

Stay Active: National Strategy for Engaging Older Adults

engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults

Executive Summary

Recently much has been learned about the individual and societal impact of social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation is commonly described as based on objective indicators, such as a lack of relationships or infrequent social contact while loneliness is defined as the subjective perception of being alone. Research suggests that remaining socially engaged improves the quality of life for older adults and is associated with better health. In addition, older adults who are socially engaged in their communities can share their knowledge, talent, skills, experience and wisdom, allowing them to contribute with a positive and powerful impact. Social engagement contributes to greater physical, mental and emotional health and well-being in older adults avoiding the negative impacts of isolation. In fact, “being connected to others socially is widely considered a fundamental human need – crucial to both well-being and survival,” says psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad of Brigham Young University.

Specifically, research has shown that remaining socially engaged improves the quality of life for older adults, resulting in dramatic health benefits including:

- Longer survival (Holt-Lunstad, et. al., 2010)
- Decreased risk of disability and functional mobility decline (James, Boyle, Buchman & Bennett 2011; Thomas 2011)
- Decrease likelihood of depression (Golden, Conroy, Lawlor, 2009; Isaac 2009)
- Decrease in cognitive decline (Golden, Conroy, Lawlor, 2009; James et al. 2011)

While other research demonstrates that the opposite is true of those experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation including:

- Recognition of social isolation as a risk factor for cardio vascular disease (Piepoli et al., 2016).
- People experiencing loneliness disproportionately report lower incomes and having a debilitating health condition or mental health conditions. (Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey, Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018)

Further, “a 2017 collaborative study by the AARP, Stanford University, and Harvard University found that the Medicare program spends an estimated \$134 more per person monthly (\$1,608 annually) for every socially isolated older adult, compared with those who were not socially isolated—a level of spending comparable to what Medicare pays for certain chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure or arthritis. In total, the study

estimated that a lack of social contact among older adults is associated with an estimated \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually.”

The number of adults in the U.S. age 65+ will increase from 46 million today to over 70 million in 2030. This 52% increase in the number of older adults in a relatively short period of time should be the impetus to transform how our society thinks about the assets of an aging population, and how communities position themselves to harness the tremendous resource they represent to make positive change. Further, as the national dialogue on the impact of social isolation grows, many are beginning to analyze how the instance of social isolation particularly in older adults can be addressed. Increasing the activities, size of networks and opportunity for connections with others or social engagement provides the opportunity to reverse some of the causes of isolation.

engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults, is the national effort to promote and provide opportunities to improve the rates of social engagement in older adults. The National Resource Center which is funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging and is part of the U.S. Administration for Community Living will work with national partners to:

- Identify and disseminate information about emerging trends, resources, and replication strategies that the Aging Network can use and tailor in their communities
- Develop a national strategy for educating and informing the Aging Network about innovative engagement approaches and programming

Social Engagement:

Why we are focusing on social engagement:

Healthy relationships are important across the total life span. Research from the Institute on Aging in 2010, indicates that fully one third of older adults live alone. Lack of social engagement has been identified as a contributing factor to the development of loneliness which can have an adverse impact ultimately on longevity. However, older adults have a lifetime of knowledge, talent, skills, experience and wisdom, enabling them to have powerful impacts in their communities. Too often, however, communities do not know the best ways to tap into these powerful resources and actively engage older adults.

Recognizing the sweeping demographic changes occurring in our country and the opportunities they represent, the Aging Network is poised to take a leadership role to promote the social engagement of older adults across all sectors of society.

To ensure that the Aging Network can bridge the gap from current levels of social engagement activities to more robust offerings, agencies will draw from a centralized National Resource Center that provides practical peer and expert training, technical assistance that draws upon lessons learned from the field of social engagement and user-friendly resources that highlight the breadth of social engagement opportunities including, civic engagement/volunteerism, creative and cultural participation, intergenerational opportunities, lifelong learning and technology. Further, many older adults want to learn new skills, apply the skills they have

in new ways or start a business of their own post retirement. Others are simply interested in supplementing their existing income. Whatever the motivation developing skills or remaining employed contributes to opportunities for greater connectedness.

The Resource Center will capitalize on the long-standing and highly respected knowledge, ability and experience of n4a and its partners, the National Center for Creative Aging, Generations United, National Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes and OATS, to identify and share lessons from their fields of expertise (volunteerism, arts engagement, intergenerational opportunities, lifelong learning and technology).

Through this unique partnership, the five organizations will reach out directly through their extensive networks to assess strategic opportunities for replicating social engagement opportunities, and develop and disseminate information, training and technical assistance tools that will aid the Aging Network in building its capacity to increase the social engagement of older adults in communities across the U.S. The assessment, training and technical assistance tools will draw upon the unique ability of the partners to reach and impact AAAs, Title VI programs, aging providers and other community-based organizations that directly serve older adults every day.

Elements of the Strategic Framework

The strategic framework includes four key elements that are designed to contribute to a greater level of opportunity for and participation in social engagement activities on the part of older adults. Volunteerism is viewed as a component of these four key elements.

- **Awareness** - A focus on contributing to a national dialogue that heightens awareness of the issues that can be addressed through social engagement and the promotion of programs which support social engagement
- **Sustainable Partnerships** - A wide range of not-for-profit organizations which agree that increasing and supporting social engagement for older adults is a priority; and will work to provide programs to communities to foster greater levels of social engagement. Includes an emphasis on the development and enhancement of additional partnerships and on expanding access to resources.
- **Impact** – Identifying approaches to overcome obstacles to engagement, developing effective practices to increase social engagement and undertaking efforts which can be readily scaled up.
- **Evaluation and Improvement** – An effort to fill any gaps in surveillance or research around social engagement; to develop evaluation approaches to measure efforts, demonstrate efficacy of interventions, and identify benefits of programs; to allow for ongoing and continuous improvement and sharing of best practices and programmatic efforts with the understanding that health is the overarching issue.

Goals

A significant number of older adults have become socially engaged through programmatic efforts of the National Strategy within the 3 year project lifespan. The additional engaged adults will have participated in programmatic efforts within the partner spheres of Intergenerational Connectedness, Volunteerism, Arts and

Cultural opportunities, Lifelong Learning and Technology Solutions as well as other types of efforts that contribute to social engagement.

Implementing the Framework

Social connection is generally described as the feeling that one belongs to a group and generally feel close to other people. According to researcher Dr. Brené Brown of the University of Houston, connection is what brings meaning to our lives. Successful implementation of the framework will be dependent upon how participating organizations and programs connect with and to older adults providing opportunities for them to become more socially engaged. Identifying and conducting outreach to all segments of the older population will be instrumental to ensure all have the opportunity to participate and be involved in their communities.

Volunteerism:

Volunteering to improve a community can foster a sense of purpose and meaning, help volunteers build social relationships and connections, increase physical activity and provide a fresh perspective on life. Looking beyond the day-to-day struggles of one's own life and focusing externally may help decrease stress, worry and other negative emotions. And while volunteering is a critical element of social engagement of older adults, the opportunities for productive engagement are much broader and include:

- Encompassing opportunities for older adults to be actively involved and contributing to people from all generations through intergenerational programs that benefit both older adults and the adults, teens or children they interact with through meaningful engagement;
- Providing and supporting opportunities for older adults to engage in a broad variety of creative expression including music, dance, acting, poetry, visual arts, etc.
- Connecting to learning communities and promoting lifelong learning opportunities that enable older adults to take classes on a variety of topics of interest, and with people of multiple ages, including classes that mix the ages to provide mentoring; and to foster involvement in co-curricular activities and campus volunteerism.
- Engaging older adults in the use of a broad range of technologies that challenge them, connect them to others as well as the world of information.
- For older adults seeking to transition to a different career, volunteering offers opportunities to learn new skills, demonstrate leadership abilities and offer experience to support such a transition.

Sustainable partnerships:

Building sustainable partnerships will be undertaken by identifying and recruiting additional sectors that through their focus, goals and expertise can be key contributors to implementing the National Strategy and supporting community approaches. A list of such potential partner organizations follows:

- Volunteer Organizations – including faith-based organizations
- Public Health such as APHA, CDC, U.S. Surgeon General; organizations which have health as an aspect of goals such as America Walks, Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health
- National networks such as Dementia Friendly America, AARP Network of Age Friendly Communities, Meals on Wheels

- Federal Agencies such as the National Park Service, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Corporation for National and Community Service
- AAA and Title VI Networks
- Media – local and national – Next Avenue, NPR, etc.
- Colleges and Universities and other community education organizations
- Parks and Recreation departments and organizations such as YMCA, YWCA;
- Transportation organizations such as NADTC
- Disability organizations such as Easter Seals
- Senior Living organizations such as Leading Age, Villages, CCRC's, etc.
- Organizations which benefit older adults seeking job training and employment opportunities such as SCSEP sites, Society for Human Resource Management, encore.org; and professional development and learning opportunities for retired executives.

Impact:

Identify and promote the individual and societal benefits of socially engaged older adults.

- Improved health both physical and mental for older adults who are connected to and engaged with others.
- Recognition of the contributions of actively engaged older adults to their communities
- Reduced medical costs both individually and societal

Commit to increasing engagement through a variety of potential approaches or programs including work and employment opportunities.

- Access and Information
- Interventions that encourage and support engagement such as groups, buddy systems, etc.
- Individual behavior change programs
- Community wide programs including media (promotion), events, policy or environmental changes

Develop a broad understanding of why older adults aren't engaged and seek to identify or create triggers to help overcome barriers to engagement. Factors that contribute to social isolation are varied. Many of these are listed below. Understanding these factors and considering them as social engagement opportunities are developed and offered can contribute to a more positive impact.

- Physical ailments; sensory impairments
- Loss of a spouse or loved one; living alone; major life transitions
- Mobility problems including lack of transportation options
- Location: rural, unsafe or inaccessible neighborhood/community;
- Real or perceived cognitive decline
- Less availability of friends or family members to assist or participate in social activities
- Socioeconomic status (low income, limited resources)
- Lack of awareness of opportunities

- Language (non-English speaking)
- Membership in a vulnerable group
- Variety of fears or emotional issues

Evaluation and Improvement:

We may want to consider not just the numbers of additional older adults who become engaged as a result of the Resource Center and partner efforts, but also the impact of the increased amount of engagement. How this can be accomplished is a question to be addressed in the further development of the Strategic Framework.

Examples or ideas for consideration can build upon the following approaches:

AARP developed the following characteristics about which to query respondents to identify individuals experiencing social isolation. A low score resulted in the respondent being identified as isolated however, a higher score indicated a positive level of social connectedness. One could suggest that these same characteristics could be used to determine if individuals participating in activities and events to promote engagement can be categorized as reasonably connected and therefore benefiting from the offerings.

- Size of social network measured as the total number of children, other family members, and friends with whom respondents have a close relationship
- The number of friends (exclusive of other types of relationships) with whom respondents have a close relationship
- Whether respondents have different types of relationships or whether their relationships are all of a single type
- How often respondents are in contact (broadly defined as meet, talk, or write) with their children, other family members, and friends
- How often respondents meet up with their children
- How often respondents meet up with other family members
- How often respondents meet up with friends

Metrics used to understand the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce isolation or loneliness typically include surveys and as an example generally rely upon the UCLA Loneliness Instrument. This instrument originally published in 1978, uses a 20 question survey to measure an individuals' subjective feeling of loneliness. Subsequent revisions have reduced the number of questions while maintaining its reliability.

However, if we are to consider outcomes related to the stated benefits of social engagement such as improved mental and physical well-being, community or civic contributions, or reduced individual medical costs other approaches may need to be identified.

Consideration can be given to establishing base line data such as class or event participation, and volunteer numbers or hours; to be compared to evaluations conducted after specific interventions have been established. The table below suggests the dimensions that can be considered in evaluating programmatic efforts.

	Impact	Activity	Capacity
Qualitative			
Quantitative			

Further Considerations:

- Ensuring adequate representation of diverse constituencies

Diversity is a broadly defined topic, covering personal differences in language, culture, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation and other factors, as well as variability in language skills, reading level, personal interactions and other topics that service providers must prepare for, recognize and respond to. Culturally competent programs maintain a set of attitudes, perspectives, behaviors, and policies – both individually and organizationally – that promote positive and effective interactions with diverse cultures. Practicing cultural competence to honor diversity means understanding the core needs of your target audience and designing services and materials to meet those needs strategically.

- Development of equitable access

Equitable access is about addressing social and economic imbalances so that people from diverse backgrounds have more or less similar opportunities when it comes to accessing and using programs and services. Designing services and programs which reflect the cultural perspectives of and address the unique needs of members of diverse populations, can help to eliminate barriers which they may experience.

- Sustainability of effort/insertion in the national dialogue

Frequently sustainability refers to maintaining funding support for the program or effort underway. However, as noted earlier, a key aspect of the National Strategy is to identify and develop relationships with organizations which can both contribute, support and advance the effort to engaged older adults and provide them an opportunity to remain socially connected. Sustainability is supported through effective measurement and evaluation of efforts from which the data bolsters the on-going commitment by stakeholders to the effort.

Certainly the existing partners have broad networks which can be leveraged in various ways to sustain the resource center. One key avenue is to promote and fuel an ongoing discussion on the topic of social engagement for older adults. There has been a steady stream of reporting on social isolation recently which lays the foundation for promotion of the many programmatic opportunities available to counter isolation with engagement.

- Maintaining funding support

Currently funding is derived from traditional sources including federal grants and philanthropy. Expanding access to resources will become necessary over time and may require both local and national policy discussions to support development of a funding stream. Further, in kind contributions can play a sustaining role in support of the resource center.

- Identification of and determination if appropriate of future advocacy or policy campaigns

References

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