



# Addressing Social Isolation for Older Adults During the COVID-19 Crisis

*Updated as of 4/9/2020*

ADVANCING  
STATES



## **Contents**

**COVID-19 Background & Impact**

**Social Impact to Older Adults**

**How States Have Adapted to Address Social Isolation in Older Adults**

**List of Activities and Ideas to Address Social Isolation in Older Adults**

**Other Resources for Social Engagement and Mental Stimulation**

## About This Resource

ADvancing States took action during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis to assist state aging and disability agencies in responding to, and meeting the needs of, facility residents and an older adult population sheltering at home. This resource was created through one-on-one conversations with states and a call for ideas in the Friday Update, a weekly email reaching over 15,000 aging and disability professionals. This resource is intended to assist states and others with creative and thoughtful approaches to social isolation and loneliness in older adults, and to also facilitate sharing and learning across states. It is our hope this collection of ideas and actions across states and organizations will reduce social isolation for some of the country's most vulnerable older adults during the COVID-19 crisis.

# COVID-19 Background & Impact

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious respiratory illness that has spread to nearly every country in the world. COVID-19 symptoms include fever, fatigue, cough, and difficulty breathing. In the most severe cases, the virus can cause pneumonia and eventually, death. Older adults and people with underlying medical conditions and immunocompromised health systems are especially at risk of complications arising from COVID-19.

The extremely contagious nature of COVID-19 has resulted in strict stay-in-home or “shelter at home” and social distancing policies in countries across the world, including the United States. These policies require people to stay home as much as possible and, if outside or in the community, to keep a minimum of six feet away from others who do not live in the same home. This has had an incredible impact on day-to-day lives and activities. Older adults in the community are staying home, and where possible having food delivered instead of going to the grocery store. Nursing facilities are restricting visitors and redesigning activities to meet social distancing guidelines. Active older adults who were used to meeting up for congregated meals, attending adult day programs, or volunteering at a local non-profit are now spending most of their day in the home with little interaction with the outside world.

## **Social Impact to Older Adults**

Loneliness and social isolation for older adults have a deep emotional impact, sometimes leading to social disorders such as depression and anxiety. Maybe less well-known is the profound impact loneliness has on physical health. One study found loneliness had similar health effects on older adults as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>1</sup>

Many state aging and disability agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) have turned their immediate attention to ensuring basic needs for older adults are met. This includes activities such as recruiting and mobilizing volunteers, meeting needs for sharp increases in

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691614568352>

home delivered meals and grocery and prescription delivery services. As agencies and CBOs have stabilized these processes, many are now attempting to address social and emotional needs, brainstorming creative ways to address and help mitigate the negative health impacts of loneliness and reduce social isolation in ways consistent with social distancing guidelines.

It is important to remember older adults served in home and community-based settings are not the only older adult group with loneliness concerns. Nursing facility and assisted living facility resident needs must also be addressed. With facility visitors now severely restricted, residents are becoming more at risk for depression and mental decline. States and facility staff are working tirelessly to come up with creative ways to keep residents engaged, connected, and hopeful.

This document is intended to be a living resource for state aging and disability agencies as well as providers, Area Agencies on Aging, and other CBOs. ADvancing States will continue to update this document as ideas and best practices are shared.

# How States Have Adapted to Address Social Isolation in Older Adults

ADvancing States reached out to state aging and disability agencies and community-based organizations (CBOs) for ways they were responding to the COVID-19 crisis and addressing increased social isolation and loneliness. States and CBOs have shared the following. If you are interested in any of these responses for your state or organization and would like to be connected to these entities, please contact ADvancing States. Additionally, if you would like to edit your state's information, please email April Young at [ayoung@advancingstates.org](mailto:ayoung@advancingstates.org).

- California – Created a campaign called Neighbor-to-Neighbor that encourages neighbors to connect using the Nextdoor website or app. Volunteers will be able to use the site to share ways to safely connect and ensure neighbors have necessities during California's stay at home order. Information and ways to volunteer can be found on the [California Volunteers](#) website.
- Colorado – The State Unit on Aging provided an evidence-based social isolation class through video connection technologies (such as a Zoom meeting). Colorado is also utilizing their Americorp volunteers and transportation providers to deliver groceries and home delivered meals to older adults. AAAs are providing reassurance calls for many of their clients receiving in-home services.
- Florida - To mitigate social isolation, Florida's Department of Elder Affairs (DOEA) and the Alzheimer's Association developed an initiative called Project: VITAL (Virtual Inclusive Technology for ALL). This project supports the well-being of seniors, their families and caregivers by allowing them to remain virtually engaged and connected. Project: VITAL utilizes the gold standard best practices developed by the Alzheimer's Association to provide support, care, education, and awareness to all those who are dealing with the effects of social isolation during the public health crisis of COVID-19. In these unusual times, "care" and "engagement" have begun to encompass more virtual

platforms that will become sustainable, scalable models for the future. Through this unique project, customized technology and resources will be leveraged to continue building on Florida's existing care and support infrastructure.

Project: VITAL will maximize the public/private partnership of DOEA and the Alzheimer's Association and engage other industry leaders to help mitigate the serious negative effects of isolation during COVID-19 and well beyond.

- Iowa – Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) are reaching out with phone safety checks every 2-4 days to all Older Americans Act program recipients. Iowa AAAs also put together a one-pager detailing three social resources accessible by phone that are available nationwide (see below for details).
- Kentucky – The Long-Term Care Ombudsmen are conducting well-check calls and also have access to civil monetary penalty funds to purchase technology equipment so residents can communicate with family. Nursing facilities report playing hallway bingo, where each person participates from their door. AAA partnerships have included food trucks, Head Start programs, and county jails to help increase home delivered meal output.
- Minnesota –
  - Minnesota's Legal Assistance Developer is working with project partners to monitor current legal trends, analyze efficacies of legal delivery tools for isolated communities and develop community legal responses for post-crisis implementation.
  - Minnesota's information and referral service, the Senior LinkAge Line, is utilizing specialists to reach out to older adults and their caregivers. They have adjusted their service delivery models so staff who had been providing in-person support are also on the phones. This helps reduce wait times and increases the number of people that can be reached.
  - Homeless older adults who were in shelters and displaced have been transitioned to hotels/motels. The state is currently working to bridge delivery of meals & other services to older adults experiencing homelessness.
  - Majority of the Title III providers are shifting to Telephone Reassurance and conducting frequent check-ins with clients served. In addition, non-nutrition providers are shifting services to meal and prescription delivery services

- Statewide wiki of older adult services developed for availability of services during pandemic. Content is updated daily to assist older adults and caregivers.
  - Title III providers are offering quite a few virtual options, ranging from health promotion classes to support groups and caregiver consultation. There is an increase in telephone check-ins and follow up from Senior LinkAge Line Information & Referral calls.
  - The MN Long-Term Care Ombudsmen staff work daily to assure facility staff are directly assisting residents and families to utilize alternative forms of communication such as creating video greetings, using video conferencing (Skype, FaceTime) and sending and receiving handwritten letters and cards. A number of family members and loved ones are visiting with their family member from the outside through a window or glass door.
- Nevada – Developed an aging network rapid response plan with goals, objectives, and major activities, including the creation of a Social Support Action Team (SSAT). The SSAT will offer one-to-one check-in calls and small-group peer support via Zoom and teleconference. Key partners and more details can be accessed on the ADvancing States COVID-19 webpage.
  - New York – Established top 5 priority services in the state, including home delivered meals, groceries and supplies, medication delivery, transportation to critical services, and combatting social isolation. New York is also responding in the following ways:
    - All congregate staff (senior centers, SADS) etc. closed down – any staff that could be reprogrammed to address the top 5 services were directed to do so
      - Many older workers and volunteers are under a stay at home order and have been directed to focus on combatting social isolation – making phone calls, skype, etc.
    - Most counties have both non-essential state staff and county staff that have been told to stay home and many are making social isolation calls
    - The Governor set up a general volunteer portal for people who want to volunteer in any capacity – many are making check in calls
    - Twice a week calls with the county Office for the Aging and advocates – NY continues to push out resources and guidance with an emphasis and focus on combating social isolation



- Friendship line – 800-971-0016
  - Mental health line (for depression, anxiety, isolation) almost 7,000 mental health professionals volunteered – 844-863-9314
  - Grief groups [Grief.com](http://Grief.com)
  - AARP Foundation [connect2affect](http://connect2affect)
  - [AARP Community Connections](http://AARP Community Connections)
- NY conducted a successful 12 county pilot to test the efficacy of animatronic pets and their impact on social isolation of community-dwelling older adults. Results of the pilot showed 70% of older adults who were isolated and adopted a pet had a reduction/significant reduction in social isolation after 1 year.
  - NY State Office for the Aging is sending 1,100 animatronic pets statewide to combat isolation
- Tennessee – Tennessee is feeding more seniors with supplemental funds and is using some of those funds to obtain meals from small, independent restaurants across the state. Small restaurants were one of the many groups hit dramatically hard by the COVID crisis. The state needed the meals and the restaurants needed the business. Existing providers are also stepping up their food production.
- Texas – Created a COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line available 24/7 for individuals to speak with a mental health professional to help with anxiety, depression, stress, grief or worry. The state also created a list of resources for individuals seeking behavioral health services.
- Washington - The state of Washington hired an outside entity who assigned a case manager to each nursing facility with COVID-19 residents. The case manager’s primary responsibility is to aid communication from the resident to the resident’s family members. Case managers carry an iPad with them to help facilitate connection.
- West Virginia – Using restaurants to help with meal delivery

# List of Activities and Ideas to Address Social Isolation in Older Adults

The following activities and resources to support socialization were shared with ADvancing States in response to a call for ideas in the Friday Update. Please note this is simply a collection of ideas and activities. ADvancing States does not endorse any of the following and strongly encourages states and other entities to use their best judgment in participation. We will continue to update this list as activities are shared:

- Writing letters or sending children’s art to nursing facility residents
- Assigning a nursing facility staff member as a primary contact for families to facilitate inbound communications as well as outbound
- Fostering partnerships with new entities, such as local police, mail carriers, high school students and school bus drivers to pick up and deliver prescriptions, groceries, and home delivered meals for older adults
- [Well Connected](#) by Covia – Connects individuals to virtual classes, conversations, and activities by phone. Programs available in English and Spanish
  - Referral:  
(877) 797-7299 (English)  
(877) 400-5867 (Spanish)
- [Lifetime Connections Without Walls](#) by Family Eldercare - Telephone activities program providing opportunities for older adults to connect with others in their community and across the country using a telephone conference call system.
  - Referral:  
(888) 500-6472  
[lcww@familyeldercare.org](mailto:lcww@familyeldercare.org)
- [Friendship Line](#) by Institute on Aging - The Friendship Line is both a crisis intervention hotline and a warmline for non-emergency emotional support calls. It is a 24-hour toll-free line and the only accredited crisis line in the country for people aged 60 years and older, and adults living with disabilities.

- Toll-Free Line: (800) 971-0016

### **Other Resources for Social Engagement and Mental Stimulation**

- List of technology-based and technology-free activities at the [Texas Aging and Longevity Center](#). Examples include recording family histories, making gratitude journals, and virtual happy hours.
- [Google Earth National Park Tours](#) – “Visit” national parks across the country and talk about which ones older adults have been to. What did they see? Who were they with?
- Listen to free audio books on [Audible](#).
- [Volunteer to sew masks for nurses and front-line medical staff](#).
- [Find or start a mutual aid group through AARP](#)
- Facility staff: Contact another facility and start a pen pal program between residents
- [Memory Well](#) – Offering free interactive digital timelines to help promote connection between family members through videos, pictures, audio, letters, and notes.
- [Happy](#) – A free app that provides emotional support 24/7. Recommended by the American Heart Association, Mental Health America, and others.
- [Journey Meditation](#) – A meditation app; offering free services for the rest of the year
- [United Nations Volunteers](#) – Online volunteering with the United Nations allows organizations and volunteers to connect from anywhere in the world on any device.
- [Translators Without Borders](#) – For those who are fluent in more than one language. Volunteer to translate information
- [LibriVox](#) – Read and record chapters of books in the public domain and make them available for free on the internet.
- [SAGEConnect](#) - SAGEConnect links LGBT elders with their broader community, reducing isolation and promoting well-being. Interested individuals can register at the link provided or call the registration line at 929-484-4160.
- This tip sheet from NCOA describes different [Tools for Reaching a Remote Audience](#) Many different tools are included, including Facebook Live, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, etc.



Leadership, innovation, collaboration  
for state Aging and Disability agencies.

**241 18th Street S, Suite 403**  
**Arlington, VA 22202**  
**Phone: 202-898-2578**  
**[www.advancingstates.org](http://www.advancingstates.org)**  
**[www.hcbs.org](http://www.hcbs.org)**