



EVALUATING SOCIAL CONNECTION PROGRAMS:
FRIENDLY CALLING AND VISITING
QUANTITATIVE PILOT STUDY
RESEARCH BRIEF

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COMBATting SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

Of the 79 million people across the country who are age 60 or older, one in four lives alone and one in three reports feeling lonely, increasing their risk of harmful health issues that could impede their ability to stay in their homes and out of institutional settings. **That's why promoting meaningful social connections and reducing social isolation and loneliness are key priorities for the Meals on Wheels network.** To this end, 93% of local Meals on Wheels programs offer social connection programming beyond the provision of a meal, and for many homebound Meals on Wheels clients, the person delivering their meal may be the only person they see that day or even that week.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Local Meals on Wheels programs are key players in addressing social disconnectedness, and they have developed ways to build quality connections with homebound seniors beyond the social interactions that occur during regular meal deliveries and congregate meal gatherings. Two of the social engagement programs most commonly implemented by Meals on Wheels programs are:

Friendly Calling: Regular phone calls by a volunteer or staff to provide conversation and companionship

Friendly Visiting: In-person, regularly scheduled one-on-one engagements between an older adult and a volunteer over an extended time



While friendly calling and visiting programs are prevalent nationwide and commonly provided by Meals on Wheels programs, there is variation in how programs reach at risk clients, little operational standardization and limited evidence about effectiveness in reducing social isolation and loneliness. We've seen the impact qualitatively in our 2023 report, *Effective Solutions to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness Through Meals on Wheels*, but **this pilot begins to quantitatively measure the impact of social connection programming for older adults and understand operational considerations for reach and scale.**

To this end, with support from Caesars Foundation, Meals on Wheels America launched a pilot program aimed at reducing operational barriers to providing social engagement programs, improving the depth and quality of social interactions, and demonstrating the impact of these programs through a robust program evaluation.

ABOUT THE PILOT

In 2023, Meals on Wheels America conducted a social connection pilot program with ten Meals on Wheels organizations to explore the feasibility of scaling social connection programs and demonstrate the efficacy of friendly calling and visiting in reducing disconnectedness. The key operational challenges to scalability identified by Meals on Wheels programs included:

- Inadequate data systems
- Lack of staff bandwidth
- Privacy considerations
- Inadequate training for meaningful conversations with clients
- Lack of uniform and appropriate measures to identify social disconnectedness

Meals on Wheels organizations engaged in this pilot tested tools and processes for training, onboarding, client recruitment, client interactions, evaluation and data collection. As such, **the pilot included four standardized components: a database hub, social call software, communication and engagement training, and the Upstream Social Interaction Risk Scale (U-SIRS-13), a validated 13-item measure to assess an individual's feelings of social disconnectedness.** An external evaluator was engaged to conduct outcome and process evaluations for all four components.



RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND KEY FINDINGS

During the pilot, which was conducted from January 1, 2023 – December 31, 2023, the organizations provided a tremendous amount of social engagement. In total, **539 Meals on Wheels clients received calls, visits or both.**



475 CLIENTS RECEIVED FRIENDLY CALLS



9,497 total calls

19.80 average calls per client



111,959 total minutes

8.74 average minutes per call



64 CLIENTS RECEIVED FRIENDLY VISITS



952 total visits

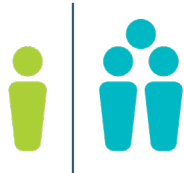
14.88 average visits per client

BASELINE SOCIAL DISCONNECTEDNESS

Of the 539 participants enrolled by Meals on Wheels organizations, 109 were assessed at both baseline and at the three-month follow-up. At baseline, these participants reported an average U-SIRS-13 score of 7.71 on a scale of 0 to 13, with higher scores indicating greater disconnectedness. **Over 82% of participants were deemed at risk for social disconnectedness** with scores within the medium (31.2%), medium-high (27.5%), and high (24.8%) categories. When looking at the baseline risk for individual U-SIRS-13 items:



80.7% of participants reported
“I MISS HAVING PEOPLE
AROUND ME”



77.1% of participants reported
“I FEEL ISOLATED FROM OTHERS”



75.2% of participants reported
“I LACK COMPANIONSHIP”



73.4% of participants
HAD NOT ATTENDED A SOCIAL
GROUP IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS



CHANGES IN SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Differences in social connectedness were assessed following three months of visits and/or calls.

Overall, on average, participants reported statistically significant reductions in social disconnectedness from baseline to three-month follow-up. About 53% of participants reported lower scores at follow-up than baseline. When broken down into subgroups: On average, participants who received friendly calls significantly reduced their social disconnectedness, while participants who received friendly visits showed no significant difference in social disconnectedness.

SEEING SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS

In terms of individual U-SIRS-13 items, significant improvements were observed in two items from baseline to three-month follow-up. Specifically, **participants reduced their risk associated with “I can find companionship when I want it” and “I am content with my friendships and relationships.”**

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study also faced limitations, preventing a larger final sample size and more robust findings. Challenges included high staff turnover among key pilot personnel at the organizations and difficulty reaching clients for engagement and assessment due to hearing impairment, cognitive decline, relocation, language barrier, volunteer shortage and the stigma associated with loneliness and social isolation.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: CLIENT EXPERIENCE

“The first interaction was very friendly, he [the volunteer] had a nice attitude and was enthusiastic about connecting with me. Although he is a lot younger than I am, we share similar interests, and he always remembers things about me.”

“My niece and nephew call, but they don’t really listen, and I don’t always tell them how I’m really feeling like I do with her. After all, she will always call me. Everyone else... now and then...on my birthday. My caller will always call.”

“Most of my time was spent alone tending to my garden, which I love but I was very lonely. Now I get to share the things I love with someone who has similar interests.”

CONCLUSION

This pilot validates existing findings that Meals on Wheels programs provide impactful social connection programming and uncovers meaningful lessons for scaling these valuable, time-intensive offerings. Despite administrative challenges, Meals on Wheels social connection programs are increasing social connectedness, with a measurable increase in participants being able to find companionship when they want it and feeling content with their friendships and relationships.

Many more clients received ongoing services than those who provided complete pre- and post-assessments, with volunteers delivering an impressive volume of social engagement. Strong volunteer networks are critical in powering Meals on Wheels social connection programs.

This initiative was an innovative step to overcome key operational challenges and evaluate effectiveness for scaling social connection programs among Meals on Wheels organizations. Pilots like this are important to demonstrate the value of these programs and better understand the benefits and challenges of implementing friendly calling and visiting programs.

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 trusted volunteer workforce, this network delivers a comprehensive solution that begins with a meal and is proven to enable independence and well-being through the additional benefits of tailored nutrition, social connection, safety and much more. By providing funding, programming, education, research and advocacy, Meals on Wheels America empowers its local member programs to strengthen their communities, one senior at a time. Learn more at www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org.

