

# Prevent and Reduce Social Isolation

## What philanthropy can do to prevent and reduce social isolation in later life

Authored by Risa Wilkerson, Executive Director, [Healthy Places by Design](#)

Social isolation is an epidemic in the United States, affecting [two-thirds of older adults and three-quarters of young people](#) (as reported during COVID). Social isolation is linked to depression, poor sleep, and impaired immunity. It [increases](#) the risks of dementia by 50 percent, stroke by 32 percent, and coronary heart disease by 29 percent, and significantly [increases](#) the risk of premature death from all causes.

People who feel that they don't belong -- because of their age, race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation -- are particularly susceptible to social isolation. That vulnerability can be exacerbated by experiences such as long-term illness or disability, domestic violence, loss of a loved one, becoming a caregiver, having a baby, relocation, incarceration, and homelessness.

Isolation is affected by community design, social norms, public policy, and institutions that make it hard for people to build strong social connections.

With strategic investments, however, we can create places where people of all ages know and trust their neighbors, feel welcomed and represented, and have a strong sense of community. We can create socially connected communities.



Philanthropic leaders are well positioned to help improve social connectedness. Here are eight ideas for getting started.

## 1. Establish measures of social isolation and social connection that matter to your community

No universally accepted metrics for social isolation or connection exist, but there is an array of widely used measures, aims, and objectives available. For example,

- Two versions of the [UCLA Loneliness Scale](#) (a 20-item and a 3-item questionnaire) can provide insight.
- The [Upstream Social Interaction Risk Screener](#) is a 13-item tool to measure social isolation in older adults and link them to appropriate resources.
- The [County Health Rankings](#) include measurements such as social associations, disconnected youth, and residential segregation that can provide insights into factors influencing social supports.

There may be other community level indicators of social connection that work better for your community and can help track progress against what is meaningful to residents.

Funders can play a key role in identifying these metrics in collaboration with residents and funding the data collection and reporting of social connection over time.

## 2. Fund asset-focused approaches to support social connections in your community

Quantitative data only tell part of the story. Qualitative community assessments (like network or asset mapping) can also help you and the community learn what is already working well to strengthen social connections across the lifespan and among diverse groups.

Recognizing philanthropy's own history and shifting from frameworks of charity to justice and social solidarity aligns well with this aim.

Funders can help in several ways, such as:

- Providing funding and other resources (e.g., meeting space, collaborative learning opportunities, networking, policy supports) to



recognize, uplift, and honor these community assets. Other assets may include favorite public spaces (e.g., libraries, parks, community centers); faith-based institutions, businesses, and other organizations; neighborhood traditions; diversity of race, culture, skills, knowledge, and perspectives; and revered elders and others of influence.

- Prioritizing support for communities of color and those experiencing health inequities by providing resources and opportunities that help address legacies of injustice. Key strategies can include:
- Practicing [trust-based philanthropy](#), in which nonprofit partners work with funders on decision-making, reporting is streamlined, and metrics are determined collaboratively.
- Establishing higher overhead rates, offering inflation-linked grant adjustments, and providing core/general operating support (as opposed to project-specific funding).
- Practicing participatory grantmaking, in which community members advise or even decide on how foundation funds are allocated.
- De-identifying grant applications to level the playing field.

### 3. Support relationship-building and advocacy

Engage diverse residents in relationship-building activities that promote trust and agency. This might mean funding block parties, neighborhood associations, or more formal cross-sector coalitions. The engagement process itself can bring together community members who wouldn't otherwise interact and forge stronger social connections for future civic engagement.

Because trust is a critical foundation for stronger social networks, leadership is more effective when it comes from community-based organizations (CBOs) who already work in and with traditionally underserved communities.

- Support and invest in CBOs with leadership that represents their communities and prioritizes power-building strategies to change the policies and systems that created and exacerbated inequities.

### 4. Elevate community-level solutions

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to support community conversations around the importance of social connectivity and the root causes of social isolation—reframing the issue through a systems lens and articulating socially connected communities as possible, vital, and key to a thriving life.

Funders can:

- Structure investments to prioritize sustainable and equitable policy, system, and environmental change strategies.
- Invest in narrative-building work that lifts the voices and perspectives of those closest to the issue. Powerful storytelling highlights the breadth and nuance of knowledge, experiences, and culturally defined success often overlooked by quantitative measures.

Such a qualitative focus, derived from community-based participatory evaluation methods, defines success on a community's own terms rather than by prescribed or inflexible methods that reinforce power imbalances.

- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded a learning network of practitioners who co-created the [Socially Connected Communities: Solutions for Social Isolation](#) report, a tool for bringing this community-level lens into the conversation.



## 5. Integrate social well-being into all investments

Social well-being affects all aspects of life because humans, by nature, benefit from being together and helping each other. Foundation investments can achieve greater impact by weaving in strategies that strengthen social health (e.g. civic engagement, intergenerational programs).

Dedicating resources for creating socially connected communities is helpful. [RRF Foundation for Aging](#), for example, recently made social connectedness one of its four priority areas, to call out the need for a direct and intentional focus.

Funders can dedicate time for building relationships and trust, integrating inclusive practices and designs, and aligning social health with other health measurements.

Integrating social well-being into all investments is essential, efficient, and likely to deepen the overall impact of every initiative. Funders could, for example, make funding contingent on including efforts to reduce social isolation and/or strengthen social connection, or challenge applicants to address how programs would create sustainable conditions for community members to build strong, trusting relationships with each other and with those in positions of local leadership. Insisting on this integration will amplify the importance of socially connected communities for all people.

## 6. Advance the field of social connectivity

To advance the field of social connectivity and demonstrate the relationship between systemic injustices and social disconnectedness, more quantitative and qualitative research, as well as formal and informal learning opportunities, are needed.



This means funding evaluation of interventions and approaches that target social isolation. It also means supporting peer learning within and across communities and countries to include practice-tested approaches.

Formal research can strengthen metrics that measure the integration of social well-being into community-level strategies. A proposed framework dubbed “[Social in all policies](#)” could guide such evaluation. “Social in All Policies” echoes the World Health Organization’s “Health in All Policies” framework, and recognizes that “social well-being is influenced by all sectors of society, including health, transportation, housing, employment, education, food and nutrition, and environment.” In all cases, integration of diverse perspectives and populations to inform the learning agenda and the learning itself is necessary for equity, and will also enhance social connectedness for participants.

- AARP Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine’s report [Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System](#), which summarizes the evidence base around social isolation.



## 7. Support age-friendly communities and comprehensive plans for aging

As state and local governments begin to recognize the challenges and opportunities associated with shifting demographics, state and local comprehensive plans for aging are providing roadmaps for stakeholders to come together across sectors to improve the experience of aging.

Funders have been instrumental in driving comprehensive plan-related activities, leveraging work accomplished through Age-Friendly Communities.

One of the most advanced examples is Together We EngAGE – the [California Master Plan for Aging](#). Built around five bold goals, the plan offers several strategies for social connectedness in [Goal 3 \(Inclusion & Equity, Not Isolation\)](#). These include closing the digital divide, enhancing older people’s opportunities to work and volunteer, and providing protection from abuse, neglect, and exploitation, among others.

Described as a “blueprint,” the California plan also encompasses the goals of Housing for All Stages & Ages; Health Reimagined; Caregiving That Works; and Affording Aging, offering many different types of funders the chance to leverage collective impact and increase sustainability of outcomes by pooling resources and working with local and state government and the private sector on shared goals.

To learn more and find opportunities for funders to get involved, visit the [GIA Funders Community on Master Plans for Aging](#).



## 8. Support digital inclusion

Closing the digital divide by increasing access to the internet and digital devices will improve the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to connect with family, friends, and health care providers, and to access additional support during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

In addition to exacerbating social isolation, the digital divide has serious health consequences for older people. These include lack of access to telehealth.

A 2021 report by Older Adults Technology Services, Inc. (OATS), in partnership with the Humana Foundation, titled [Aging Connected: Exposing the Hidden Connectivity Crisis for Older Adults](#), found that nearly 22 million older Americans lack broadband access at home.

It also found that 40% of older people, who were already at disproportionate risk of death from COVID, could not find important pandemic-related information online when searching at home.

To learn more about opportunities in this area for funders, please visit the [GIA Funders Community on Aging and Technology](#).

## Conclusion

The ideas in this brief stem from the [Socially Connected Communities Action Guide for Philanthropic Leaders](#) created by [Healthy Places by Design](#), and are intended as starting points for supporting social connection in your communities.

The good news is that prioritizing social well-being need not mean an overhaul of your funding priorities. No matter what issues you invest in, integrating strategies to strengthen social connectedness can create meaningful impact.

Finally, as you incorporate these or other recommendations, keep sharing your lessons with others for broader learning. Together, we can prevent and reduce social isolation so people of all ages can experience the benefits of socially connected communities.

## Additional Resources

### [Healthy Places By Design](#)

Healthy Places By Design also hosts the Local Leaders for Socially Connected Communities network. To join, please email [GabriellaP@HealthyPlacesbyDesign.org](mailto:GabriellaP@HealthyPlacesbyDesign.org)

### [The Foundation for Social Connection](#)

[Creating the Conditions for Social Well-Being: Insights from the Connect+Conversations Series](#)  
[Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation](#)