RRF | Foundation for Aging

ENGAGED AND THRIVING:
PROMOTING SOCIAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTEDNESS

ISSUE BRIEF #3: OCTOBER 2021

About RRF Foundation for Aging

The mission of RRF Foundation for Aging (RRF) is to improve the quality of life for older people. RRF is one of the few private foundations in the United States devoted exclusively to aging issues. Our vision is that ALL older people will continue to be valued and respected as participants in and contributors to our communities. In addition to social and intergenerational connectedness, RRF's grantmaking focuses on three other priority areas — economic security in later life, caregiving, and housing.

We are pleased to introduce RRF's Issue Brief on Social and Intergenerational connectedness. This is the third in a series that describes how we approach the Foundation's work toward improving the quality of life for older people.

Meaningful connection is a fundamental part of what constitutes a good life at any age. These relationships can be many or few. They may vary in intensity and duration. Still, these social connections are a kind of emotional lifeblood, nourishing us and playing a critical role in our larger health and well-being, especially as we get older.

Of course, the flip side of social connection is isolation and the feelings of loneliness that may follow. While often conflated, isolation is the objective lack of social contact or support, while loneliness is the subjective (and negative) feeling of being alone. We may experience social isolation without loneliness or vice versa.
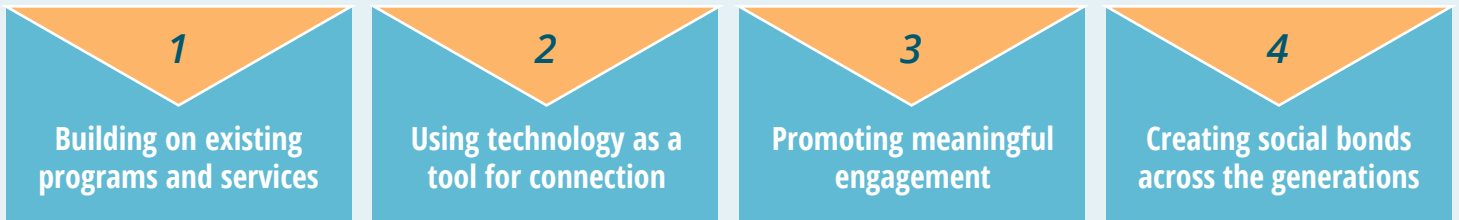
Systemic inequities such as ageism, age segregation, structural and environmental racism, and discrimination, lead to many people living in communities that are geographically and economically isolated from the opportunities, services, and institutions they need to thrive. And as the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light, the unequal allocation of resources has created a divide that separates many of us from the technological supports and services that can provide needed online connections to people and programs.

While many of the driving causes of social isolation are structural, we encounter loneliness as individuals. This can be experienced as a lack of companionship, an inability to participate in social roles and activities, or obstacles to receiving the informational or instrumental support we need to live well. Some of these feelings may be transient or situational, for example, related to caregiving or an acute disease. Some may be chronic, related to sensory loss or mobility limitations, which lead to a daily struggle to find meaning and purpose. Still other causes of loneliness may be occasioned by role shifts, for example, leaving the workforce or the loss of family and friends.

Four Strategies Towards Greater Connection

Just as the causes of social isolation and loneliness are multi-faceted, and in many cases inter-related, addressing these issues is equally complex. RRF Foundation for Aging has identified four pillars through which we are supporting efforts to address this priority area:

1	2	3	4
Building on existing programs and services	**Using technology as a tool for connection**	**Promoting meaningful engagement**	**Creating social bonds across the generations**

Our grantmaking in this priority area is focused on programs that directly address social isolation and loneliness. In some cases, the original design of a program intentionally focuses on reducing social isolation and loneliness. In others, innovators design new ways to confront these issues within the context of existing services and activities. These innovations may include inventive uses of technology or volunteers, or new ways to enhance connections that span the generations.

In the future, our grantmaking approach will certainly evolve as researchers, policymakers, and providers continue to unpack both the underpinnings of social isolation and loneliness and gain insights into what works to help older adults from the full range of diverse communities stay connected to the people and places around them.

Focus on Measurement

Measuring or assessing social isolation and loneliness remains a challenge. RRF is particularly interested in supporting the development of new assessment tools, broadening or sharpening existing ones, and backing their dissemination and implementation. This includes clarifying the clinical diagnostic criteria for identifying social isolation and loneliness in individual people.

Building on existing programs and services

Many existing programs and services have the potential to play a role in addressing social isolation and loneliness. RRF is especially focused on funding effective community programs that *intentionally* overlay a new or evidence-informed approach to social isolation or loneliness on top of their existing services. This kind of synthesis can also provide a way to adapt successful strategies into different settings and communities.
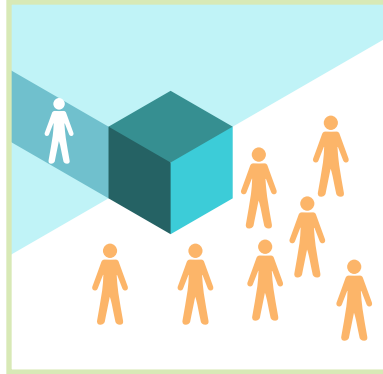
SOCIAL ISOLATION

significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.[1]

Featured Project

- **Illinois Aging Services**
  Illinois Aging Services (IAS) is a nonprofit organization that assesses the needs of older adults and their caregivers, assures access to needed services, and offers education to service providers. Recently, RRF provided IAS a grant to oversee a collaborative project to explore and assess the nature and extent of social isolation services in the state's aging services network. Ultimately, the findings of this work will inform the development and implementation of programs addressing social isolation and loneliness throughout the state.

Using technology to connect us

The COVID pandemic has affected the lives of older people in many ways. The shutdowns and other public health protocols have disproportionately isolated large numbers of older people from the communities and services they desperately need to survive and thrive. Technology—including "old school" phone calls, as well as more contemporary digital technologies such as apps and video conferences—served as a lifeline. Older adults' access to newer tech, however, continues to be uneven. According to a January 2021 study from Older American Technology Services (OATS), a small majority (58%) of older people have broadband access to the internet, but historically excluded communities continue to struggle to get connected.

As we emerge from the pandemic, these tech tools and services offer an important opportunity to reduce social isolation and loneliness. These tools, however, are not necessarily beneficial, unless further enhanced by efforts to provide appropriate training and support to enable older people to understand the full value of these tools. For example, older adults might start using new technology to connect with family members or friends, but quickly learn that it can also help them access needed information and services critical to their health and economic well-being. RRF is interested in supporting innovations that leverage technology as a practical tool to reduce loneliness and isolation.

Those who are not online are more likely to be:[2]

OVER THE AGE OF 65

INCOME OF LESS THAN $30K

HIGH SCHOOL OR LESS EDUCATION LEVEL

RURAL

Featured Projects

- **Divine Revelations Ministries**
  Geeks and Gramps aims to decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness in older adults while confronting age-based stereotypes. It does this by creating opportunities for youth to work with older people to improve their digital literacy through group and one-on-one monthly experiential learning/coaching sessions. At the same time, the program also offers meaningful volunteer experiences for the older adults by providing opportunities to mentor their younger counterparts.

- **Howard Brown Health**
  Howard Brown Health delivers high-quality, affordable health services to patient populations and geographic areas disproportionately affected by health disparities. RRF's recent grant supports the delivery of evidence-based programs and social programming geared specifically to reduce isolation and loneliness in LGBTQ older adults. The program is designed to increase older adults' participation in a variety of virtual, programs by providing video capability, unlimited data service plans, training, and skill-building.

3

Promoting meaningful engagement

Older adults represent a fount of social capital that too often is underutilized and underappreciated. Older people volunteer at high rates and make a wide range of contributions to their families and communities. According to a 2019 AARP study, people age 50 and older annually contributed $745 billion worth of unpaid services with broad societal benefits. In many cases, this service is something they have done for decades, is part of their civic or religious traditions, and is an important element of a rich and meaningful life. Research suggests that remaining meaningfully engaged and having a stronger sense of purpose in life reduces feelings of loneliness and improves quality of life in older adults.[3] Further, this type of purposeful, generative activity helps to combat ageist stereotypes and strengthens the social fabric between all of us.

Featured Projects

- **Oasis**
  Oasis received funding to study the impact of intergenerational volunteerism on social isolation levels and health outcomes of older adults, including how these effects vary by demographic groups within the older adult population. This research also seeks to understand volunteerism when social distancing requirements are in place.

- **Encore.org**
  With funding from RRF and other foundations, Encore.org launched the Gen2Gen Innovation Fellowship. This incubator supports social innovators in strengthening and disseminating promising intergenerational program models.

Creating social bonds across the generations

Intergenerational bonds are a unique and critically important set of social connections that have powerful impacts on families and communities, as well as the older and younger people themselves. America is increasingly age-segregated, so that naturally occurring, cross-generational contacts are not as common as they have been in previous eras. Research from the FrameWorks Institute and others suggest that ageist language can further divide the generations, create a sense of "othering," and contribute to the isolation and minimization of older adults. Conversely, studies also show that meaningful intergenerational programming, which brings to light the strengths of both generations, may reduce social isolation and loneliness and enhance the physical and mental well-being of older adults.

RRF is committed not only to a nation that values older people, but to one that is supportive of people of all generations. At their best, intergenerational initiatives drive connections that benefit everyone—young, middle-aged, and old. Older and younger people may come together for a variety of reasons. For example, they could help each other learn a new subject or skill, or pursue a common, constructive passion together— to help the environment or fight racism—that makes their community a better place to live. These kinds of shared experiences are always enriching, opening new friendships, adding social connections and reducing feelings of loneliness.

Featured Projects

- **Northwest Center**
  Northwest Center has created Common Ground, an intergenerational program based on an innovative approach that combines 1) peer-to-peer relationship building; 2) attention to ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), 3) computer literacy skill-building; and 4) intergenerational engagement, to address trauma and improve the resilience of youth and older adults.

- **Generations United**
  Generations United (GU) was recently awarded a grant to advance intergenerational solutions by working to identify, advance, and build intergenerational programs using a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens. With this funding, GU is also working to update the Programs of Distinction designation criteria to be more accessible, and inclusive of a broader range of intergenerational programs.

Generations United Recognizes Programs of Distinction

An international leader in the field, Generations United (GU) has developed a special designation, "Program of Distinction," which serves as the U.S. benchmark for intergenerational programs. The designation recognizes excellence while celebrating the rich diversity of programs in this area. The GU website features 50+ such programs and serves as a helpful resource for people looking to learn about the best intergenerational programs across the country, and the elements that make them the best.

Big Questions Ahead:

What works? Why does it work? How does it work? Can it be applied to other people?

The field of social isolation, loneliness, and connection in older people is relatively new. Over the past few decades, researchers have only just begun to dig into these topics in earnest, to understand how these concepts work in our lives, as well as their effects on our health and well-being.[4] Aging services providers and community-based organizations have long run programs designed to connect and serve people, but efforts to directly and intentionally affect isolation and loneliness are generally new.

We are interested in learning:

- Are there modifiable behaviors that can prevent or reduce loneliness? And are these behaviors consistent across situations?

- How can older people increase their sense of self-efficacy to address loneliness in the face of isolation?

- Of the array of new programs to address loneliness or isolation, which are the most feasible and effective? Are these programs accessible to a variety of populations – for example, for people who are low income, living in rural areas, or who have been historically excluded because of racial and other systemic inequities?

- How do we measure success?

According to a study by researchers at the AARP Public Policy Institute and at Stanford and Harvard universities, the impacts of people living in social isolation add almost **$7 billion a year to the cost of Medicare.[5]**
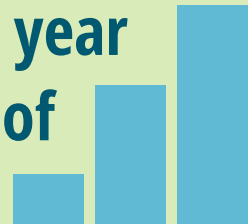
A Commitment to More Research

A 2020 Consensus Study Report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine[6] notes a wealth of research pointing to the importance of social connection to addressing:

- Anxiety and depression
- Health-related behaviors including smoking, physical activity, and weight loss
- Suicide and elder abuse prevention
- Overall quality of life

The report recommended that all major public and private funders support further research to continue to build our understanding of the links between social connection and all aspects of health and healthy aging.
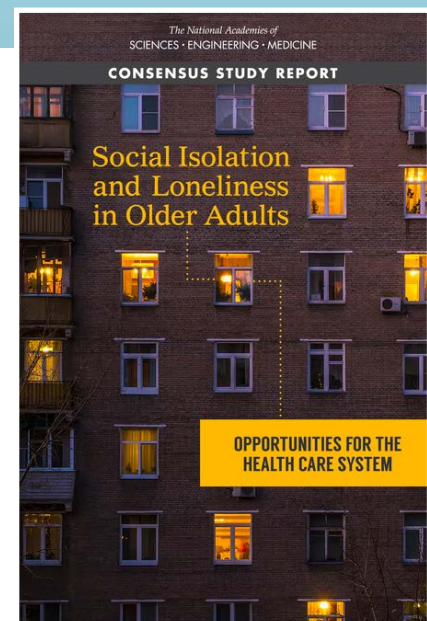
Looking Ahead

Good solutions require diverse, integrated strategies that include direct service, training, education, research, and advocacy.

At RRF Foundation for Aging, we look forward to collaborating with organizations and individuals who are developing promising approaches to address connectedness. We will continue to build on the work of experts and organizations already in the field across the U.S. There is much to do and much to learn from an ever-broadening network of partners committed to addressing the historical and structural inequities that challenge too many of us. We hope you will join us in developing the next generation of collective solutions to addressing social connectedness, as part of the Foundation's larger effort to improve the lives of older adults.

Contact Us
We would like to hear from you. Please contact us at **info@rrf.org**. And follow us on Twitter **@RRFAging** and on LinkedIn at **linkedin/company/rrf-aging.**

NOTES AND SOURCES

1. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7437541/
2. Cudjoe, T. K., Roth, D. L., Szanton, S. L., Wolff, J. L., Boyd, C. M., & Thorpe, R. J. (2018). The epidemiology of social isolation: National health and aging trends study. The Journals of Gerontology: Series B. 75(1):107-113. doi: 10.1093/geronb/gby037.
3. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/02/7-of-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/
4. Yoona Kang, PhD, Danielle Cosme, PhD, Rui Pei, PhD, Prateekshit Pandey, MA, José Carreras-Tartak, BA, Emily B Falk, PhD (2021). Purpose in Life, Loneliness, and Protective Health Behaviors During the COVID-19 Pandemic, The Gerontologist 61(6), 878–887, https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnab081
5. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/25663
6. https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2019/medical-cure-for-loneliness.html

RRF | Foundation for Aging