

Too Much Alone Time:

Three ways philanthropy can reduce social isolation

THE TAKEAWAY

Social isolation puts mental and physical health at risk for too many Vermonters and the pandemic isn't helping. Philanthropy can help build community and connection to combat this trend.

Here's how:

- Support libraries, community centers, and senior centers
- Support volunteer programs and nonprofits that build connections for people at high risk of social isolation
- Support centrally located housing and housing with common areas



START WITH THE DEPTH OF WINTER and add cold winds, short days, and overcast skies. Sift in a lengthy pandemic, quarantines, and continued bouts of social distancing, and all the ingredients combine to exacerbate the problem of social isolation. This condition, defined as a lack of meaningful connections to others, can increase the risk of mental and physical health problems, including heart disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, and dementia.

Nor is social isolation rare. A study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found that about one-fourth of adults ages 65 and older are socially isolated. Younger people also experience the predicament, but it tends to be more common in older populations as the rate of

people living alone increases, along with chronic illness and the deaths of family members and friends. In Vermont, with its relatively gray population and rural landscape, social isolation is a factor in the demand for mental health services, a demand that has grown with the pandemic.

And even before COVID-19, a significant number of residents of all ages reported feeling the pangs of isolation, according to the 2019 Vermont Rural Life Survey.

Asked how often they felt isolated, 23 percent of respondents said sometimes, 11 percent said often, and 5 percent said always in the study, a collaboration between Vermont Public Radio and Vermont PBS with funding from the Vermont Community Foundation.



"I think the social isolation that we've all experienced and now really the burnout that we're all experiencing two years into the pandemic has only exacerbated the need for mental health clinicians," said Pam Zagorski, executive director of the nonprofit Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging.

Most of us understand social isolation when we see it and when we experience it. It can mean having no one to call when you are sick. Or wondering who would help if you ran out of gas on the roadside, or whose name should go on a form as an emergency contact. The good news is that people can create a stronger circle and form new and meaningful relationships, regardless of age. Philanthropy can help.

Here's a look at solutions:

Support libraries, senior centers, recreation centers, and other community spaces

People who feel isolated don't just need social connections, they need a place to form them. That's where community spaces come in. They can allow people to participate in a discussion on political history, join a cookbook club, practice chair yoga, or bust out a Zumba move. Libraries, in addition to providing the warmth of community, also provide literal warmth, which is especially needed in winter for people who are homeless or living in precarious situations.

Although the pandemic has forced some libraries and other community centers to shift programming online or temporarily suspend it, in-person activities are still happening at quite a few outlets. Donations can help ensure that live events continue during the pandemic and that suspended operations return at robust levels when feasible. Meanwhile, community gathering places such as the South Burlington Public Library illustrate just how much these spaces are needed right now. It draws thousands of visits per month (6,000 in November alone)

and is open six days a week in a bright and beautiful new building on Market Street, which opened last year after much planning.

Visitors check out books, apply for jobs on the computers, or go to the senior center in the same building, which continues to serve in-person lunch to about 25 people several times a week. Tutors work with students of all ages, patrons attend poetry club or play chess, and immigrants and refugees attend English language conversation sessions. Programming is designed to include and welcome people of all ages and backgrounds, including patrons with intellectual or physical disabilities.

Visitors often chat with staff and exchange greetings. The conversations are brief but still meaningful, said library director Jennifer Murray. Earlier in the pandemic, when the library was at temporary digs in the University Mall, it closed for several months. When the library re-opened, "People were so grateful," Murray said. And it wasn't just for reading material, which had been available online and curbside. "It was the chance to talk to another human being about books or their lives for just a few minutes and to feel that they belong," Murray said.

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human being.**

Engagement tends to increase when activities draw people with a shared interest, be that learning a new language or critiquing a best-selling mystery. "We're not saying 'ok, you two become friends now,'" Murray explained. "But we have the opportunity to provide things of topical interest that really grab people and then those people get into groups and find each other."



It's important to keep in mind that many publicly funded institutions, such as libraries, can do more when philanthropy contributes private resources to augment taxpayer funding. Numerous Vermont libraries have auxiliaries or "friends" groups that are set up as nonprofits to accept donations, as well as foundations to help with capital campaigns. These include the South Burlington Public Library, the Rutland Free Library, the Aldrich Public Library in Barre, and the Brooks Memorial Library in Brattleboro, to name just a few.

Charitable individuals can also support teen centers to help counteract the pandemic's impact on young people. The 2021 Vermont Youth Project survey found that 52 percent of high school juniors and seniors felt a little or a lot more lonely due to COVID-19.

Philanthropic advisors at the Vermont Community Foundation can help charitable individuals learn more about worthy projects and current needs.

Support connections for seniors and others at higher risk

Studies suggest older people are more prone to social isolation. In Vermont, where 20 percent of the population is 65 or older, compared to an average of 16 percent nationally, this is of particular concern. The state's long winters and rural nature can mean some seniors hunker down and stay at home not because it feels cozy or because they want to, but because they lack transportation to visit friends or community centers, or the weather makes driving a white-knuckle exercise they prefer to avoid.

Philanthropy can help by supporting organizations such as the nonprofit Green Mountain RSVP in Bennington, which lines up volunteers ages 55 and older to help provide companionship, meals, and even tax preparation assistance to people who need support. Charitable individuals can also volunteer their own expertise. Volunteers who can help people set up

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electronic devices such as laptops and iPads are in high demand and a huge help to keep seniors, especially, connected to others via online classes and events.

"One of the things that we have been working to do is to recruit volunteers who can provide training to older adults to get their devices set up and help them with trouble shooting," said Zagorski at Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging, which serves Bennington and Rutland counties, and is the sponsoring organization of Green Mountain RSVP.

Along with older people, social isolation can also affect other groups at higher rates than the overall population, including immigrants, LGBTQ+ populations, and people with disabilities. Nonprofits that help organize events, sponsor in-person or online support groups, and offer mental health services are a good place to give. Philanthropic advisors at the Vermont Community Foundation can help donors find effective programs and organizations.

Support centrally located housing and housing with common spaces

Vermont needs more housing of all types, especially housing close to or within town and city centers so people can easily access shops, parks, libraries, theaters, restaurants, houses of worship, and other places where there is activity to enjoy, observe, and get drawn into. When it's easy to get to places where people can mingle with other people, the chances of connection increase and the potential



for social isolation decreases. Funders can help by giving to nonprofit housing organizations that put an emphasis on infill and downtown historic building redevelopments, especially those that include common areas in their housing designs.

People who have suffered respond to the opportunity to have connection.

Rural Edge Housing and Community Development, a nonprofit based in Lyndonville, helped redevelop an 1897 hotel in downtown St. Johnsbury into a 40-unit affordable apartment building that was completed last year. The building, known as New Avenue, includes a well-appointed, inviting community room in addition to a living room and lobby where residents can get to know their neighbors or invite friends and family in for a visit.

The goal was to make the common spaces functional and beautiful, said Patrick Shattuck, executive director of Rural Edge. How you furnish common spaces is “as important as how you design the building,” according to Shattuck. People are more inclined to spend time in an attractive space, and thus more likely to meet and get to know their neighbors.

Rural Edge also offers a range of services in many of its properties, and recently started offering on-site COVID testing which has allowed some special holiday meals and other events to safely continue. The nonprofit does outreach to help people experiencing social

isolation and housing challenges get in the door at the properties it oversees.

Recently a unit opened up for a 97-year-old World War II veteran who was living in a motel because the camper on his land, where he normally lives, does not have water in the winter, Shattuck said. He’s now living in much safer permanent housing, and connecting with other residents, including another 90-something World War II vet, Shattuck said. “He’s in a warm place, a safe place, where he is supported, and he is thriving. People who have suffered, you know, respond to the opportunity to have connection.”

Deeper Reading

[Supporting Vermonters in Crisis: Three ways funders can strengthen Vermont’s mental health system](#)

[Vermont Rural Life Survey](#)

[Vermont Youth Project Survey](#)

For recommendations about organizations in Vermont working on this issue, reach out to Jane Kimble at jkimble@vermontcf.org or (802) 388-3355 ext. 286 to be connected with a philanthropic advisor.

If you found this information useful, find similar content at vermontcf.org/insighthub.

The heart of the Community Foundation’s work is closing the opportunity gap—the divide that leaves too many Vermonters struggling to get ahead, no matter how hard they work. Learn more about the Community Foundation’s philanthropic advising services or opening a donor advised fund at vermontcf.org.