



## An Update to the State of Aging

In the fall of 2021, the Bell released its inaugural [State of Aging report](#). This report provided a comprehensive set of metrics by which to benchmark our state's ongoing successes and challenges in meeting the needs of older Coloradans. In this brief, we assess what's changed since the inaugural report. By regularly re-examining our progress against initial metrics, we can chart a meaningful path forward in shaping an inclusive state that recognizes everyone's value.

### Key Takeaways:

1. Many older Coloradans are facing economic pressures as a result of growing costs and constrained incomes.
2. COVID-19 demonstrated the imperative of creating resilient, equitable systems.
3. New efforts, many of which are being funded by one-time federal dollars, present our state with a valuable opportunity to create meaningful change. To make these permanent however, we must begin thinking now about developing sustainable funding streams and systems.

### A Note on Data

Before diving into our analysis, it's important to first consider COVID-related data limitations. We, as do most other researchers, rely upon data from the U.S. Census Bureau to analyze health, economic, and social outcomes. The Census Bureau gathers information by conducting regular community surveys. These surveys, unfortunately, were disrupted by COVID-19, which contributed to [unreliable data for 2020](#).

The lack of 2020 data has implications for this and future reports. Specifically, it means that we can't use the exact same benchmarks laid out in our initial State of Aging to understand the immediate impacts of COVID. These benchmarks include one's relation to the federal poverty threshold, median income, health care coverage, and more.

COVID data challenges, however, do not mean that we're powerless to assess changes over the past two years. As you'll see below, we do have other data sources. However, the lack of Census information restricts what we're able to measure. Thankfully, we expect these data challenges to dissipate as the pandemic becomes less acute.

## Updates to Key Issue Areas

Our State of Aging report examined four main issue areas: [financial security](#), [health](#), ability to live in one's [community of choice](#), and [quality of life](#). We provide an update on each of these focus areas below.

### Financial Security

While we can't reliably track changes in poverty, we can explore how the economic lives of older Coloradans have shifted, particularly as it relates to changes in expenses and changes in income.

### Expenses

The [global phenomenon of inflation](#) has increased the cost of goods and services for everyone, including older adults. Using data from our initial State of Aging report, we examined how prices have changed for older Coloradans across several major expense categories in the chart below.

### Price Changes for Older Coloradans Across Major Expense Categories September 2021-September 2022

Item	Inflation Rate	Cost Before	Cost Now	Difference
Rent	10.4%	\$900	\$990	\$90
Utilities	13.3%	\$200	\$230	\$30
Health Care	6.5%	\$300	\$320	\$20
Transportation	6.3%	\$300	\$320	\$20
Food	11.8%	\$300	\$340	\$40
Miscellaneous/Recreation	3.5%	\$400	\$410	\$10
Totals	7.7%	\$2,400	\$2,610	\$210

Source: Bell analysis using September 2022 Denver-Aurora-Lakewood [inflation data](#) for everything but health care, which used [federal inflation data](#) for the same time period; Bell State of Aging monthly expenses for renters was used as a benchmark; numbers rounded to the nearest \$10

### Income

Income has an equally important influence on economic security. Notably, many older Coloradans have seen changes to their income sources over the past couple years.

- **Social Security:** Social Security is the most prevalent source of income for older Coloradans, making it an especially important linchpin to achieving economic security. While Social Security payments are adjusted by the federal government for inflation, they are lagged, meaning changes are only implemented after prices have risen. For example, though year-over-year prices have increased by [8.2 percent nationally](#), Social Security benefits only grew by [5.9 percent](#) in 2022.
- **Wages:** As older adults [remain employed longer](#), wages are becoming an increasingly important element of their budgets. Prior to the pandemic, labor force participation for those 65 and older was [steadily increasing](#). Like most other demographic groups, this changed in the initial months of COVID. Despite more recent upticks in the economy and a strong [demand for workers](#), however, labor force participation rates for older adults remain depressed.

- **Pension and retirement Income:** Finally, retirement and pension income provide crucial financial padding in later life. As such, changes to these sources of income will be important to keep an eye on in the coming years, both as the stock market continues to fluctuate and as the state implements a new [SecureSavings Program](#) to help people save for retirement.

As showcased above, financial security for older Coloradans is in flux. Inflation, lagged social security increases, and labor market considerations are combining to stress budgets and household finances. Continued attention to these trends will be important in identifying lasting implications.

### Health

Our research shows that prior to the pandemic there were tremendous disparities between White and older Coloradans of color as it relates to both health care access and outcomes. As mentioned above, current data makes it difficult to assess any recent health-related changes. However, it should be noted there has been increased attention to previously identified disparities. For example, Colorado lawmakers recently passed bills to support [culturally relevant health care](#) and greater [health equity](#). Additionally, the federal [Inflation Reduction Act](#) includes a provision to reduce Medicare drug prices.

While we wait for the implementation of new and ongoing efforts, it’s worth taking a moment to reflect on the lessons of COVID. Throughout the pandemic, we saw the virus [disproportionately impact](#) older adults of color. This has been attributed to systemic, long-standing inequities across all facets of our society. As we move forward, this reality should motivate us to prioritize addressing disparities, which as has become all too clear, can have life and death consequences.

### Community of Choice

In our initial State of Aging report, we identify two significant challenges to aging in one’s community of choice: a shortage of supports for [unpaid caregivers](#), and a dearth of paid [direct care workers](#). We examine movement within these two care ecosystems below.

### Direct Care Workers

[Home-based care](#) played a critical role during COVID in helping to reduce nursing home utilization. As a result, federal aid was funneled into strengthening the ecosystem supportive of this care. This included earmarking dollars (Colorado saw a benefit of approximately [\\$500 million](#)) in the federal American Rescue Plan Act for home and community services. Colorado decided to invest a portion of its allocated funds into supports for the direct care workforce, and has been developing training systems and [increasing pay and reimbursement rates](#).

While there is certainly a [long way to go](#), the chart below indicates that, at least in some respects, the above-mentioned efforts – especially when combined with previous work – are leading to some positive changes in Colorado’s caring workforce.

	Number of Workers				Median Wages			
	2019	2020	2021	Change	2019	2020	2021	Change
<b>Home Health &amp; Personal Care Aides</b>	35,790	36,610	39,990	4,200	\$12.54	\$13.38	\$14.38	\$1.84
<b>Nursing Assistants</b>	21,970	21,130	20,660	-1,310	\$16.20	\$16.61	\$17.59	\$1.39

Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Colorado Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates

## Unpaid Caregivers

Though receiving less attention than their paid counterparts, unpaid caregivers have also benefited from recent investments. This includes [increased federal funding](#) for [respite services](#). Additionally, here in Colorado, the state's new [paid family and medical leave program](#) continues on its path toward implementation.

Home and community-based care is essential to the well-being of many older Coloradans and their families. One-time, enhanced federal funding presents us with an opportunity to make meaningful investments into the systems and workforce we will rely upon for years into the future.

## Quality of Life

Finally, our State of Aging report recognizes that well-being can't be assessed through economic and health outcomes alone. As a result, we examined a variety of less concrete measures related to overall well-being, like safety, security, and the ability to meaningfully participate in community. Many of the examined measures came from the [Community Assessment Survey of Older Adults](#) (CASOA). Results from the most recent CASOA are expected in the coming months. Examining these findings will help us understand COVID's continuing impact on issues like community connectedness.

## Tying the Pieces Together

While data challenges prevent us from replicating previous analyses used in our initial State of Aging report, we're still able to draw some conclusions about the landscape impacting older Coloradans.

- **Continuation of previous trends:** Upon conducting our first State of Aging analysis, we identified [five major takeaways](#), including the presence of: disparate outcomes and access to resources based upon race as well as geography; significant economic vulnerability; considerable data gaps; and emerging opportunities for progress. As we look at the current landscape, it's clear these trends persist.
- **We're in a tremendous period of uncertainty:** Whether measured by inflation, fluctuations in the labor market, infusions of one-time federal money, or the implementation of new programs, uncertainty is pervasive across Colorado. This reality makes it imperative that we move with intentionality to provide targeted resources to meet emerging needs.
- **Opportunities for systemic change:** Similar to our [initial report](#), we note here that a host of new programs and initiatives are beginning to take effect. If coordinated and implemented with care, we have the ability to utilize this opportunity to make long-needed systemic change.
- **Considerations for long-term sustainability:** As we capitalize upon the [recent influx of resources](#), we must also recognize that much of it is the result of a one-time infusion of federal support. A great deal of this support will expire in the next few years. If we want to make changes permanent, we must begin thinking now about developing sustainable, state-specific, funding sources.
- **Continued evaluation:** Finally, as initially acknowledged, there are data challenges in assessing how older Coloradans have fared throughout the past couple years. These data challenges, however, will not last forever. As the world regains some sense of normalcy, it is imperative that we continue to track our progress, but also ongoing challenges.

## **Moving Forward**

This analysis spotlights the tremendous opportunities and challenges that are in front of us. We are in a period of tremendous uncertainty where many older Coloradans and their families are experiencing economic turbulence. At the same time, a host of new initiatives—thanks largely to a significant infusion of one-time federal support—are being implemented. If done right, these new initiatives can provide targeted support to the very same Coloradans who may be struggling. Navigating this landscape will be difficult. However, if done carefully, we can make meaningful progress in our collective aim of making Colorado one of the best states in which to age.