



EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS THROUGH MEALS ON WHEELS

RESEARCH BRIEF

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MEALS on WHEELS
AMERICA

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SOCIAL ISOLATION IS A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS FOR AMERICA'S SENIORS

If there is one thing the pandemic taught us, besides resiliency, it's that social isolation takes a huge toll on us mentally, emotionally and physically. Those months of isolation and shutdowns felt surreal and disorienting, but for millions of homebound older Americans, that's their reality – pandemic or not. Our social networks tend to shrink as we age due to retirement, loss, mobility challenges and declining health. Gaps in social support needs intensify as older adults become more reliant on others to meet their increasing support needs, yet they have fewer people to rely on.

It's clear that social isolation and loneliness are growing public health concerns, underscored by a recent advisory from the Surgeon General. The negative consequences of social isolation include anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, a lower quality of life and increased use of healthcare services. Homebound older adults are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness.

BACKGROUND & RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

For more than 50 years, Meals on Wheels has worked to support our nation's seniors by providing them with meals, social connection, vital resources, support and more. Meals on Wheels America partnered with researchers from the School of Public Health at Brown University to dive deeper into the issues of loneliness and social isolation by conducting a qualitative research project that evaluated the efficacy of social connection programming offered by the Meals on Wheels network.

Through 116 interviews with staff, volunteers and clients from six local Meals on Wheels programs, the research team gained valuable insights into the role that social isolation plays in seniors' lives. They set out to understand the feasibility, effectiveness and sustainability of their current efforts, and assess the direct impact of social connection programming on Meals on Wheels clients.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

The analyses revealed three key findings:

- The Meals on Wheels social connection programs studied - telephone reassurance, friendly visitor and activities/virtual programming - were all feasible and demonstrated the potential for long-term sustainability.
- Four successful program components that can be transferable and scaled were identified.
- The programs had positive impacts on social isolation and loneliness for all study participants, including Meals on Wheels clients, volunteers and staff.

The four key themes for successful programs identified by the research team as a result of the interviews are:

- **Commitment of resources** throughout the organization allows social connection programs to achieve success through resource allocation, including administrative support, standard operating procedures, clear roles, data, and collaboration with the community.
- **Engagement of staff, volunteers and clients** at all levels of social connection programming ensures a consistent program understanding, which aids in assessing community needs, developing marketing materials and recruiting volunteers.
- **Communication** allows for clear understanding of program mission and is reflected in volunteer training materials, client feedback, client and volunteer matching based on interests, and opportunities for volunteers to connect.
- **Innovation, flexibility and creativity**, which originally inspired the development of the social connection program, are critical for ongoing program adaptation to meet evolving client needs.



INSIGHTS FROM THE MEALS ON WHEELS COMMUNITY

The following quotes gathered through the qualitative research interviews shed light on the tremendous impact that Meals on Wheels programs have had on their communities when it comes to addressing social isolation, combating loneliness in seniors and creating sustainable social connection programming.

Meals on Wheels clients say...

“I’m talking from my heart. I love this program. It makes me feel alive, like someone cares. And I know I’m not the only lonely senior.”

“[The program] made me feel better. I’m here alone all day till four o’clock. So when anybody comes to visit and I’m sitting on the porch, most of the time when it’s nice and they come and visit, that makes me feel good.”

“I look forward to talking to these two women. I happily anticipate them calling. So it’s a win for me, because I know I can just talk to them. We usually talk for over an hour, sometimes more. Friendship is important.”

Meals on Wheels volunteers say...

“Oh, it means the world to me actually. And I just feel like I’m blessed... It makes me feel like I have helped somebody.”

“Expand it the best you can. This can be everywhere. Every state, every county. It’s overdue, because people are so lonely.”

Meals on Wheels staff say...

“That’s probably one of the strongest benefits [of the program] is to know that there’s somebody else out there that cares about them.”

“I would love to see [the program] grow... And because I’ve seen and heard the benefits of the people who are being visited. We have people going and picking up prescriptions for someone, we have people picking up groceries for them and just keeping them busy, keeping them engaged.”

ADDRESSING THE EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS: MEALS ON WHEELS STUDY PAVES THE WAY FOR TRANSFORMATIVE SOLUTIONS

America's seniors are struggling with isolation and deserve to have the basic human need for social connection fulfilled. The negative consequences of social isolation include anxiety, depression, cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, a lower quality of life and increased use of healthcare services. Homebound older adults are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness.

Meals on Wheels plays an integral role in supporting and uplifting the community through its social connection programming and initiatives. Better yet, the implementation and success of these programs benefits more than just seniors. They provide individuals of all ages with dynamic and fulfilling volunteer opportunities, strengthen communities across the country and address a critical public health issue head on.

The research confirms what Meals on Wheels programs have known anecdotally for decades: social connection programs are effective and truly make a difference in the lives of meal recipients. The Meals on Wheels network has been at the forefront of addressing the unique needs of homebound older adults, providing social connection programs that cater to their specific circumstances. It is imperative in addressing the epidemic of loneliness to drive additional funding that expands and sustains these transformative programs, so they can reach even more homebound older adults, ensuring they receive the care, companionship and support they deserve.



METHODOLOGY

Meals on Wheels America partnered with researchers from the School of Public Health at Brown University to assess the effectiveness of the social connection initiatives within its network of programs. The qualitative analysis involved 116 in-depth interviews with Meals on Wheels program staff, volunteers and clients across six different programs from February through September 2022. It examined the feasibility of incorporating efforts to combat social isolation within their programs, identified the most critical components of that programming, and evaluated the direct impact those programs have had on the older adult beneficiaries.

Transcripts were analyzed using a content analysis approach to identify overarching themes, understand which components make a program most effective in addressing social isolation and loneliness for clients, identify program elements that provide and/or facilitate social connections for clients, and identify program barriers and challenges. [View the full report here.](#)

ABOUT MEALS ON WHEELS AMERICA

Meals on Wheels America is the leadership organization supporting the more than 5,000 community-based programs across the country that are dedicated to addressing senior hunger and isolation. Powered by a dedicated volunteer workforce, this network delivers the nutritious meals, friendly visits and safety checks that enable America's seniors to live nourished lives with independence and dignity. Through funding, leadership, education, research and advocacy, Meals on Wheels America empowers its local member programs to strengthen their communities, one senior at a time. For more information or to find a Meals on Wheels provider near you, visit www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org.