

## Addressing Seniors' Isolation as a Community

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### Introduction

For many people, growing old can be an isolating and lonely process. We tend to lose loved ones and connections in late life, and re-establishing contact with the community can be difficult. For seniors that do become isolated, this has a large impact on their quality of life. It takes a mental and emotional toll, and is associated with increased risks for hospitalization, a range of physical ailments, and even death.

As Canada's population ages rapidly, awareness of this issue is increasing. Governments and communities are beginning to take steps to address it, but there is no easy solution; the contributing factors are complex, and solving this will require teamwork across many sectors. This is why the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program is supporting the development of collaborative partnerships that aim to reduce isolation among seniors in cities across the country. In Hamilton, there are estimated to be more than 11,000 seniors living in isolation. With the support of the New Horizon's for Seniors Program, local groups and organizations are now collaborating to reach these seniors and help anchor them into the community.

Hamilton's faith communities have a special role to play in helping to accomplish this work. Read on to find out more about how faith communities can contribute!

### What is isolation?

Let's begin by gaining a better understanding of what isolation is. Many mistakenly assume that isolation and loneliness are the same thing, but there are important differences. Isolation occurs when someone has very few meaningful relationships or roles, and minimal social contact. This is measurable and objective. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a negative feeling that occurs when someone perceives that they have less quality or quantity of social contact than they'd like. So, while isolated people often do express feelings of loneliness, this doesn't have to be the case.

People also tend to assume that addressing isolation means linking seniors into social or recreational activities. While this can be part of the solution, it isn't the full picture. This is because, in addition to lacking access to social support, isolated seniors also tend to have other unmet basic needs (such as food, income, health care, and supports for daily living). And in some cases, isolated seniors simply do not want to be connected to social activities, and that's ok. In these situations, helping isolated seniors can be more about connecting them to programs and services in the community, so that their basic needs are met and they know how to reach out for help in an emergency.

### Collaboration is Key to Addressing Seniors' Isolation

The issue of seniors' isolation should not be tackled individually; there is no single policy, program, government, group or organization that can solve this issue on their own. We need to collaborate to promote awareness and understanding, to increase the identification of isolated seniors, and to improve supports.

This is what the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan (HSIIP) aims to achieve. The HSIIP is a three-year initiative funded in part by the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program. It is a collaboration of seven agencies, each with a project that contributes to reducing isolation among seniors. In its first year (May 2016 to April 2017) the HSIIP Connectors have anchored 301 isolated seniors into programs, services and activities in the community, and they will connect even more in years two and three. The HSIIP Collaborative has also developed a 'CareDove Referral System' for Hamilton – an online portal that provides information about seniors' services and enables people to book appointments directly with local providers (link provided below). In partnership with Gilbrea Centre for Studies in Aging, the HSIIP Collaborative is conducting research to better understand seniors' isolation in Hamilton, which will inform future policies and practices.

And, thanks to a generous donation of \$50,000 from the Retired Teachers of Ontario Foundation, the HSIIP Collaborative is administering a Social Participation Fund that helps seniors with low-incomes to access services and activities that reduce their isolation.

In addition to these activities, the HSIIP Collaborative convenes a group of key stakeholders to improve understanding and coordinate supports at a systems level, as well as partnering with various other projects in the community.

## **The Role of Faith Communities in Addressing Seniors' Isolation**

The HSIIP Collaborative is excited to support Aging Together and Grace Lutheran Church in their new project, 'Strengthening Connections for Older Adults through Faith Communities'.

Isolated seniors are a notoriously hard-to-reach population, so we must cast a broad net to identify and support them. Faith communities are particularly well-suited to help with this. They have many connections to seniors, and a lot of older people have a lifelong commitment to their place of worship. This means faith communities are in a unique position to identify the progression towards isolation among their members.

Furthermore, a religious network might be one of the only places where some seniors feel comfortable reaching out; a shared faith is a bond that can facilitate social connections and help seniors tap into support. And connecting with faith might be a source of great satisfaction and comfort to isolated seniors; as they say, the body breaks down, but the spirit is still capable of growth in old age.

How can faith communities help? The first step is to learn to identify the risk factors for isolation, so that members of the community are keeping an eye out for it and know who to approach when they see the signs. The next step is to intervene. There are many ways that faith communities can improve the lives of isolated seniors. Here are a few suggestions:

- Be aware of services available to seniors, and act as a bridge between seniors and services providers. If possible, try to help isolated seniors to get connected to services early on, to prevent them from becoming so unwell that they stop attending religious services.
- Try to be aware and reach out when seniors experience the death of a spouse or loved one.
- Create faith-based volunteer networks that can visit seniors in-home or organize social events.
- Address obstacles to accessing religious services. As people become frail or lose personal connections they might stop attending. See if you can help them to reconnect.
- Be public champions of the issue. Help to spread awareness by sharing information and resources.

## **The HSIIP Collaborative Can Help**

If you know of an isolated senior, you can refer them to a HSIIP Connector. The Connector will assess their needs and follow up over time to get them anchored into services and activities.

If your faith community would like to learn more about the risk factors for seniors' isolation, the HSIIP Collaborative can provide training free of charge.

For more information about referrals or training, contact Taralyn Prindiville at [prindiville@hsc.ca](mailto:prindiville@hsc.ca)

For more information about HSIIP, visit [www.socialisolation.ca](http://www.socialisolation.ca)

For information about seniors' services in Hamilton, visit [www.caredove.com/hamiltoncss](http://www.caredove.com/hamiltoncss)