

Rural Communities and Building Social Connection for Older Adults and People with Disabilities



Introduction to Social Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are increasingly recognized as critical and growing public health issues impacting the lives of millions of Americans. While social isolation and loneliness are related, they are different. Loneliness is defined as a subjective feeling of being alone or separated while social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly.¹

In a May 2023 Surgeon General Advisory, United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy warned about the public health crisis that loneliness, isolation, and disconnection pose to the American public. Prevalence of loneliness and social isolation in the U.S. now surpasses smoking (13 percent), diabetes (15 percent), and obesity (42 percent).^{2, 3, 4} These are significant issues for older adults and people with disabilities. Although individuals of all ages and backgrounds can be lonely and isolated, groups at higher risk include people with poor physical or mental health, people with disabilities, those experiencing financial insecurity, those who live alone, as well as single parents, older adults, and adolescents.⁵

Social engagement improves quality of life, and people with strong connections experience better physical and mental health outcomes.⁶ In addition, when people are socially engaged in their communities, they provide important contributions to their communities through sharing their knowledge, talent, skills, experience, and wisdom with others.

What Defines a Rural Community?

The U.S. Census Bureau considers areas that are not urban to be rural, and it defines the smallest urban areas (urban clusters) as having at least 2,500 people.⁷ The Federal Office of Rural Health Policy uses Census data and considers all non-metropolitan counties to be rural, whereas the Office of Management and Budget considers counties rural if they are micropolitan, with an urban core of at least 10,000 and fewer than 50,000 people, are not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), or are not classified.⁸ Although federal agencies offer differing definitions of rural, professionals who work with older adults and people with disabilities in rural areas have their own practical definitions. Rural residents cannot easily access services such as transportation, health care, jobs, education, and groceries (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023; L. Kaye, personal communication, April 10, 2023). Simply reaching a bus line to connect to services may require dozens of miles of travel.⁹

Challenges and Opportunities for Social Engagement in Rural Areas

Older adults and people with disabilities who live in rural communities face unique barriers to social connection. Distance and limited resources shape rural living. People living in rural areas are more likely to experience poverty and to be socially isolated.¹⁰ Yet the strength of rural communities may also help facilitate solutions.

Transportation: Transportation challenges and costs contribute to social isolation and are a primary barrier to connection for people with disabilities.^{11 12} In remote areas, public transportation is rarely available, and the distances to needed services and community gatherings are long. Paratransit services may operate with extended pickup windows and wait times. Friends and family may not be available to provide rides, and gas can be unaffordable. In addition, transportation challenges can limit access to medical care, and friends, family and social connections important to their overall well-being.

Access to Health Care: Residents of rural communities have less access to affordable health insurance, primary care providers and health care specialists, and hospital care.¹³ In addition, approximately 60 percent of people living in rural communities live in an area without a sufficient number of mental health professionals to serve their community.¹⁴ Rural residents have higher rates of suicide, mortality, and morbidity.^{15 16} Social isolation and loneliness can amplify rural health risks. On their own, social isolation and loneliness bring health impacts equal to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day including a higher risk of heart disease, stroke, anxiety, depression, dementia, and getting sick more often.¹⁷ Social isolation and loneliness can exacerbate the many factors impacting rural residents' health.

Access to In-Person Connections: For people who need support to leave their homes, factors such as distance, cost, and workforce shortages may limit their ability to find assistance (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; R. Sage, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 5, 2023). Community gathering spots may also not have the necessary features or modifications to be accessible or welcoming to those who have physical or cognitive disabilities.

Technology Access: Rural living may also affect the ability to connect virtually. More than 22 percent of U.S. rural residents and nearly 28 percent of Americans living on tribal lands do not have access to broadband internet, compared to only 1.5 percent of urban residents.¹⁸ Rural residents may be hesitant to adopt technologies that can help them engage with others

online (R. Rausch, personal communication, April 12, 2023). A recent study found that technology could help address social isolation among older adults living in rural areas, but more than 21 percent do not use technology.¹⁹

Rural Culture: Because rural culture often prizes independence and privacy, rural residents may be reluctant to ask for or accept help (R. Rausch, personal communication, April 12, 2023; L. Kaye, personal communication, April 10, 2023). At the same time many rural residents have a keen sense of place and loyalty to their community members, which can increase connection (L. Kaye, personal communication, April 10, 2023; R. Sage, personal communication, April 5, 2023). Faith communities play an important role, such as addressing transit needs (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Community gatherings such as local football homecoming games and powwows in Tribal communities bring people together (R. Sage, personal communication, April 5, 2023). Rural communities excel at identifying who may be in need and in providing volunteers to assist them (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Personal ties help people find paid workers when they need help and function as a network for job opportunities (R. Sage, personal communication, April 5, 2023; S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Accustomed to making the most of limited resources, rural residents are creative and solution-focused (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023). Stigma also operates differently in rural communities, where an acquired disability is often seen as simply part of life (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023).



Developing Social Engagement Programming to Serve Rural Areas

Social engagement programming, particularly in rural areas, requires removing structural access barriers—both physical and virtual. Organizations can develop new programs or customize existing programs to encourage older adults and people with disabilities living in rural areas to interact with others in their communities. Doing so can improve health outcomes and quality of life for rural residents. Incorporating the following concepts can strengthen rural social connectedness:

Encouraging Participation: A recent study identified ways to encourage social participation in rural areas; the top factor was providing options for transportation to events. Other factors were promoting programs effectively; offering programs that cover a wide range of interests, abilities, health conditions, times, costs, and languages; and arranging for someone to accompany a participant during the program. Reaching out to participants in ways that welcome them and show that their participation is valued were also keys to success.²⁰ Straightforward and time-tested approaches to recruit program participants are often effective in rural America (e.g., using phone calls to check on past program participants, mailing flyers and running radio ads to promote programs) (S. Royster, personal communication, April 24, 2023; M. Willard, personal communication, April 24, 2023).

Organizations can also expand access to community activities by reducing financial barriers, such as providing childcare and options to attend events at no cost.²¹ An organization can design more-inclusive programming by proactively seeking direct feedback from individuals who face financial barriers to participation in community activities.²²

Building on Community Collaboration:

Organizations serving older adults and people with disabilities can expand their reach by partnering with other local organizations, faith communities, and professionals who regularly engage the target population, such as mail carriers and bank tellers, to identify and connect with those who may have a high risk of social isolation.²³

Supporting Livable and Socially Connected Communities:

To build a sense of community and give opportunities for people to interact, organizations can create or adapt inclusive public spaces such as community gardens and libraries where people can meet and interact informally.²⁴ Organizations can also connect people with housing options that facilitate interaction and make social connection a norm.²⁵ Programming can incorporate person-centered, inclusive, age-friendly, and/or dementia-friendly principles, for example, to ensure programming meets varied needs and interests.²⁶

Addressing Technology Needs: Technology training for older adults and people with disabilities in rural areas is essential to foster adoption of technology for social media, telehealth, and entertainment. Simple technology support instructions, written in plain language and incorporating Easy Read principles, are important, along with technology that works across platforms.²⁷ Showing people how they can do things they like online, and making the process feel welcoming and stress-free, is important to engage people who are reluctant to use technology (S. Sack, personal communication, April 27, 2023).

Facilitating Use of Assistive Technology: The right assistive technology and training can enable persons with vision and hearing loss, motor skill impairments, and a wide range of disabilities to engage with caregivers and others outside of their home (R. Rausch, personal communication, April 12, 2023; S. Sack, personal communication, April 27, 2023). Organizations may consider partnering with a State Grant for Assistive Technology program, which lets community members try out devices to find the best one for their needs and provides support to find a low-cost device or loan.²⁸

Programs and Resources to Increase Social Engagement

The social engagement-focused programs listed below originated in rural areas and are examples of effective programs that rural communities may consider offering.


Programs

Older Adults

- **Addressing Older Adult Isolation** is a community-wide collaboration in rural northeastern Pennsylvania in which trained navigators connect isolated older adults with services and supports, in addition to conducting public awareness campaigns that call attention to social isolation and its health impacts.²⁹ Partners include the Lackawanna County Area Agency on Aging and approximately 30 local organizations. One reason for its success is that peer navigators break down stigma and build trust with older adults in the community (L. Kaye, personal communication, April 10, 2023). The program includes a shared screening tool to measure social isolation, which is also used by local health and social service organizations.
- **Embracing Aging on the Square** in Logan County, Colorado, is an annual special event intended to unite community members of all ages and address social isolation and loneliness.³⁰ The local senior center, a retiree, and Colorado State University collaborated on the inaugural event, which exemplified the livable communities concept. Attendance tripled in the event's second year, when it was held in conjunction with a popular high school jazz band concert. The event included free fresh vegetables from a meal program and a Latinx group serving samples of cultural foods, along with approximately 20 vendors.
- **The Tellegacy Program** at the University of North Dakota connects students with residents of retirement communities, nursing homes, and assisted living facilities through "friendly visiting" phone calls or virtual visits.³¹ Their interactions build rapport and provide social connections, with the older adult sharing wisdom and stories of their past. The student then creates and presents a legacy book to the older adult. The program overcomes distance, transportation, and technology needs and could be easily adapted by a rural community-based organization.

People with Disabilities

- **Transitional Paths to Independent Living** is a center for independent living (CIL) in rural Washington, Pennsylvania, that addresses social engagement as part of its support for people with disabilities transitioning into the community.³² Its peer support program, offered individually or in group settings, revolves around common frustrations or interests. The program enables participants to share struggles and adaptations with peers who understand their challenges and encourage them to achieve their goals.
- **Tech2Connect** on the Wyoming Center on Aging website helps older adults and people with disabilities choose assistive technology that enables them to engage with others.³³ The online decision guide helps people select devices (e.g., tablets, iPads, Fitbits, equipment to take blood pressure and participate in telehealth). The guide assesses a participant's comfort level with technology and asks what they want to use it for (e.g., Facebook, Zoom). It also asks where they will use the technology in their particular living situation (e.g., in a noisy atmosphere, in an area with internet access challenges).
- During the pandemic, the replicable and low-cost Car Bingo helped connect participants from Title VI Native American Aging Programs, an Area Agency on Aging, a local hospice, and a home health agency in Wyandotte, Oklahoma.³⁴ Volunteers helped attendees park their cars six feet apart, handed out bingo supplies, and called out numbers over a public address system. Participants would honk and wave when they got bingo. Car decorating contests, ice cream trucks, and musical guests added to the festive atmosphere.
- Title VI Native American Aging Programs in western New York helped tribal elders stay engaged and connected during the pandemic through weekly friendly outreach calls to make sure elders' needs were addressed. The local case managers who made the calls then collaborated with Tribal



made the calls then collaborated with Tribal departments including aging services. The nutrition program tripled the number of home-delivered meals and, in July 2022, began offering grab-and-go meals in addition to congregate meals. A new outreach coordinator position was created to provide elders information about resources, facilities, and services, and to do outreach at local events.

Community Resources

Employment

- The Vocational Rehabilitation Self-Employment Guide (vrselfemploymentguide.org) and the Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Self-Employment Toolkit (www.tvrselfemployment.org): Helps people with disabilities and vocational rehabilitation counselors understand the self-employment process, which is an important income-generator for persons who live in rural areas and on tribal lands.

Rural and Virtual Resources

- Aging UnLonely (artandhealing.org/aging): Develops evidence-based programs that utilize the creative arts to address loneliness.
- AgrAbility (agrability.org): Offers networking and ideas for agricultural workers with disabilities.
- Community-based Organizations: These organizations provide hubs where rural residents can consistently find programs and engagement.
 - Area Agencies on Aging (AAA) (acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/area-agencies-aging) provide services and support for older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers with AAAs in communities nationwide. AAA is a generic term, and the names of local AAAs may vary. They are part of the National Aging Network headed by the U.S. Administration on Aging.
 - **Centers for Independent Living (CIL)** provide independent living services for people with disabilities. CILs are designed and operated by individuals with disabilities and funded through the Administration for Community Living (ACL).
- Title VI Native American Aging Programs (acl.gov/programs/services-native-americans-oaa-title-vi) are funded through ACL and support American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Americans in the areas of nutrition, supportive services for older adults, and caregiver services.
- Rural Health Information Hub / RHlhub (ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/community-living): This website provides extensive information, including tools and grant information, with a section on Community Supports for Rural Aging in Place and Independent Living. A search on social isolation and loneliness offers additional resources.

Technology

- Affordable Connectivity Program (affordableconnectivity.gov): This federally funded program helps low-income households pay for broadband service and internet connected devices.
- GetSetUp (getsetup.io/partner/wyoming): More than 100 partners, including the Wyoming Center on Aging, offer hundreds of free live online classes to help people over age 55 learn new skills, connect with others, and unlock new life experiences.
- National Assistive Technology Act Training Assistance and Training (AT3) Center (at3center.net): This federally funded resource center provides technical assistance and support to Assistive Technology (AT) Act Programs.
- SeniorPlanet.org (oats.org/senior-planet-from-aarp): The flagship program of Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP offers a wide range of free live virtual classes each week, including discussion groups that foster engaging conversation and lasting friendships.
- State Grant for Assistive Technology Program (acl.gov/programs/assistive-technology/assistive-technology): This program from the Office of Interagency Innovation at ACL supports states in providing assistive technology to people with disabilities of all ages.

Tribal Communities Transportation

- Toolkit for Operating a Rural Transportation Voucher Program (umt.edu/rural-disability-research/resources/transp-voucher-prog/): Shows how to run a transportation system to connect people with disabilities with jobs, health care appointments, daily living chores, and social activities. RTC: Rural in Missoula, Montana, and the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL), a national nonprofit membership network including over 230 rural CILs, created this resource.

Connect and Learn on the Nationwide Network of Champions

To engage with others on this important topic, join the Commit to Connect Nationwide Network of Champions! Commit to Connect Champions are passionate leaders and innovators at the local, state, and national level dedicated to ending social isolation and loneliness. Champions work together to increase awareness of social isolation and loneliness, connect people who are at risk of social isolation to social connection programs and technologies and create more socially connected communities that are inclusive of all people including older adults, people with disabilities, and care partners. This network of peers supports collaboration through shared learnings and open communication across sectors and perspectives.

Join the conversation and become a Commit to Connect Champion (<https://committotoconnect.org/network-champions/>)!

This topical guide is part of a series aimed at raising awareness of key issues impacting social isolation and loneliness across the U.S. This publication is aimed at staff and volunteer leaders from organizations serving older adults and people with disabilities in rural areas seeking to enhance or initiate social engagement efforts. Online sources and interviews with experts were used to develop this topical guide. Interviews were conducted with the following subject matter experts who have academic and lived experience:

- **Lenard W. Kaye**, D.S.W., Ph.D., Director, UMaine Center on Aging; Program Coordinator, UMaine Interprofessional Graduate Certificate in Gerontology; Professor, UMaine School of Social Work
- **Ryan Rausch**, MOT, OTR/L, Assistive Technology Professional (ATP), Co-manager, Wyoming Institute for Disabilities, Wyoming Assistive Technology Resources, University of Wyoming
- **Sierra Royster**, Director of Innovation, Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL)
- **Sara Sack**, Director, Assistive Technology Program; Senior Scientist, Life Span Institute at Parsons, The University of Kansas
- **Rayna Sage**, Project Director, Research & Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities (RTC:Rural)
- **Mary Willard**, MSW, Director of Training and Technical Assistance, APRIL



End Notes

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