Reducing Social Isolation and Fostering Healthy Aging through Intergenerational Programming

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Social Connection is a Fundamental Human Need

- A 2012 article in the Journal of American Medicine reported 43% of older adults report feelings of loneliness.
- There are 46 million people in the US who are 65 and older – that translates to nearly 20 million older people have feelings of loneliness.

Source:
www.nextavenue.org/loneliness-isolation-age
www.jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/1188033
Definition of Social Isolation

*The lack of meaningful connections with other people in community.*

Social Isolation is linked to a myriad of health risks including:

- High blood pressure
- Obesity
- Alzheimer’s
- Dementia
Research Highlights on Impacts of Social Isolation Among Older Adults

Numerous studies and publications support the critical importance of social connections for older adults.

• Successful Aging by Rowe and Kahn (1998)
• Social Connectedness of Health by Wilder Research (2012)
• National Institute of Health Newsletter (2018)
• American Journal of Aging Life Care (2018)
Generativity is the care and concern directed toward others, especially the younger generation.

Intergenerational Connections: Experience Corps

Researchers at John Hopkins have studied the benefits of intergenerational engagement on older adults who volunteer for Experience Corps, a national program model that connects older adults to tutor at-risk youth.

MRI testing of older adults engaged in the program showed improved executive function in volunteers

Source: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19692672
Intergenerational Connections Just Make Sense!

Despite the documented impact of social isolation in people’s health and well-being, limited efforts have been made to reduce isolation and loneliness among older people, especially those from rural communities with fewer resources.

Two Positive Strategies that work:
**Overall Goal ~**

*AGE to age: bringing generations together* actively engages people 55 and older to ensure children and youth, including those at risk, achieve their potential and remain connected to their communities.
Snapshot of Northeastern Minnesota

- 7-county region covers 18,000+ sq. miles – about 25% of Minnesota’s total land mass
- 1 urban hub of 86,238 people and 67 smaller towns with populations up to 16,000 and 3 Tribal Nations
- Outpacing state and national averages – 36% of population is 55 and older
- 25% of adults 65+ live alone
- Population in nursing homes is less than 4%
- 20% of the population is 18 and younger
1. Aitkin (pop. 2,165)
2. Barnum (pop. 600)
3. Bigfork (pop. ranges from 123 to 447)
4. Bois Forte Band (pop. 657)
5. Chisholm (pop. 4,976)
6. Cloquet (pop. 12,124)
7. East Range Communities (pop. ranges from 30 to 2016)
8. Ely (pop. 3,477)
9. Floodwood (pop. 528)
10. Fond du Lac Band (pop. 3,728)
11. Grand Portage Band (pop. 557)
12. Hibbing (pop. 16,355)
13. International Falls (pop. 6,424)
14. McGregor (pop. 391)
15. Moose Lake (pop. 2,751)
16. North Shore Area (pop. 1,866)
17. Proctor (pop. 3,075)
18. Two Harbors (pop. 3,745)
Our Model

- Identify a local coordinator to serve as a communication link and rally community participation
- Build an action team consisting of older adults, youth, and the generations in between
- Engage Action Team members in a community planning process to identify activities and projects that promote the well-being of people and enhance community
- Conduct Learning Community Meetings with 18 Coordinators
Intergenerational Community Initiatives

- Community Service & Beautification
- Culture & Tradition Activities
- Recreation & Community Gatherings
- Technology Learning
- Health & Wellness
- Youth Enrichment & Education
Two Harbors, Minnesota

- Named “Best Intergenerational Community” in the country by Generations United in 2017

- Program Examples;
  - Tech and Coffee Program
  - Intergenerational Community Radio Station
  - Chore Service
  - Book Walk
  - Reading Pals
  - Walking Club
  - Trail Beautification
  - Intergenerational Activities as part of Community Events
Program Enhancements

- Peer Learning Community Meetings and Annual Intergenerational Training Summits
- AGE to age College Interns
- AGE to age Reading Pals
**Purpose:** To help children in a variety of community-based settings and schools, become successful readers by connecting them with caring older adult volunteers.

- Northland Foundation launched 3 sites in 2012 and now have 5 sites, with 3 more to be added this year.
- Reading Pals engages 40 to 50 older adult volunteers with 500 children from Pre-K to Grade 6, annually.
- In the five sites, older adults provide 1,800+ hours of service during the course of the school year. On average, the older adults provide two to four hours of volunteer service per week.
Impact on Older Adults

- Reduced isolation and strengthened connection to community
- Improved emotional and physical wellbeing
- Renewed sense of purpose
- Increased opportunities for leadership and mentoring
- Engaged in new volunteer opportunities to help children and youth thrive
Impact on Children and Youth

- increased involvement in volunteer opportunities and healthy activities
- strengthened relationships with caring older adults who listen compassionately and offer encouragement
- increased leadership and teamwork skills
- improved confidence and motivation to do better in school
Impact on Communities

- Created an avenue to bring generations together through intergenerational leadership teams
- Increased social, recreational, and volunteer efforts that build a sense of community
- Improved community infrastructure and facilities (e.g. gathering spaces, park beautification projects, gardens, intergenerational theatre, and writing group)
- Reduced age-segregation
188 older adults, 105 youth, 20 teachers, 16 program leaders, and 42 college interns responded to evaluations for AGE to age in 2017-2018:

- 95% of older adults report a renewed sense of purpose and community connections
- 94% of older adults report decreased feelings of isolation
- 97% of youth report increased leadership skills and opportunities to volunteer
- 95% of program leaders note that children and youth participating in AGE to age have increased motivation to do better in school
- 100% of teachers say students involved in the AGE to age Reading Pals program have increased self-confidence and reading skills
- 100% of college interns report improved understanding of how older adults can contribute to community
Overall Impact

- Program expansion:
  - children’s reading program
  - community health initiatives
  - college interns

- 18 AGE to age sites developed encompassing 32 communities

- 1,000+ new intergenerational opportunities and activities

- 9,475 people ages 5 – 96 engaged annually across the 16 sites

- 13,100 volunteer service hours per year across 16 sites valued at nearly $361,300

- $4 million in funding raised from state and national partners
Lessons Learned – Secret Ingredients

- Relationship-building and respect are at the core of all efforts and key to successful outcomes.
- Engaging older adults and young people in the planning process results in ownership of the program.
- Providing a range of opportunities that draw upon the talents, skills, and wisdom of older adults are key to success.
- Developing partnerships to weave an intergenerational lens into existing community projects and programs will help sustain intergenerational efforts.
- Creating a welcoming environment for people of all ages with food and fun are important ingredients for a successful program.