



Mayors Wellness Campaign[®]
Put your community in motion.

Reducing Social Isolation Program



TOOLKIT



WHAT IS SOCIAL ISOLATION?

Social isolation is the lack of social connections which can lead to loneliness and have serious long-term effects on overall health and wellness. Health risks associated with social isolation and loneliness include premature death, increased risk of dementia, and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Social isolation has increased because of the pandemic and the need for social distancing. Even prior to the pandemic, **43% of adults age 60 or older reported feeling lonely**, and those numbers have only increased over the past year.

Residents can use [AARP's Social Isolation Risk Assessment](#) to gauge their risk.



BENEFITS OF CONNECTEDNESS

There are many benefits of being socially connected and integrated into a community. **Individuals who have stronger social connections are happier, have fewer mental health concerns, and have better overall health outcomes.** The [New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute's Mayors Wellness Campaign \(MWC\)](#) has developed a guide to creating a volunteer-based program to address the issue of social isolation in your community and get people connected. Older adults are the target recipients of this program; however, volunteer opportunities also benefit the volunteers themselves. Volunteering can reduce the risk of depression, create a sense of purpose, and helps individuals stay mentally and physically active, all of which are important supports needed at this time.



ACTION STEPS TO START YOUR PROGRAM

Recruit Program Volunteers

- Engage a member of your MWC as a Program Lead. They will be responsible for managing the recruitment and implementation processes.
- Recruit a pool of volunteers interested in connecting with older adults in need in your community. Possible avenues for recruitment include:
 - Houses of worship,
 - [Passaic County RSVP Program](#),
 - Local high schools and colleges,
 - Local nonprofits,
 - MWC staff can connect you with a local volunteer nurse through our partnership with the [New Jersey Action Coalition](#),
 - List your volunteer opportunity on [VolunteerMatch](#) so that residents looking to volunteer can find your program,
 - Advertise the need for volunteers on your local social media platforms, newspapers, and in libraries. Provide information on the program as well as the benefits of volunteering.
- Screen all volunteers to determine if they are a good fit for the program. At a minimum, basic interviews should be conducted with all potential volunteers. Additionally, fingerprinting and background checks can be considered.



Recruit Program Participants

- Recruit older adults who are at risk of experiencing social isolation to be matched in the program. There are many places from which you can receive referrals for this program including but not limited to:
 - Local or county senior centers,
 - [Passaic Senior Services](#),
 - Food banks,
 - Libraries,
 - Local health care providers such as [St. Joseph's University Medical Center](#) and the [Health Coalition of Passaic County](#).
- Provide information about your program to these organizations so that they can make referrals. Older adults should also have the opportunity to sign up for the program themselves, so advertising in your local publications is suggested.



Prepare Volunteers and Program Participants

- Create a training plan for volunteers to help prepare them for their role in the program. This can include an overview of why reducing social isolation is important, parameters for conducting meetings safely with program participants during the pandemic, a basic cultural competency overview, and a summary of expectations. This training can be done virtually. Quality Institute staff is here to help with the development of this training if needed.
- Provide volunteers with the *MWC Conversation Starters* and *Resource List*.
- Provide an orientation to the older adults participating in this program to ensure they understand why they have been referred to the program and what the goals and boundaries of the program are. This can be done virtually or over the phone.

Match Volunteers to Program Participants

- Create a brief survey to collect basic information on both volunteers and older adults participating in the program. This information should be collected when individuals sign up to be part of the program. Important information might include:
 - Languages spoken,
 - Preferences around communication options, such as phone calls or the use of virtual platforms like Zoom,
 - Availability.
- Host an introduction session conducted by the MWC Program Lead so that the volunteer and the participant have the opportunity to meet prior to setting up their first interaction on their own.
- Provide contact information to both the volunteer and the participant so they can contact their match effectively. Encourage the matches to set a regularly scheduled check in date and time.

Evaluate Your Impact

- Set up a system to evaluate the success and effectiveness of your program before getting started. Plan for the MWC Program Lead to do a check in with the volunteer and the participant to see how the program is going. If a match doesn't seem to be a good fit, you can offer the participant the opportunity to be matched with a new volunteer.



- Create a pre and post survey. This is a great way to determine if your program is achieving its goals. Surveys should be provided at the start of the program, and then in timed increments throughout the program, such as after 30, 60, and 90 days. Check out the [MWC Handbook](#) for sample surveys or reach out to Quality Institute staff for assistance in developing one.
- Use feedback to make changes to your program to ensure that you are running a program that best meets the needs of your community.



FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

At the height of the pandemic, the Health Coalition of Passaic County and the MWC town, the City of Paterson, recognized the necessity to address the isolation needs of older adults in the community. With funding from the Henry and Marilyn Taub Foundation, they recruited high school students to conduct wellness checks on older adults over a period of 10 weeks while also addressing any identified social needs older adults in the community were experiencing.



LET US HELP

MWC staff is here to help you get your programming up and running. We are here to assist with:

- Creating your local volunteer pool,
- Partnering with community organizations to identify older adults in need of your program,
- Developing your volunteer training,
- Creating evaluation surveys and tools to measure the impact of your program.

For technical assistance with your Reducing Social Isolation Program, contact MWC Program Officer, Julie DeSimone at jdesimone@njhcqi.org or 609-452-5980. For more information about the MWC, visit the [Mayors Wellness Campaign webpage](#).



MORE RESOURCES

- [AARP: How To Fight the Social Isolation of Coronavirus](#)
- [CDC: Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Issues](#)
- [Health Affairs: Social Isolation and Health](#)
- [How to Develop a Volunteer Program](#)
- [Kaiser Family Foundation: Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use](#)
- [Mayo Clinic: The 6 Benefits of Volunteering](#)
- [Papa: Pairs older adults and families with Papa Pals for companionship and assistance with everyday tasks.](#)



The Reducing Social Isolation Toolkit was generously supported by  [Amerigroup](#)



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VOLUNTEER CONVERSATION STARTER GUIDE

Sharing memories and telling stories is a great way for older adults to develop relationships and stay connected. It can be challenging to start a relationship with someone you just met, especially if you are not able to have conversations in person. Use these ideas to help get your conversations going. Remember, everyone has a unique history and life experience. Questions that seem basic may evoke a negative or emotional response for some people. If a question seems to make someone uncomfortable, be prepared to move on.

CHILDHOOD

- Where did you grow up, what was it like growing up there? What brought you to Passaic County?
- What was your first job?
- What did your parents do for a living?
- What was your favorite thing to do as a kid?

PEOPLE WHO MATTER TO US AND LIFE EVENTS

- Do you have any children or grandchildren? Tell me about them.
- What has been your proudest moment?
- What historical event had the biggest impact on you?
- What is your favorite family tradition?
- Who in your family are you the most similar to/different from?

FAVORITES

- What is the most memorable trip you have taken?
- What is your favorite meal?
- What are your favorite movies/books/music?
- What are your hobbies? Have they changed throughout your life?

THE PRESENT

- Who do you see the most often?
- What do you consider a “good day”?
- What would you say is the most important thing to you right now?
- Who do you admire? Why?
- What is your best piece of advice?





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VOLUNTEER RESOURCE LIST

As a volunteer, you may learn that the older adult you are matched with needs services outside the scope of the Social Isolation Program. Individuals may be experiencing food insecurity, health issues, mental health or substance use concerns, or other issues that as a volunteer, you are not prepared to address. There are many options for social services in Passaic County. The programs listed below are a great place to start. Provide this list to your match if they need other supports.



EVA'S VILLAGE

973-523-6220

[Eva's Village](#) helps thousands of men, women, and children each year by addressing basic needs of food and shelter, as well as complex issues around addiction, mental illness, and chronic homelessness.



MEALS ON WHEELS

973-569-4099

Home Delivered Meal Service ([Meals on Wheels](#)) is available to homebound older adults who are unable to provide for

their own nutritional needs due to acute/chronic illness or handicap. Please note that applicants must meet specific program requirements in order to be eligible for service. Service includes the delivery of one hot meal per day Monday through Friday.



PASSAIC COUNTY SENIOR SERVICES

973-569-4060

The [Department of Senior Services](#) provides and coordinates numerous services and sponsors many activities for senior citizens. Services available within the County include transportation, seasonal cleaning, housekeeping, certified home health aides, telephone reassurance, social adult day care and legal services.