

Washington State Council On Aging

2021 Report from Social Engagement Committee

Issues

Gerontologists have long recognized social isolation as an issue in the older communities. The onset of the pandemic in 2019 increased social isolation to an all-time high. Social isolation is different from loneliness. While isolation means having few regular contacts with people, loneliness is the emotionally painful feeling of being alone and left out. Both social isolation and loneliness are associated with decreased mental and physical health.

Social isolation has had disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged, marginalized, and vulnerable often identified as the elderly, the disabled, people of color, the homeless, and the LGBT+ community. Failing to meet the needs of marginalized, disenfranchised, and vulnerable populations creates personal hardship and potentially greater costs for societies in the long-run.

Needs vary across groups in Washington, requiring a menu of ideas for increasing social engagement through many different communities:

- Urban vs. rural settings
- Marginalized communities
- Strong vs. weak social networks
- People living at home vs. living in long term care

Challenges

- Diversity challenges. If agencies take a “one size fits all” approach to social isolation in elders, programs will likely fail to account for the diversity within communities. Examples:
 - ✓ Creating programming for urban marginalized communities that does not serve those in suburban or rural areas.
 - ✓ Creating programming for “seniors” without recognizing the broad diversity of seniors. Differences can include the vastly different needs in ages from 65 to 100, seniors of different cultural

- heritages, communities of color; members of the LGBTQ+ community, and seniors with limited English skills.
- Lack of coordination. Some small non-profit organizations serve diverse populations, but their efforts would be amplified with more coordination with government agencies that coordinate services and resources available to seniors.
 - Need for strong community networks. Strengthening community networks can prevent elders from becoming isolated. Developing systems that incorporate churches, senior centers, local businesses, neighborhood centers, gyms, and community health clinics can help identify seniors who are socially isolated and strategies to step in when needed.
 - Support of aging in place. Many – perhaps most --people want to stay in their homes as they age, maintaining their neighborhood and community ties in familiar surroundings. The pandemic has exposed risks of congregate care settings and infection control, which will likely increase desires to remain at home. Individual costs and costs to our society will be reduced by supporting elders at home for as long as possible. An important public challenge is to identify land use, social service, medical service, and other governmental policies that support or hinder keeping people in their homes as they age.

Ideas for increasing social engagement using electronics

The pandemic has shown that broadband access for all needs to be a priority. It is important to recognize that having broadband in a community does not translate to broadband access for all. Multiple obstacles keep people in any age group from broadband access:

- Lack of technical skill
- Lack of equipment (cell phone or computer)
- Lack of reliable broadband service in a geographic area
- Lack of economic resources to pay monthly broadband and cell phone bills
- Reluctance to learn to use computers or lack of interest in unfamiliar electronics.

Several electronic tools can help to encourage connection for families and communities. The pandemic spurred experimentation, and we need to

follow the results of several innovative pilot programs in Washington and continue experimenting with using electronic tools to enrich wellbeing and social networks.

- Some Area Agencies on Aging are starting pilots using Grand Pads this year, targeting clients uncomfortable with using computers by providing a simpler piece of equipment .
- Robotic pets for dementia patients have been shown to be calming for some and are part of a statewide pilot project initiated during the pandemic.
- Digital picture frames allow family members to upload family photos easily without requiring tech skills from the recipient.
- Video chats for long term care residents need to be supported to become a routine way for families to stay in touch with their elders in care facilities.
- Video calls have made it possible for homebound citizens to attend meetings, medical appointments, legislative hearings, conferences, and family dinners, increasing engagement in activities that in pre-pandemic times required in-person attendance. We need to keep some lessons learned during the pandemic and use them for improving social connection possibilities in post-pandemic life, especially for people with mobility or transportation challenges.

Finally, most seniors have a TV and a telephone, so we suggest on considering development of a public messaging campaign that relies existing accessible technology. Example: A “Reach Out” campaign to remind all of us to make a phone call or visit to those in our social networks and neighborhoods who live alone.