

## Here's How Darien Senior Center Is Shifting to More Indoor, In-Person Programs; Drive-Thru Lunches Continue

**Author :** David Gurliacci

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Darien Senior Center members are being welcomed back to more in-person programs indoors at the Mather Community Center starting Monday, June 7, and seniors picking up lunches today (Friday) can park and hear a concert from 12 noon to 1 p.m. in the parking lot.

Starting Monday, the center's Woodshop and its Computer Room will both be open (but only if you've reserved a spot). Participation in indoor programs is strictly limited in order to allow for safe distancing of seniors, said Beth Paris, director of the center.

Other in-person activities for this month include a Tai Chi class, a "Walking Club" for Thursday mornings, and in-person talks about the Battle of Midway in World War II, the women of the Soviet Red Army in that same war, and a blood-pressure screening.

The Senior Center's move back toward in-person programming is a gradual shift over time, Paris said. Programs that take place outdoors, like the Walking Club, have already started, and some talks and other events will still be done online, via Zoom.com webinars.

"We're going to be a virtual senior center and an in-person senior center for the foreseeable future," she said. And some of that virtual programming is expected to be a permanent change, she added (see her comments below).

Registration for in-person activities began May 24 for Darien residents and on June 2 for non-Darien residents.

A number of Senior Center programs during the pandemic had either restarted (often in September of last year) with online-only participation or, for the caregiver assistance program, switched to one-on-one consultations indoors.

### **Following State Safety Rules**

The state has set guidelines for senior programs, and Darien Senior Center is following them, Paris said. The guidelines are stricter for seniors than for non-seniors because, even fully vaccinated seniors are more vulnerable to COVID-19, she said.

Therefore an exercise class that may have been able to accommodate 30 seniors may only have room for 15 once 6-foot distancing is taken into account, she said. Paris said she hopes to see the regulations loosened to 3-foot distancing within months to allow for more in-person participation.

### **Traffic and Parking**

Seniors entering the building around noontime may need to be aware of cars forming the line for lunches.

Town Administrator Kathleen Buch recently sent a memo to tell Town Hall staff they need to refrain from parking in the half of the lower parking lot nearest the Senior Center entrance.

She also said that as a health safety measure, access to the Senior Center will be closed from the rest of the building the community center shares with Town Hall. "Anyone attending programs at the center will need to enter through the Mather Community Center front doors on the lower level."

### **Drive-Thru Lunches and Two Concerts**

The senior lunch program will remain a drive thru-program for now (for details about getting lunches, see [the Senior Center's main Web page](#)).

From 12 noon to 1 p.m. on Friday, the first of two concerts for people picking up their lunches will take place in the same parking lot. "Following lunch pick up, staff will direct you to a parking space to enjoy the show," the Senior Center's newsletter announced.

Here's the newsletter's description of the concert:

"On Friday, June 4 we welcome the summer music stylings of Peter Randazzo!" "Peter has been playing piano and singing for over 25 years! He has performed at the Marriott Marquis in New York and can be seen

at local piano bars throughout Fairfield County! Chef Judi will be making a Hawaiian themed lunch to enhance the festivities!" Another concert in the parking lot is scheduled for Friday, June 25.

### **Into the Future: Programs Provided Online**

The challenge of the pandemic prompted Darien Senior Center and the other 13 Fairfield County senior programs that are members of the Southwest Connecticut Agency on Aging to turn to Zoom.com webinars to reach seniors who couldn't enter the closed senior center buildings, Paris said. The county agency, an independent nonprofit group, has been a great help in setting that up, she said.

The June "What's Happening" newsletter of the Senior Center has a list of programs of interest to seniors that are offered by outside groups, including Quinnipiac University and AARP.

And that new avenue to reach seniors is not expected to shut down, even as senior centers reopen, Paris said.

"We see the value of remaining virtual for the future," she said. With the Senior Center's caregiver support group, for instance, online meetings can be held when the caregiver can't get out of the house.

And for anyone at the Darien Senior Center or at any of the senior programs in Fairfield County, lectures now are often shared online, so seniors in many towns can, for instance, get an opportunity to hear a talk given by a Stamford Hospital expert about a medical problem to watch out for. Senior centers around Fairfield County are already sharing lecture programs that they once held only at their own locations.

Zoom.com events can allow people to ask speakers questions, making them more valuable than lectures that are taped or even broadcast live.

### **Another Silver Lining From the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic, for all its burdens, has resulted in a silver lining for the Senior Center's patrons — more of them, even those over 85 years old, have familiarized themselves with online meetings, giving them a new opportunity to attend events and interact with others even if they can't leave home, Paris said.

"I can't tell you how many people got hooked up" with computers and online service to keep from being isolated by the pandemic, Paris said. "That never happened before."

Being able to connect online with other people is an enormous benefit to the mental health of seniors, she said. "If this [pandemic] had happened at a different time, we'd probably be dealing with more mental health issues for seniors."

Paris, a gerontologist, pointed out that by learning something new, outside their comfort zone, anyone over 45 helps keep their brain more alert and is less likely to suffer from dementia in the future. A mix of learning new things that a person is already interested in or is challenged to learn is recommended, she said.

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"You're tapping an area of the brain that remains healthy and stimulated," Paris said. "You need to keep it going, just like you need to keep your muscles going."

**Find Out More in the 'What's Happening' Newsletter**

A link to the latest Senior Center "What's Happening" newsletter is posted at the top of [the center's Web page](#) on the town government website.

Although it's not identified as a link to the newsletter, you can click on "[JUNE 2021 HIGHLIGHTS & HAPPENINGS!](#)" to get to it, and it looks different from the pre-pandemic newsletters).

Any events marked in yellow are in-person events; if there's no yellow marking, the event is online, Paris said.