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Resources to Decrease Social Isolation in the Elderly

Colchester Family Practice-Colchester, VT

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Problem identification and description of need: global

- ▶ Social isolation is impacted by factors such as social network size and range, frequency and duration of contact with friends/family, and perceived social support¹
- ▶ Social isolation and loneliness are risk factors for poor health, reduced wellbeing, mortality, depression, and cognitive decline in the elderly²
 - ▶ During older age, many factors increase the likelihood of social isolation: decreased mobility, changes in family structure (loss of friends or spouse), decreased economic resources, and limited social networks
 - ▶ In a review of 128 studies, *only two* of these studies did not find a negative association between social isolation or loneliness and health outcomes²
 - ▶ In the elderly, perceived social isolation from friends is associated with greater levels of depressive symptoms and psychological distress, compared to those who feel socially connected
- ▶ The Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing requirements have significantly exacerbated these issues³
- ▶ Importantly, there is evidence to support that social support “protects elderly people against psychological distress...and mediates the effects of loneliness on depression”⁴

Problem identification and description of need: Vermont

- ▶ In Vermont, it is estimated that 28% of the population will be 65 years of age or older by the year 2030. About two-thirds of the total population of Vermont lives in a rural area⁵
 - ▶ In one study, 32.5% of older Vermonters reported not having access to a personal vehicle. This in turn affected ability to attend social events, religious practices, and other forms of community engagement⁵
 - ▶ This highlights the need for improved access to transportation, as well as a need for inclusive, accessible opportunities for social engagement among the elderly
- ▶ Since the onset of Covid, the need for social support in older Vermonters has outpaced the ability of Age Well's volunteer program (the largest source of volunteers in Northwestern VT) to meet these needs*

* Info from interview with Age Well Leadership Team

Public health cost and unique cost considerations in Vermont

- ▶ Due to the evidence-supported association between social isolation and depression in the elderly, the public health cost of social isolation can be tied to that of depression
 - ▶ Depression is among the top ten most costly diseases in the US both for health care systems and for individuals and is the leading cause of psychiatric hospitalizations in older adults⁶
 - ▶ Older adults with depression have annual healthcare costs \$5100 greater than those without depression⁷
- ▶ In a 2019 report on Elder Economic Insecurity Rates, Vermont ranked 3rd highest in this measure of the severity of economic insecurity⁸
- ▶ In Vermont, the rural environment, lack of access to transportation, and high prevalence of economic insecurity make social isolation an important financial and health challenge to the older population

Community perspective

- ▶ Key takeaways from conversations with Age Well Leadership Team member and Senior Companion Program coordinator
 - ▶ Older Vermonters face unique, significant changes that greatly increase the chances of social isolation—such as the death of a spouse or friend, a move from one’s home to an assisted living facility, or a health decline that limits mobility
 - ▶ There are many requests from older Vermonters to be paired with a social companion through Age Well (Northwestern VT’s primary organization for aging), and since the onset of Covid, the need for social support has outpaced the ability to provide it. Additionally, there has been a 20% increase in the need for Meals on Wheels, which provides both meal delivery and social support
 - ▶ Low-income, older adults are particularly vulnerable to the effects of social isolation. This has been a problem for years, not just since the onset of Covid- though in some ways Covid has helped bring this issue to light
 - ▶ Social connections give a sense of purpose to older individuals, in particular to those who live alone. Volunteering, especially in a similar age group, helps provide this purpose and enrich both lives in a volunteering partnership

Intervention and methodology

- ▶ Goal to increase awareness and access to resources that promote social engagement among the elderly
 - ▶ Social isolation may precede depression, thus targeting the issue of social isolation rather than depression could be a preventative intervention⁴
- ▶ Creation of an informational pamphlet detailing multiple local resources for social engagement in Colchester, VT
 - ▶ Intervention at Colchester Family Practice in Colchester, VT
 - ▶ Information included
 - ▶ Impact of social isolation on health
 - ▶ Resources and programs for social support, community engagement, and transportation services

Results

Feeling lonely or isolated?
Older adults may be more likely to face social isolation due to loss of a loved one, health challenges, difficulty with transportation, and difficulty with adjustments that come with aging. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many additional challenges, and if you have been feeling isolated, you are not alone.

How does this relate to my health?
Social isolation and loneliness are risk factors for poor health, reduced wellbeing, mortality, depression, and cognitive decline in older adults. On the flipside, social support has protective effects against various physical and mental health conditions.

How can I find more social connection?
Because of how common an issue this is, there are many resources to find social connection within our own communities. Please read on.



Resources for Social Connection

Feeling lonely or in need of community? Learn more about social engagement and support for seniors in Colchester, Vermont and the surrounding area

- ▶ Pamphlet provides an overview of key local resources and programs supporting social connection and engagement in the senior population; available in waiting room at Colchester Family Medicine

Age Well Volunteer Program

- Overview: Age Well's volunteer program connects older adults with volunteers to develop a supportive relationship. Volunteers are matched based on common interests and experiences. Volunteering may involve friendly visits, help with errands, and more. Many volunteers are ages 70+—an excellent program whether you would like to volunteer or be paired with a volunteer.
- Learn more: <https://www.agewellvt.org/giving-back/volunteer> or call 802-662-5249

Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)

- Overview: This program sponsored by United Way of Northwestern VT connects adults ages 55+ with volunteer opportunities in the community, including mentoring/tutoring children and assisting seniors with errands or transportation.
- Learn more: <https://unitedwaynwvt.org/rsvp> or call 802-861-7821

Senior Corps Senior Companion Program

- Overview: This statewide program matches volunteers ages 55+ with elders who need companionship and assistance. Volunteer eligibility: age 55+, yearly income less than \$25,520 (single) or \$34,480 (couple), and willing to serve 10-20 hours/week. Senior Companions receive a non-taxable stipend and other benefits and provide invaluable support to elder community members.
- Learn more: <https://www.cvcoa.org/senior-companion.html> or call 1-800-642-5119

Home Share VT

- Overview: This is a housing program in which a person offers a private bedroom and shared common space in exchange for rent, help around the home, or a combination of the two. Home Share VT has developed a comprehensive screening/matching process over the past 35 years.
- Learn more: <https://www.homesharevermont.org> or call 802-863-5625

Bayside Community Center

- Overview: Located at 26 Blakely Road in Colchester, VT, the Colchester Parks and Rec Dept. offers a variety of seasonal classes aimed at the 55+ age group, including yoga, Tai Chi, watercolor, and more.
- Learn more: <https://colchestervt.gov/353/Bayside-Activity-Center> or call 802-264-5640

Just need transportation?

- Special Services Transportation Agency (SSTA) operates out of Colchester, VT and provides accessible transportation to those with specialized mobility needs.
- Learn more: <https://sstarides.org> or call 802-878-1527

If you have questions or concerns about social isolation or social engagement, please speak to your provider!

Evaluation of effectiveness and limitations

▶ Evaluation of effectiveness

- ▶ Through conversations with both patients and providers, I found that social isolation can be a difficult topic to discuss when there are uncertainties surrounding solutions to the problem. However, it does frequently come up, especially in the context of Covid.
- ▶ Future considerations in evaluating effectiveness
 - ▶ It would be useful and interesting to implement a screening for social isolation among elderly patients at this family medicine practice
 - ▶ If screened for social isolation, a way to evaluate this project would be to check in with the patient at follow-up visits to determine if they have been able to participate in any of the suggested community programs

▶ Limitations

- ▶ The length of the Clerkship limited the time available to observe use and effectiveness of this information
- ▶ As this Clerkship progressed, Covid resurged and barriers to social contact again started to become a challenge especially to those who are older and/or with chronic health conditions
- ▶ During a short appointment it can be difficult to find time to discuss this issue among other physical or mental health issues

Recommendations for future interventions/projects

- ▶ In addition to implementing a social isolation screening, and following up on involvement in social programming, it would also be useful to determine the association, if any, between participation in such programs and scores on social isolation and depression screenings (such as the PHQ-2 and PHQ-9)
- ▶ In addition, because of the evidence to support associations between social isolation and poor physical health, it would be interesting to observe or evaluate the changes, if any, that occur to patients' physical health based on changes in their social involvement
- ▶ Social involvement is difficult to measure but much of the research surrounding this issue deals with patients' perception of their social support, rather than quantitative values (number of friends or hours of social time per week). Therefore, asking patients about perception of social support could be a useful future tool to guide intervention

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