbrella
Cloud	Thunder
Rainbow	Raindrop
Puddle	Drizzle
Lightning	Storm
Forecast	Wind

CROSSWORD PUZZLE "April Fools' Day"

ACROSS

- 1 Baby bed
- 5 One-celled animal
- 10 Replace a striker
- 14 Tortoise and the ____
- 15 Review
- 16 Fake butter
- 17 Smell
- 18 Seasoner makers
- 19 Lighted sign
- 20 Dinner drinks
- 22 Unmasked
- 24 Only
- 25 Japanese city
- 27 Droop
- 29 Microorganism
- 32 Blabber
- 35 Short fictional story
- 38 Car speed
- 39 Someone who jokes or acts playful
- 40 Kimono sash
- 41 Romantic flower producer
- 43 Rapid eye movement
- 44 Comply
- 46 European sea eagle
- 47 Ma
- 48 Stores
- 49 Relationship
- 51 Mongrels
- 54 Occupy attention in a pleasing manner
- 57 Cell stuff
- 59 Floral leaf
- 62 Playful mischievous trick or stunt
- 64 Small particle
- 66 Parts to play
- 68 Bare
- 69 Eager
- 70 Lassos
- 71 Adam's garden
- 72 South of the border crazy
- 73 Before
- 74 Prank



By Jimmy and Evelyn Johnson - www.qets.com

DOWN

- 1 Grub
- 2 Wireless
- 3 Clothes pressers
- 4 To deprive
- 5 Raiders of the Lost ____ (Harrison Ford movie)
- 6 Restaurant listing
- 7 Economics abrv.
- 8 Fence projections
- 9 Fourth month of the Gregorian calendar year
- 10 Boy
- 11 ____ and Marc Antony
- 12 Long time
- 13 Tibia
- 21 Slide on snow
- 23 Tricked or misled
- 26 Protective covering
- 28 Married woman
- 30 Highs
- 31 Transparent
- 33 Seethe
- 34 Writer Bombeck
- 35 Athlete
- 36 Band instrument
- 37 Motion mechanics
- 39 Governing group
- 41 Oxidizes
- 42 Brassiere
- 45 Central processing unit
- 47 Grieved
- 50 Pixie
- 52 ____ cotta (clay)
- 53 Humorous imitation, prank or joke
- 55 Saudi Arabian citizen
- 56 Ceased
- 57 Face
- 58 De ____ (from the beginning)
- 60 Dog food brand
- 61 Look
- 63 Beano
- 65 Hoopla
- 67 Compass point

WORD SEARCH "Spring Showers"

Y	Y	X	H	S	P	G	F	K	G	J	X	G	L	L	Q
D	P	L	T	T	T	U	I	O	X	R	K	O	X	Q	N
D	F	K	E	J	Q	O	D	F	R	I	V	Y	N	Y	J
W	O	T	S	Q	Z	R	R	D	R	E	D	X	C	N	O
O	U	F	H	Y	H	A	R	M	L	T	C	J	I	M	F
Z	U	A	B	O	Q	I	A	A	W	E	M	A	K	L	F
G	M	X	U	T	R	N	I	S	Z	Q	S	W	S	J	F
D	B	X	Q	X	B	I	N	U	J	J	H	E	H	T	F
J	R	U	Y	C	D	F	B	N	D	M	A	E	R	L	P
K	E	V	Z	H	F	Y	O	D	I	V	E	W	U	B	P
M	L	Y	K	U	U	H	W	J	U	A	F	I	Y	N	C
J	L	M	G	R	I	N	W	D	R	I	Z	Z	L	E	L
I	A	Q	D	R	V	X	Q	P	J	L	V	V	A	I	O
E	A	N	N	M	X	F	T	H	U	N	D	E	R	F	U
L	I	P	B	J	G	R	A	I	N	D	R	O	P	O	D
W	Y	I	L	I	G	H	T	N	I	N	G	W	W	R	C

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Concha M Chacon	Steve & Robin Mullin	Avi & Juliet Porton	Tammy Schmolder	Barbara & Gary Tatman	Sherry Weyers
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Laila & Sean McCloskey	Sonia & Paul Nuss	& Shawn Brumbaugh	Kathleen Sikora	Liz A. Thompson	Jeffrey M. Zamacona
Sandra McConnell	Debbie & Paul Nye	Patricia Riehle	Julie & Jeff Silva	Christen & Dean Thompson	Shirlee Zane
Adrienne McCord	Jennifer & Scott Nygard	Kay Riper	June M. Silva	Matthew Thompson	Alice & Don Zanini
Maryann McCourt	Kellie Nyholm	Chris C. Roach	Eileen & Joe Silva	& Patricia Morandi	Paul Zarn
Gene McCreary	Oakmont Community Church	Belvia & Richard Robbins	Diane & William Silveira	Sharon A. Threlkeld	Diane Zootis
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The Community Table

CA council on aging

For Seniors 60 and Older

SANTA ROSA
Finley Community Center
2060 W. College Ave.
MON 12:45 – 1:15 PM

SANTA ROSA
Salvation Army
Senior Activity Center
115 Pierce Street
FRI 12:00 – 1:00 PM

SONOMA
Vintage House
264 First Street East
MON 12:00 – 1:00 PM

SONOMA
Oakridge Senior Apartments
18800 Beatrice Drive
TUES 12:00 – 1:00 PM

HEALDSBURG
Fitch Mountain Senior Apartments
710 S. Fitch Mountain Road
THUR 12:00 – 1:00 PM

Pre-Registration Required

RESERVATIONS AND CANCELLATIONS MUST BE MADE ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE.

ROHNERT PARK
Rohnert Park Senior Center
6800 Hunter Drive, Suite A
MON – FRI 12:00 – 1:00 PM

SEBASTOPOL
Burbank Heights & Orchard
7777 Bodega Avenue
WED 12:00 – 1:00 PM

WINDSOR
Bell Manor Senior Apartments
8780 Bell Road
WED 12:00 – 1:00 PM

For More Information, Call
707-525-0143 x128

Meals Funded in Part by County of Sonoma. Contributions are voluntary and confidential.
Eligible participants will not be denied service for an inability to contribute.
A suggested \$4 per meal contribution can be deposited in the collection box.
Eligible individuals who do not complete a registration form must pay \$7 for meal costs. REV. 1/5/2026



2026 SITE CLOSURES: 1/1, 1/19, 2/16, 5/25, 6/19, 7/3, 9/7, 11/11, 11/26, 11/27, 12/24, 12/25, 12/31

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Cacio E Pepe
White Bean Skillet



INGREDIENTS:

- 4 Tbs EVOO, Divided (2 T, 2 T)
- 4 Thick Cut Slices White Country Bread
- 2 Tbs Unsalted Butter
- 1 Tsp Freshly Ground Black Pepper, Divided (½ t, ½ t)
- ½ C Finely Shredded Quality Parmesan Cheese (about 1 oz), plus more for serving
- ½ C Finely Shredded Quality Pecorino Ramano Cheese (about 1 oz), Plus more for serving
- 4 C Your Favorite Leafy Greens: Tuscan Kale, Radicchio, Escarole, Collards
- ½ Tsp Diamond Crystal Kosher Salt (If other brand reduce by half)
- 2 14.5 oz Cans of Cannellini beans, drained but not rinsed, leave in cans.

If you don't like or can't have leafy greens, you could use peas or green beans. Use the best cheese you can find. Absolutely grind the pepper fresh. Cacio E Pepe is an Italian classic—Cacio means cheese and Pepe means pepper so these ingredients are what is it all about.

METHOD:

- Cook one a piece of bread per serving when serving. 1 T oil per slice. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat 1 T oil per slice of bread. Cook turning halfway through, until golden brown on both sides, 3 to 4 minutes total. Transfer to a plate. Repeat with remaining bread as needed. Wipe out skillet.
- In same skillet over medium heat, melt butter, add ½ t pepper, and cook, stirring frequently until fragrant, 30 to 60 seconds.
- Add Parmesan, Romano, Salt, 1 can of beans and ½ C of water (or veg. stock) bring to a simmer over medium-high heat; reduce to medium-low and continue to simmer, stirring occasionally, until slightly thickened, 2 to 3 minutes.
- Fold in ½ t pepper and remaining can of beans. Bring it back to a strong simmer, add greens. Adjust salt if needed. Bring back up to a strong simmer.
- Place bread in a wide bowl, top bread with bean mixture, top with parmesan and fresh pepper.



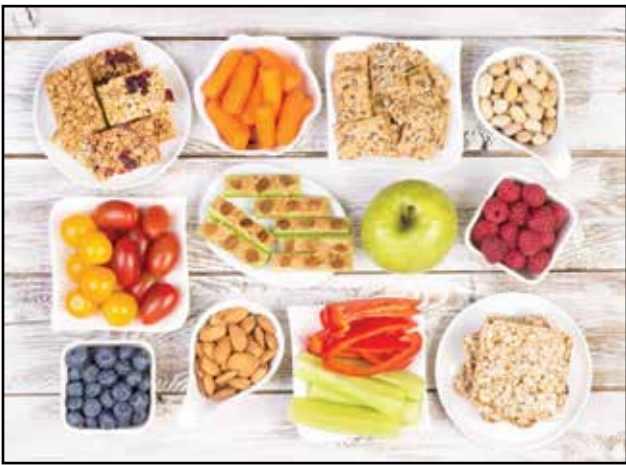
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Look for: Council on Aging

Smart Snacking for Older Adults

By Megan Atha, Nutrition, and Dietetics Graduate, CSUS Food

Smart snacking is very important in older adults. One of the reasons for this is that malnutrition is more likely to occur in older adults because of the difficulty in accessing healthy foods and preparing meals. To achieve optimal health, it is essential to consume a variety of foods from all food groups to ensure you get the nutrients you need. Snacks that provide a variety of nutrients and taste good are a simple way to give older adults the nutrients critical to their health.



As you age, some nutrients become increasingly important, like calcium and vitamin D for bone health and protein for muscle health. Including foods rich in these nutrients in your snacks, such as dairy products, tofu, dark leafy greens, edamame, nuts, seeds, fortified juices, tuna, salmon, nutritional yeast, and whole grains, can be a great way to increase their intake.

When building a healthy snack try the “high-low” combination. This is a small amount of a healthy high-fat food, like peanut butter, almond butter, avocados, nuts, or seeds, combined with a large amount of a low-calorie food, like apple slices, celery sticks, or berries. Some other foods to include are whole grains, fruits, vegetables, protein, healthy fats, and dairy. When making your snacks, combine these different food groups for a more satisfying meal.

You can prepare healthy snacks in advance. Wash and cut up vegetables, and portion them into reusable containers for easy snacking when you're hungry. Keep these snacks visible and within reach in the fridge or counter for a convenient anytime snack. For some individuals, having snacks readily available helps maintain blood sugar levels, thus increasing energy and focus and improving mood. If you are purchasing pre-packaged snacks, make sure to check the nutrition facts label to see how much sodium, added sugars, and calories are included. Many snacks that are marketed as “healthy” may be loaded with hidden sugars and unhealthy fats. Even snacks labeled “fat-free” can contain higher sodium and added sugars to compensate for the lack of flavor, ultimately doing more harm than good.

Incorporating healthy snacks into your diet can benefit your overall health. Examples of healthy snacks that you can incorporate into your diet:

- Cottage cheese with canned fruit (in 100% juice).
- Greek yogurt topped with berries.
- Apple slices with peanut butter (no or low added sodium [$<5\%$ DV per serving]) purchase no-added-sugar peanut butter.
- Hummus with celery (or your choice of vegetables).
- Whole-grain toast with no or low added sodium ($<5\%$ DV per serving), peanut butter, and sliced bananas.
- Trail mix with unsalted nuts, dried fruit, and dark chocolate chips. You can also buy prepackaged unsalted nuts if this makes it easier to eat.

Meet Koa

Introducing Koa, our newest friend and the official mascot of Council on Aging. Koa is an elephant—chosen with great care and intention.

Across cultures, elephants symbolize wisdom, strength, memory, and longevity. They age within their communities, remain independent while staying connected, and are respected for the life experience they carry. In many ways, elephants reflect what growing older can and should look like: aging with dignity, resilience, and purpose.

Koa is a name with Hawaiian origins, and it carries several strong, positive meanings: “Warrior” or “Brave One.” The most common translation: symbolizing courage, strength, and fearlessness.

You'll now see Koa popping up in every issue of Sonoma Seniors Today. Sometimes Koa will be enjoying a cup of coffee, sometimes learning something new, and sometimes simply reminding us that growing older is something to be honored.

Koa loves to explore, connect, and stay curious—so keep an eye out and see where Koa appears next. Your job? Find Koa in each issue!



Welcome, Koa. We're glad you're here!

Perdue Foundation Supports the Essential and Nutritional Needs of Seniors

\$10,000 Grant Strengthens Council on Aging's Drive-Up Pick-Up Program

When access to healthy food becomes a challenge, community support makes all the difference, and a \$10,000 grant from the Franklin P. and Arthur W. Perdue Foundation is doing just that for seniors served by Council on Aging.

Sonoma County.

The DUPU program was created in 2020 in response to the closure of congregate dining sites during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the request of the Sonoma County Area Agency on Aging, COA quickly launched the program to ensure seniors continued access to nutritious meals.

DUPU serves seniors and individuals with disabilities who can drive but face barriers to preparing healthy meals, such as chronic arthritis, difficulty standing for long periods, illness, or limited access to nutritious food.

The program supports independence while improving the health and quality of life. Today, 200 seniors participate in DUPU, receiving up to three meals each week.

COA's kitchen team prepares more than 1,200 meals daily for DUPU, Meals on Wheels, and other nutrition programs county-wide.

Support from partners like the Perdue Foundation helps ensure seniors across Sonoma County continue to receive healthy, reliable meals when they need them the most.



Council on Aging (COA) is grateful to the Franklin P. and Arthur W. Perdue Foundation for its generous support of COA's Drive-Up Pick-Up (DUPU) meal program. COA also thanks Nathan Bryner of Petaluma Poultry for his local partnership and support. Nathan recently visited COA's Santa Rosa kitchen to see firsthand how meals are prepared and distributed to seniors throughout



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Jenny Helman: Giving Voice to Older Adults and People with Disabilities

Meet Jenny Helman
Chair of Sonoma County's
Aging & Disability Commission

Jenny, what led you to become an advocate for older adults?

After 25 years in the wine business, I was ready for something new. I went back to school and earned a certificate in Holistic Nutrition Counseling. I'd always been interested in healthy eating, growing my own food, and understanding how food and health are connected. I began teaching nutrition classes for older adults, things like eating well on a budget, cooking for one person, managing conditions like diabetes, and how small lifestyle changes can improve the way you feel day to day.

Through that work, and living in a senior community myself, I saw the challenges older adults face, including social isolation and difficulty accessing services. I also live with a disability that limits some of my daily activities. I'm fortunate to receive in-home care, and that experience has shown me how important it is for people to know what resources are available and how to access them.

How did you get involved with the Aging & Disability Commission?

While teaching about nutrition, I was also volunteering in other ways, such as delivering Meals on Wheels, doing senior peer counseling, and serving on the Healdsburg Senior Citizen Advisory Commission. In 2017, someone suggested I apply to the county's Aging & Disability Commission. It turned out to be a wonderful opportunity to make an impact at the county level. Being a voice for older adults and people with disabilities and speaking directly to county leadership is very important to me.

What do you find most rewarding about serving on the Commission?

I'm constantly impressed by the commitment of our volunteers and their willingness to speak up as advocates. Right now, we're focused on outreach and encouraging Commission members to connect with their communities, city and town councils, and county supervisors. I also love helping people navigate services. I've been able to

refer many community members to helpful resources like the 565-INFO information and assistance line and In-Home Supportive Services.

Are Commission meetings open to the public?

Yes! Meetings are open to everyone, either in person or on Zoom. Public input is the foundation of the Commission. We rely on community voices to help shape our discussions and share information with county leadership. Meetings are on the third Wednesday of most months from 1:00 to 3:00 pm. Agendas and Zoom links are posted on: <http://sonomacounty.ca.gov/sonoma-seniors>.

Is the Commission accepting new members?

Yes. The first step is to attend a meeting. The ideal Commission member has personal or professional experience with aging or disability issues and wants to connect with their community and help elevate the voices of those most in need. Commission members attend monthly meetings, serve on subcommittees, and participate in community outreach. To strengthen representation, we encourage applicants who are age 60 or older, living with disabilities, members of Indigenous communities, or identify as LGBTQIA+.

Do Commission members work directly with county supervisors?

They do. Twice a year, Commission members meet with their district supervisor to share progress updates and exchange information. Members also work closely with Human Services staff in the Adult & Aging Division, including the Director of the Area Agency on Aging. It's a great way to learn how the county works and build meaningful relationships with leadership.

What do the Commission's subcommittees do?

We have two standing committees: No Wrong Door and Executive.

The No Wrong Door Committee provides community input to the county's Aging & Disability Resource Hub, which helps people find the services they need to live independently.

The Executive Committee helps guide the Commission's direction and prepares meeting agendas. We also form short-term committees for specific projects like research reports, setting annual goals, or updating membership materials.



Jenny Helman and County Supervisor James Gore

Where should someone start if they need help finding aging or disability services?

The easiest place to start is by calling 707-565-4636 (565-INFO). This free local service connects callers with county social workers who are trained to help people understand their options, access benefits, and follow up to make sure their needs are met. People can also chat online at socoadrh.org, email 565INFO@schsd.org, or browse the resource directory at: <http://agingdisabilitysonomacounty.org>.

How can people learn more or get in touch with you or the Commission?

You can reach me through our support staff at the Area Agency on Aging at aaa@schsd.org or 707-565-5238. More information about the Aging & Disability Commission is available at <http://sonomacounty.ca.gov/sonoma-seniors>. And please, come to a meeting! Introduce yourself and say hi. We'd love to meet you.

A Warm Meal and a Welcoming Community

By Loretta Eubanks, Congregate Coordinator

As a Congregate Coordinator, I have the privilege of working closely with older adults at three of our dining sites. I've also had the chance to support the Rohnert Park site as a volunteer and substitute for Sebby. From my experience, I can say with confidence that this program is truly appreciated by the seniors we serve.

For many participants, the congregated meal program offers more than just lunch. It provides companionship, connection, and the comfort of sharing a warm meal with others rather than dining alone. Most clients genuinely enjoy being around people, visiting with friends, and having a welcoming place to spend part of their day.

Even for individuals who don't consider themselves "social," the program still makes an impact. Many will come for the served lunch and to be in the presence of others—even if they choose not to interact. The sense of being included and surrounded by community can matter more than we realize.

It's also rare for a meal to be served without hearing a few "thank-yous." Clients often share feedback on the food—sometimes good, sometimes critical, and occasionally influenced by picky preferences—but complaints are rare. In fact, no one has ever turned down a meal we've served.

Overall, I see this program meeting an important need, and making a real difference. I strongly believe that outreach to connect even more seniors to congregated dining is worth the effort—for their health, well-being, and quality of life.

If you are interested in or know someone who would benefit from the Community Dining program, please call 707-525-0143 ext. 128 or email lspillane@councilonaging.com.

COA Management Team Visits the Buck Institute

By Denise Johnson, Senior Nutrition and Health Director, COA

The leadership team of Council on Aging visited the Buck Institute, and what we found is that our missions are the same. The Buck Institute for Research on Aging, located in Novato, California, is the nation's first independent biomedical research institute dedicated solely to the science of aging. The Institute's work is centered on one bold and urgent goal: helping people live healthier, longer lives by better understanding—and ultimately preventing age-related disease.

Their research focuses on uncovering the biological mechanisms that drive aging and translating those discoveries into real-world solutions. Instead of treating diseases one at a time, Buck scientists study the aging process itself as the root cause of many chronic conditions—such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

In addition to research, the Buck Institute is a leader in education and workforce development. They actively support the training of the next



Council on Aging's Leadership Team

generation of aging-science researchers and work to share scientific knowledge with the broader community.

By advancing innovative research and educating future scientists, the Buck Institute plays a critical role in shaping the future of healthy aging—helping ensure that people not only live longer, but live better.

PEARLS: A Lifeline for Sonoma County Seniors and a Program We Must Not Lose

By Nyah Reynolds, PEARLS Coach, Council on Aging

In Sonoma County, mental health challenges among older adults are a serious and growing concern. Local data show that seniors report mental health needs at rates higher than the California average. Even more alarming, is our county's suicide death rate among older adults exceeds the statewide rate, with adults ages 75 to 84 having the highest suicide increase of any age group. If these statistics are unsettling, consider this: Sonoma County's older adult population is projected to grow from 28% to 35% by 2030. Without meaningful intervention, the number of seniors struggling in silence will continue to rise.

Depression is one of the most common and often overlooked mental health challenges facing older adults. While it is prevalent, depression is not a normal part of aging. Unfortunately, many older adults and those close to them mistakenly accept depressive symptoms as "just part of getting older." This misconception can prevent seniors from seeking help and can delay critical intervention.



Nyah Reynolds

Participants also reported increases in pleasant activities, physical movement, and social engagement—the building blocks of well-being later in life. But behind every data point is the story of someone who once felt isolated or overwhelmed, until PEARLS helped them regain confidence and control.

What Participants Are Saying:

- "The problem-solving techniques not only taught me how to go about solving my problems, but that they can be solved."
- "This program made a difference because someone was interested in understanding my reality. My coach always allowed me to make my own decisions."
- "Now I'm in a better world for myself, my family, and my community. PEARLS has honestly been life-changing for me."

For seniors juggling caregiving responsibilities, the support has been especially meaningful: "When you're hurting, it's hard to have a clear mind to know what to do next. I needed help and was really struggling. It's easy to just sit there and feel sorry for myself. My coach supported me and helped me take things step-by-step so I didn't feel overwhelmed. I relied so much on my husband, I had to learn how to take care of myself, and PEARLS helped me do that."



Photo by Timur Weber

National health authorities consistently emphasize that depression is a treatable condition, not an expected consequence of aging. When left unaddressed, depression can significantly erode quality of life, worsen physical health conditions, increase social isolation, and place older adults at greater risk of crisis. Recognizing depression early and responding with effective support can be truly life-changing.

For nearly three years, Council on Aging's PEARLS Program—Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives—has been part of that critical response, quietly, but profoundly helping to improve the emotional well-being of older adults across Sonoma County.

Developed by the University of Washington, PEARLS is an evidence-based program designed specifically to address depression symptoms and social isolation. PEARLS offers seniors practical tools, structured support, additional resources, and human connection at a time when many feel overlooked or alone.

For many participants, this program has been more than a program, it has been a lifeline. Yet without new funding, this proven and deeply needed service is at risk of ending in June.

Our local outcomes speak clearly:

- 198 seniors enrolled; 138 graduates
- 64.6% achieved depression remission (no longer meeting criteria for clinical depression)
- 51.5% increased their social connection scores
- 55.6% reduced their loneliness scores

"If it wasn't for PEARLS, I could have really gotten stuck down the quicksand because it's been one thing after another after another after another. You've helped me act to connect with some things that I needed to do. Basically, PEARLS helped me stay out of the quicksand."

The voices of the PEARLS participants remind us what's truly at stake. Isolation, depression, health challenges, and caregiving burdens are becoming increasingly common for older adults. PEARLS helps prevent crises before it occurs, offering a proven approach that keeps seniors emotionally strong, socially connected, and engaged in daily life.

Council on Aging is seeking community donors, foundation grants, and organizational sponsors to ensure PEARLS remains available to the older adults who depend on it and to the many more who have yet to discover it.

Losing this program is not a line item in a budget. It has real human consequences. It means fewer lifelines for older adults who may have no one else. And it means stepping away from one of the most cost-effective, humane, and heart-centered models of emotional support our county has ever had.

Sonoma County can write a different ending. If we value the emotional well-being of our older adults, we must ensure this work continues. We invite county leaders, funders, and community partners to come together and safeguard a program that has been a lifeline for so many.

Contact Denise Johnson at djohnson@councilonaging.com or 707-525-0143 ext. 119 to make a difference.

An Awakening

By Sari Zimmerman, PEARLS Coach

Susan was born in the Midwest and had lived in many parts of the country before finally settling in California. She spent most of her childhood on the East Coast, specifically Long Island and New York. She remembers, "I grew up in a really loving family; there was a lot of warmth and laughter."

Susan worked with children for years; she's been a teacher, a coach, and a counselor. She loves gardening, watching movies, and being in nature.

"I really like good movies, any movie except horror and super violent movies, but other than that, if it's well done, well produced with good actors, I'll watch anything," said Susan.

She also does a lot of dancing in her living room, and Qigong is part of her daily practice.

The accomplishments that have been most meaningful to Susan are having her three children, earning her master's degree, and working with children with special needs. Watching them transform in a year brought her great joy. Another accomplishment was starting one of the very first infant daycare centers in Marin. Susan informed me that there weren't any at the time, and women wanted to go back to work. She explains, "It was a new concept because people with money could afford a nanny, but some of them wanted their children to be around other children. Amazingly enough, it's still in existence."

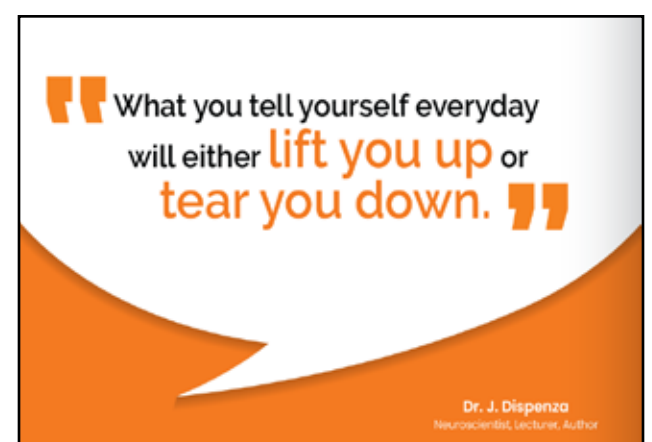
Susan learned about PEARLS from an article in our Sonoma Seniors Today newsletter. She said it was an excellent testimonial, and fortunately, it included Council on Aging's contact information. Susan says she called, "Because I needed it, I was aware my momentum and focus were not what they used to be. And I knew that I needed someone external to people who've known me for a long time, and the truth is, I was moved to make the phone call."

PEARLS has been a highly beneficial process that helped Susan focus and act in areas where she felt stalled. Many of her goals were initially health-related, and she was just being honest about what she needed rather than saying, "Oh, it will get better," or, "I'll get around to it." She questioned herself, thinking "What good am I if I'm tired all the time, disorganized, and lacking focus?"

Susan added that her coach, Sari, was a real motivator. "Her disposition is terrific, her focus on me has been instrumental, and having a relationship with someone you have confidence in and trust and intrinsically value makes all the difference in the world."

Susan found the PEARLS PST Worksheets helpful and said they helped her stay focused. She also appreciated the pre-appointment phone call reminder, saying it was an important part of the process. Susan adds, "I just found working with Sari really valuable for opening my eyes. This program illuminated the areas in my life where my eyes weren't open. The process, over 6 months, has been like an awakening!"

If you're interested in PEARLS or would like to refer someone who may benefit, please contact Nyah Reynolds at (707) 525-0143 ext. 130 or nreynolds@councilonaging.com.



How to Become Aware of and Manage Stress

By Megan Atha, Nutrition, and Dietetics Graduate, CSUS Food

April is National Stress Awareness Month. To celebrate helping you manage stress, this article explains what stress is, what happens to your body when it's under chronic stress, and some ways to help manage stress in older adults.

The World Health Organization defines stress as “a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.” This is your body's natural response to life's demands. Stress exists to help us survive. It is the basis of our “fight or flight” mechanism that occurs when our body perceives danger. This allows us to react quickly in life-threatening or dangerous situations. Some stress can be beneficial in survival situations, but it can also pose health problems.

When under stress, your body pumps out the stress hormone, cortisol, to help you quickly respond to a perceived threat. But higher cortisol levels in older adults can lead to increased stress and decreased cognitive performance. The cortisol surge caused by stress is stronger in older adults and may take longer to return to normal levels. The American Institute of Stress states that stress and inflammation are closely linked. Chronic stress (also known as prolonged stress) increases inflammation in older adults, which affects their physical capacity. This also means that chronic stress equals more inflammation, and more inflammation when stressed equals more (or worse) health problems. Other studies have found that chronic stress can increase cholesterol, triglycerides, blood sugar, and blood pressure, which can all be risk factors for heart disease.

Some other symptoms of stress are:

- Headaches
- Sleep Disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Poor concentration
- Digestive issues
- Heart palpitations
- Irritability
- Depression

Many things can cause stress in our lives, but it's how we manage it that matters most. Here are some things you can do to help reduce stress in your life:

- **Identifying the cause of stress:** If you can find the source, you can remove it from your life. If you can't remove the source of the stress, you can try to do something to help reduce the amount of stress it's causing you.
- **Exercising:** Exercise releases feel-good endorphins while reducing stress hormones (like cortisol). The exercise you choose doesn't have to be intense; a short walk or adding some more steps to your day can be beneficial.
- **Getting a good night's sleep:** Establishing a sleep routine signals the brain and body to wind down, reduces stress, improves sleep quality, and promotes better mental and physical health by reinforcing the natural sleep-wake cycle.
- **Eating a balanced diet:** This gives your body the energy it needs to work through stress. According to Harvard Health, certain foods, such as omega-3 fats (found in fatty fish, nuts, and plant oils) and vegetables, can help regulate cortisol levels.
- **Meditation:** Allowing time to take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate can help reduce stress.
- **Journaling:** This allows you to process emotions, externalize worries, and identify triggers.

Journaling activates the brain's calmer “rest and digest” system and lowers your stress hormones.

- **Practicing daily gratitude:** This allows you to remind yourself of specific things that you are grateful for, which you can write down and look at any time.
- **Leaning on your social network:** Research has shown that people with high levels of social support tend to be more resilient in stressful situations. If you have a small or nonexistent social circle to lean on for support, one way to expand it is to engage in activities aligned with your interests, such as joining hobby groups, taking classes, or volunteering. You can also use technology to connect with some old friends whom you may not have talked to in a while. Making small efforts, such as smiling and inviting people to join you in activities, can increase your social network.
- **Getting a pet:** In a survey on healthy aging, a majority of pet owners aged 50-80 say their pet helped reduce their stress and improve their quality of life. Pets can also help you be more active and feel less alone. Just be aware that taking care of a pet can be a lot of responsibility, so make sure you can take care of yourself and the pet before you get one.

Sometimes, stress can be helpful to help us out of a challenging situation, but chronic stress negatively affects our bodies. Using the tactics mentioned above can help reduce chronic stress in older adults. Let's try to make April a stress-free month to honor National Stress Awareness Month.

Better Living Through Peer Support

By Marcia Katz, Clinical Supervisor, Senior Peer Support Program

Council on Aging (COA) Senior Peer Support (SPS) Program offers seniors in the community an opportunity for both volunteers and clients to benefit from the positive effects of connection. I spoke with Terri S., who became a program client through somewhat unusual circumstances.

Terri initially reached out to the SPS program for her 94-year-old mother, who had participated in several other programs offered by COA. Her mother, Jeannie, had such wonderful experiences that Terri decided to look into the SPS program for her as well. While interviewing her mother for the program, it became evident that Jeannie was very well supported and had little to complain about, stating that her daughter was doing such a wonderful job caring for her! Terri mentioned that the stress of caring for her mother for seven years was taking a toll on her state of mind, and we all agreed she would receive more from the program's support than her mom.

Terri is an only child who grew up in Santa Rosa and raised two children in the house she currently lives in, while her mother lives in the granny unit next to the main house on the three-quarter-acre property she owns. She was a hair stylist until 1999, when she left work to care for her husband, who was a Vietnam Vet. Her husband passed away in 2013, and about 7 years ago, her mother, who had been living in Phoenix caretaking her husband, came to live with her. Her mother was depleted from the years of caring for her husband and turned to Terri as she recuperated from the toll of caretaking. Terri's main focus then shifted to caring for her mother. What Terri originally thought would be a short-term caretaking role (due to the poor health her mother presented with when she arrived) has now extended to the seven-year mark.

“She was relying on me for everything — friendship, care, transportation. She lost all independence, and I let it happen. I felt guilty leaving her alone. I wouldn't turn my phone off because what if she needed me? I got more and more exhausted as she thrived. I think she was expecting me to take the place of her husband, but in trying to fulfill that, I lost my own life.” Terri marvels that, during the SPS program interview, her mother heard how burnt-out Terri was and slowly started giving Terri a break to focus on her own life.

Terri was matched with a volunteer named Susan K, who specializes in teaching calming and relaxation exercises. Terri identified three goals she wanted Susan to help her with: community resources for her mom, setting boundaries with others (especially her mom), and finding ways to relax to help her regain the life she had put on hold for her mother's care. She has now been working with Susan for several months, and reports a complete 180 for both herself and her relationship with her mother.

“Susan has been amazing, very helpful, and caring. Through her, I have come to see the value in setting boundaries. I turn off my phone and take time for myself during the week, something I would never have done before. I stand by my boundaries, and my mother sees me as a separate person now. She sees she can't be my only priority, and she has gotten more independent as a result. And I've learned I need to be my own priority, to take care of myself so I can better take care of her.”

Susan K has been a volunteer with the SPS program for over five years. She says volunteering for the program has brought a renewed sense of purpose to her life. “I like helping seniors because I'm a senior. And I hope that when I'm in need, help will be available to me. There's such a need in



Terri and her Mother, Jeannie

the community — loneliness, navigating health care systems, and finding activities to lessen isolation are the biggest concerns I see. And there is a growing need for help as Sonoma County ages and suicide rates continue to rise.” The county's suicide death rate among older adults exceeds the statewide rate, with adults aged 75-84 years having the highest suicide increase of any age group.

During the Sept. 18 suicide prevention conference, titled “Connection is Prevention,” Sonoma County Supervisor Chris Coursey spoke to some of the life challenges seniors face. These include increased isolation, loss of loved ones, declining health, and the stress of being a caregiver for a loved one.”

If you would like to donate to this meaningful program, become a volunteer, or participate in SPS, please contact Denise Johnson at (707) 525-0143 ext. 119 or djohnson@councilonaging.com.

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Sonoma County Aging & Disability Resources



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City	Location	Dates & Hours	End Date	Text / Phone #
Guerneville	Guerneville Regional Library 14107 Armstrong Woods Road	Monday 10 am – 3:30 pm	Apr 13	707-582-0251
Healdsburg	Healdsburg Community Center 139 Piper Street	Thursday 10 am – 3 pm	Apr 9	707-582-0251
Oakmont	Oakmont Village Berger Center Fireplace Room, 6633 Oakmont Drive	Monday & Wednesday 9 am – 3 pm (Closed 4/6)	Apr 15	707-582-0565
Petaluma	Petaluma Community Center 320 N. McDowell Boulevard	Monday 9 am – 2 pm	Apr 13	707-582-0251
Rohnert Park	Rohnert Park Senior Center 6800 Hunter Drive	Friday 9:00 am – 2:00 pm (Closed 4/3)	Apr 10	707-582-0251
Santa Rosa	Franklin Park Clubhouse 2095 Franklin Avenue	Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 9:30 am – 2:30 pm	Apr 15	707-582-0251
Santa Rosa	Santa Rosa Vet Memorial Bldg. 1351 Maple Avenue	Monday 9:30 am – 2:30 pm	Apr 13	707-582-0251
Sebastopol	Sebastopol Center for the Arts - Veterans Bldg. 282 High Street	Tuesday 9 am – 3:30 pm	Apr 14	707-582-0251
Sonoma	Sonoma Valley Regional Library 755 W. Napa Street	Friday 10 am – 2 pm	Apr 10	707-996-5217 or in person at Library
Windsor	Windsor Senior Recreation Center 9231 Foxwood Drive	Monday 1 – 5 pm	Apr 13	707-582-0251

You do not need to be a senior or a member of AARP to use the service. We have no age or income restrictions, and we're always looking for more volunteers!

IF YOU NEED ASSISTANCE OR RESOURCES FOR ANY OF THESE SERVICES, CALL (707) 565-INFO (4636) OR VISIT WWW.SOCOADRH.ORG

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