



COMBATING SENIOR SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

GROWING CHALLENGES FACING OLDER ADULTS

Our nation's senior population is rapidly increasing, leaving more older individuals at risk of hunger and isolation. One in four seniors live alone¹, and one in five is lonely,² increasing susceptibility to a number of harmful health issues that impede their ability to stay in their homes and communities. The unique and elevated risk of social isolation and loneliness for older adults has been exacerbated amid social distancing and other safety measures needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

DELIVERING SOLUTIONS AND HUMAN CONNECTION THROUGH MEALS ON WHEELS PROGRAMS

Several factors that make older adults more susceptible to social isolation and loneliness – like living alone, managing limited mobility or past experience with falls – are common among seniors receiving Meals on Wheels. The Meals on Wheels delivery model inherently provides social connection and meaningful human interaction. Older adults receiving daily delivered meals report improved feelings of connectedness as well as reductions in self-reported falls.³ Furthermore, among seniors receiving home-delivered meals, 91% report services help them feel more secure and 94% say that the services help them stay in their own homes.⁴

Local Meals on Wheels programs often supplement the social interactions that occur during meal delivery with a variety of additional services that combat social isolation and loneliness, such as telephone reassurance, friendly visitors, and/or pet assistance programs.

Telephone Reassurance	Telephone reassurance services are designed to have a volunteer or staff member make consistent phone calls to an isolated, homebound older adult to socialize with them and check on their well-being. In 2018, prior to the coronavirus outbreak, more than 170,000 older adults received telephone reassurances through local Meals on Wheels programs nationwide. ⁵
Friendly Visitors (Senior Companions)	Friendly visiting programs are designed to offer human connection by providing companionship and emotional support to older adults who are socially isolated or lonely. In 2018, approximately 28,000 older adults benefited from these types of programs. ⁵
Pet Assistance & Food Delivery	Pet assistance programs often leverage partnerships with shelters, veterinarians, pet food stores and/or boarding and sheltering services to provide holistic animal care and encourage animal companionship. Seniors with pets are less likely to exhibit depression, report feelings of loneliness and experience illness. Today, more than half of Meals on Wheels programs nationwide offer some form of pet assistance programming.

BERTHA'S STORY

Bertha's home was once a constant bustle of non-stop activity with her eight children. And, even to this day, at age 95, nothing brings her more joy than the time she gets to spend with her family when they can come to visit.

But most days still get lonely for Bertha, now living in an empty house. That's why it's so important to her that the Meals on Wheels volunteers who bring her meals also provide some company and conversation.



"Meals on Wheels allows me to eat well and has been a blessing for the whole family." – Bertha

POLICY SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS AMONG OLDER ADULTS

Social isolation and loneliness are prevalent and growing issues affecting an increasing number of older adults in our country. The well-established and demonstrated positive impact of senior nutrition programs and their role in alleviating these issues provides a strong and sufficient basis to justify and support more robust federal funding and policies to assist those in greatest social need, including:

- Increased federal funding for the Older Americans Act (OAA) Nutrition Program to provide resources for senior nutrition programs to continue delivering services that combat loneliness and social isolation, and the negative health effects of these issues. This includes through the annual appropriations process, as well as emergency supplemental legislation, such as provided in the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*.
- Effective implementation of the OAA and a broad awareness and understanding of policy changes it brought forth, including the vital provisions that support social connectedness for older adults.
- Protection of, and support for, programs and services that help seniors age independently in and remain connected to their communities such as federal block grants and Medicare and Medicaid home- and community-based services (HCBS), and establish policies that encourage health plans to partner with senior nutrition programs and provide coverage for services that promote social connection and reduce loneliness.

¹ Census Bureau, 2020, *American Community Survey (ACS) 2018*. Available on the Administration for Community Living Aging, Independence, and Disability (AGID) Program Data Portal: <https://agid.acl.gov/CustomTables/>

² AARP, 2017, *A Profile of Social Connectedness in Older Adults*. Available at: <https://connect2affect.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/A-Profile-of-Social-Connectedness.pdf>

³ Thomas & Dosa (report commissioned by Meals on Wheels America), 2015, *More Than A Meal: Pilot Research Study*. Available at: <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/more-than-a-meal/pilot-research-study>

⁴ Administration for Community Living (ACL), 2019, *National Survey of Older Americans Act Participants 2018*. Available on the AGID Program Data Portal at: <https://agid.acl.gov/CustomTables/>

⁵ Meals on Wheels America (research conducted by Trailblazer Research), 2019, *More Than A Meal Comprehensive Network Study*. Available at: <https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/learn-more/research/more-than-a-meal/comprehensive-network-study>