

DATA BRIEF

Social Engagement for Older Adults, People with Disabilities and Caregivers During COVID-19: Results from a New Poll of Aging Network and Partner Organizations

Social isolation and loneliness have gained attention as recent research has indicated the significant impact they have on health and well-being. Social isolation is the lack of social contacts within an individual's network, which translates into a lack of participation in social activity and groups. Loneliness occurs when there is a mismatch between the level of social connection an individual desires and the level of social connection they actually experience.

Older adults are more likely to experience life events and transitions that decrease the size of their networks, including family dispersal, health issues, cognitive decline, role losses or changes, mobility limitations and living alone,ⁱ all of which are risk factors for social isolation and loneliness. Estimates prior to the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that 43 percent of older adults reported feeling lonely and 27 percent reported feeling isolated from others.^{ii,iii} Studies indicate that the impact of our social connections on health rival those of biological factors,^{iv} with social isolation contributing to physical illness or impairment, depression and cognitive decline.^{v,vi,vii}

While there is not as much social isolation and loneliness research focused on people with disabilities, recent research has found that people with disabilities are more likely to report loneliness, social isolation and low social support compared to their peers without disabilities.^{viii} Factors that hinder people from engaging with others, including disabilities, may also increase feelings of loneliness and isolation.^{ix} Family and friend caregivers may also be more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness. In a 2020 study, 21 percent of



caregivers reported feeling alone, with caregivers living with their care recipients more often reporting feeling lonely than those who did not live with their care recipients.^x

Social isolation and loneliness have been thrust further into the health and policy spotlight as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidelines surrounding social distancing and in-person gatherings pose challenges to in-person activities that foster social connection. A study from AARP Foundation and the United Health Foundation, *The Pandemic Effect: A Social Isolation Report*, shows that more than half of adults 50 and older reported experiencing social isolation during the pandemic.^{xi} A majority reported that either they or someone they love also experienced other negative feelings, including lack of motivation, depression and

withdrawal from others.^{xiii} COVID-19 restrictions have also impacted the way organizations serving older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers provide many essential services that are critical to maintaining health and social connection and help meet daily needs.

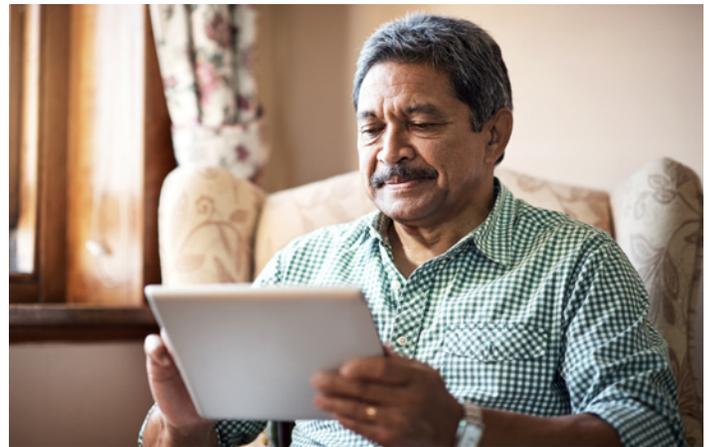
Social engagement promotes health and well-being and provides people with an avenue to share their knowledge, experience and wisdom with their communities. Thus, it is crucial for organizations serving older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers to explore possible interventions that enhance social engagement opportunities and interventions for consumers.

The Aging Network Response

engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults is a national effort to increase the social engagement of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers. Administered by the **National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)** and funded by the **U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL)**, engAGED identifies and disseminates information about emerging trends, and develops resources and tools that the Aging Network can customize to expand and enhance social engagement in their communities.

During November and December 2020, engAGED conducted a poll of Aging Network organizations and community partners on current social engagement priorities for older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers. engAGED received responses from 249 organizations, including Area Agencies on Aging, State Units on Aging, Title VI Native American Aging Programs, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, Centers for Independent Living, senior centers and other aging services providers, and various other community-based organizations. These organizations serve older adults (98 percent), people with disabilities (73 percent) and caregivers (72 percent) in a variety of geographic areas: 70 percent serve rural areas, 52 percent serve suburban areas, 51 percent serve urban areas and 12 percent serve Indian Country. The survey was disseminated by n4a to Area Agencies on Aging and Title VI programs and by engAGED **partner organizations to their communities/constituents**.

The Aging Network and community partners have continuously worked before and during the COVID-19 pandemic to foster engagement opportunities that promote social exchange and interaction. These interventions aim to provide meaningful social interactions that can boost overall health and well-being.



engAGING Safely and Virtually

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the interest of health and safety, Aging Network organizations and other community partners adjusted their programs and services to reflect public health guidance. With safety a primary concern, organizations successfully adapted programming to offer virtual and no-contact opportunities to older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers.

In the poll, engAGED sought to learn about social engagement programs the Aging Network and community partners offer that fall under four main themes: arts and creative expression activities, health and wellness activities, volunteer engagement activities and learning activities. The responses provided a window into pre-COVID-19 programming and what adjustments organizations made to provide continuity during these challenging times.

Arts and Creative Expression Activities

Research shows that participatory arts have a positive effect on cognitive and quality-of-life outcomes.^{xiii} Arts activities offer individuals the opportunity for group participation and social support. Not only does engaging in the arts help reduce stress and promote positive social interaction,^{xiv} it also can have therapeutic effects on morale, depression and loneliness.^{xv} Prior to COVID-19, Aging Network and partner organizations provided various in-person arts and creative expression activities, including cultural outings, painting, drawing, music, theater and social dancing. To adapt to COVID-19 guidance, organizations transitioned some of their arts and creative expression activities to virtual mediums and launched new programs to offer continued engagement at a time when in-person activities were not possible. The top five virtual programs offered during the COVID-19 pandemic by poll respondents are represented in the following chart.

77% offer virtual **Radio Show Programming**

76% offer virtual **Pen Pal Programs**

50% offer virtual **Book Clubs**

48% offer virtual **Storytelling**

41% offer virtual **Crafting**

Health and Wellness Activities

Older adults frequently have more co-occurring medical conditions than those under age 65.^{xvi} Cognitive impairment and mobility limitations can lead to a lack of social support and exchange, making it difficult to acquire timely and tailored medical treatment. Caregivers also have a strong need for respite services, information and referral, and information about affordable care services.^{xvii, xviii} Before COVID-19, Aging Network organizations and their partners provided an abundance of in-person health and wellness programming, including exercise programming, health promotion classes, caregiver support programs, group meals, evidence-based programs related to chronic disease and fall prevention, and peer support/counseling health management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, poll respondents indicate that:

85% offer virtual **Peer Support/Counseling Health Management**

85% offer virtual **Telephone Reassurance**

76% offer virtual **Caregiver Support Programs**

71% offer virtual **Wellness Checks**

65% offer virtual **Meditation/Mindfulness**

Volunteer Engagement Activities

The Aging Network and its partners provide older adults and people with disabilities with critical support essential to maintaining their independence and remaining in their communities. Organizations engage with tens of thousands of volunteers whose work supports this vital programming. Volunteer opportunities are available to members of the community seeking social connection through service, with older adult volunteers in particular playing a critical role. Before COVID-19, Aging Network organizations and their partners offered a variety of volunteer engagement activities, and they have



successfully adapted many opportunities to be offered virtually. Of the poll respondents:

79% offer virtual **Medicare Outreach or Counseling**

60% offer virtual **AmeriCorps Seniors Programs**

48% offer virtual **Intergenerational Mentoring**

Learning Activities

The Aging Network and partner organizations also facilitate social engagement by conducting and promoting a range of educational and learning opportunities. Lifelong learning has received recent attention as studies show that continuous participation in lifelong learning courses is associated with the psychological well-being of older adults.^{xix} Educational activities can promote a sense of community and informal social support. Popular offerings furnished by Aging Network and partner organizations include faith-based classes, lectures and seminars. Additionally, poll respondents noted that they provide language classes, lessons in advocacy and information on COVID-19, and that they successfully adapted programming to accommodate the virtual space:

73% offer virtual **Educational Classes**

73% offer virtual **Lifelong Learning Seminars**

72% offer virtual **Technology/Computer Assistance**

33% offer virtual **Faith-Based Classes**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most social engagement opportunities provided by the Aging Network and partner organizations took place in person. For the most

part, these in-person engagement opportunities were reimagined and adapted overnight once COVID-19 hit. To continue offering engagement opportunities during COVID-19, poll respondents report using a variety of platforms. The most widely used platforms among respondents are **telephone (80 percent), Zoom or other online conference systems (68 percent), Facebook/Instagram Live or other social media (68 percent), direct mail (64 percent) and email (64 percent)**. Other frequently used platforms include call loops, radio, cable television and Wi-Fi-calling apps. The adoption of technology-mediated means of communication has demonstrated the adaptability of the Aging Network and its partners, as well as areas for growth—**68 percent** of poll respondents indicated an interest in **social engagement interventions that address the use of technology**.

Poll respondents indicated interest in other social engagement interventions, particularly with respect to populations disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including minority populations and individuals in hard-to-reach areas.^{xx, xxi} Of poll respondents, **63 percent** expressed interest in **interventions that address the needs of minority older adults**, and **61 percent** expressed interest in **interventions targeting the needs of older adults living in rural communities**. **Seventy-three percent** of respondents indicated an interest in **interventions that address the needs of low-income older adults**. Poll respondents noted several other social engagement interventions they are interested in learning more about, including community partner involvement,

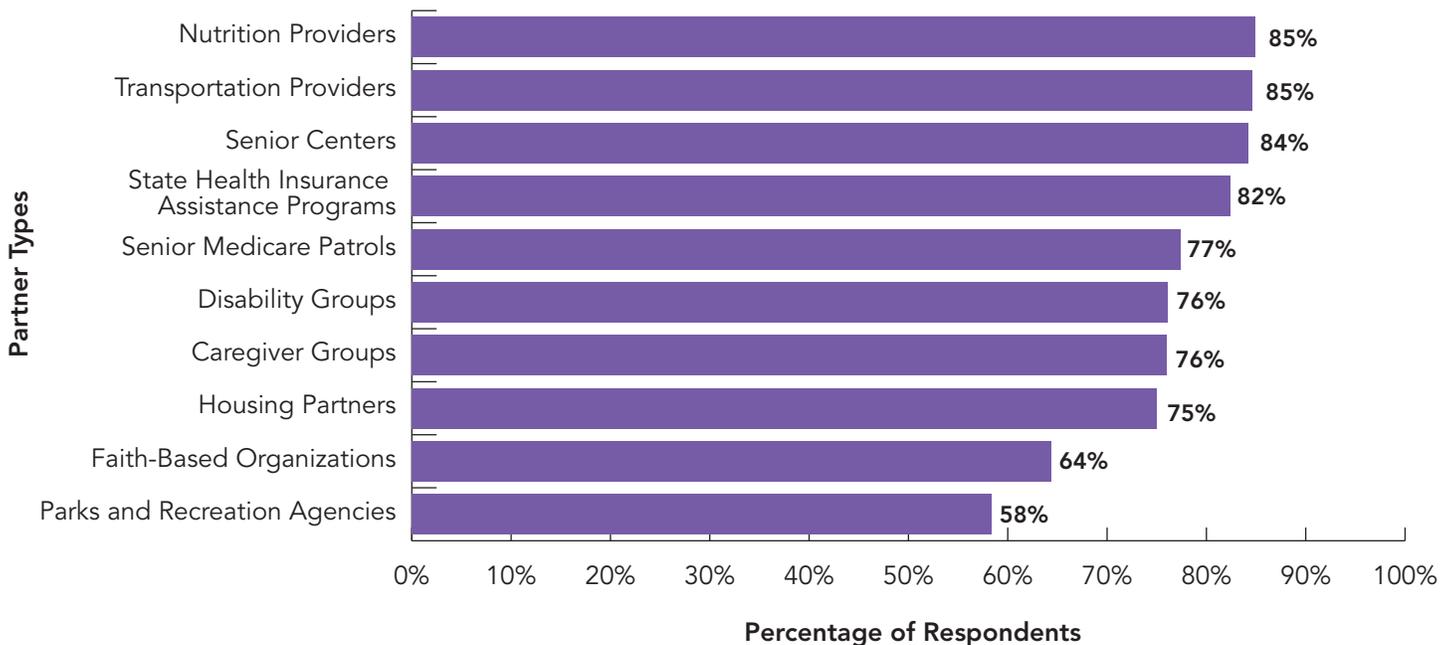
cultural best practices, intergenerational engagement and interventions for older adult caregivers of children. Due to the growing ethnic diversity of older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers, the Aging Network, in collaboration with other community partners, strives to offer social engagement interventions geared toward diverse populations that are inclusive, accessible and culturally relevant.

Community Partnerships: Present and Future

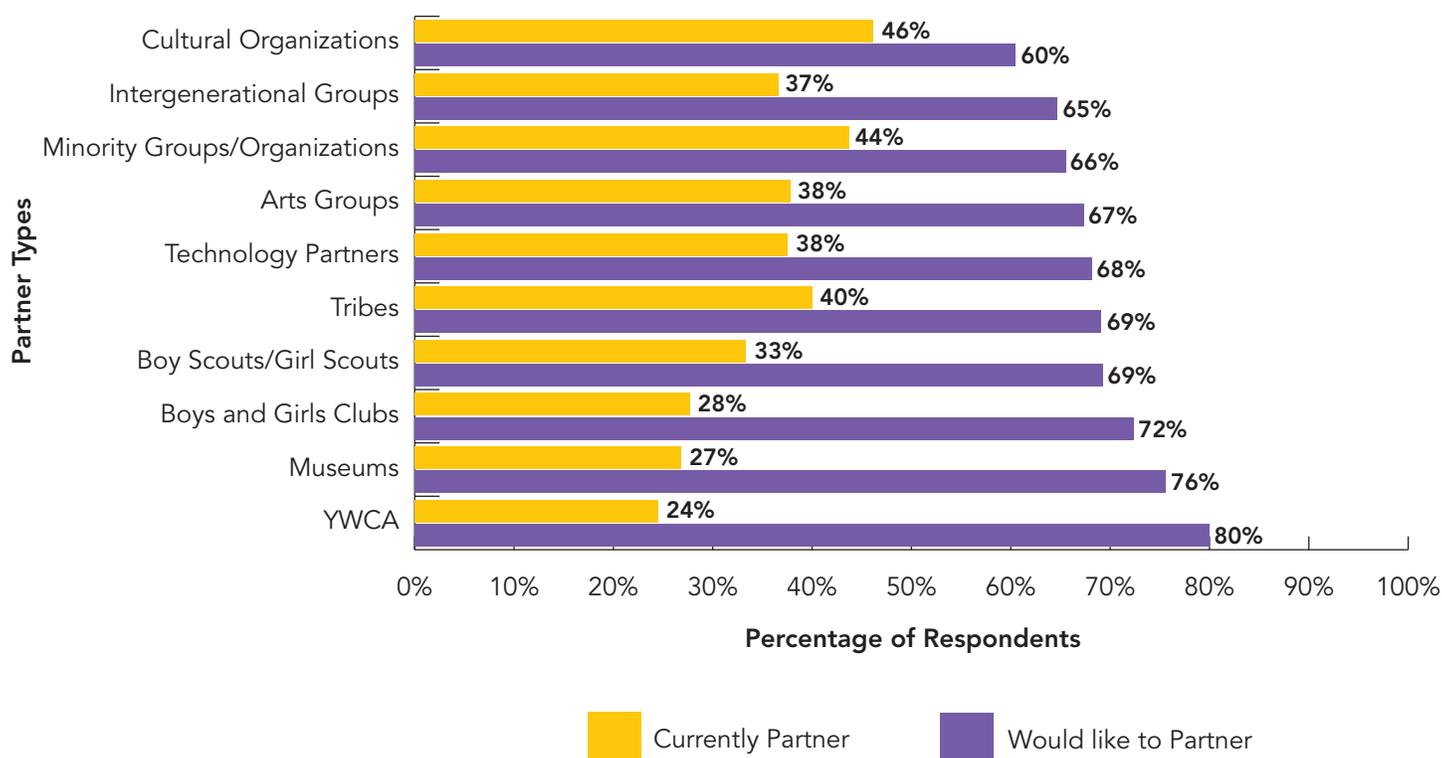
Partnership is already inherent in the work of the Aging Network, but the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that even more opportunities for collaboration lie ahead.

The Aging Network and partner organizations have provided extensive social engagement programming to meet the diverse needs of the populations they serve both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interventions focused on arts and creative expression, health and wellness, volunteer engagement and learning activities mitigate social isolation. These activities provide meaningful interaction and must be sustained. Moving forward, community partnership development is a key priority to continue to expand and enhance these engagement efforts and deliver impact that significantly improves the lives of older adults as they generate new and rich connections.

Top 10 Types of Organizations That Respondents Partner With to Offer Older Adult Social Engagement



Top 10 Types of Organizations Respondents Would Like to Partner With to Offer Older Adult Social Engagement



Endnotes

- i https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp_foundation/2012_PDFs/AARP-Foundation-Isolation-Framework-Report.pdf
- ii <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22710744>
- iii <http://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/148147>
- iv <https://doi.org/10.17226/18951>
- v <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28553785/>
- vi <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16648391/>
- vii <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23362501/>
- viii <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7403030/>
- ix <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hpb20200622.253235/full/>
- x <https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/full-report-caregiving-in-the-united-states-01-21.pdf>
- xi <https://connect2affect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Pandemic-Effect-A-Social-Isolation-Report-AARP-Foundation.pdf>
- xii <https://connect2affect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Pandemic-Effect-A-Social-Isolation-Report-AARP-Foundation.pdf>
- xiii <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4229893/>
- xiv <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6331422/>
- xv <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-Creativity-and-Aging-Cohen-study.pdf>
- xvi <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22579043/>
- xvii <https://www.norc.org/PDFs/Maintaining%20Physical%20and%20Mental%20Well/ESandNARReportNarrative.pdf>
- xviii <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2015/caregivers-of-older-adults-focused-look.pdf>
- xix <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5848758/>
- xx https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6924e2.htm?s_cid=mm6924e2_w
- xxi <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/1/2019378118>

Acknowledgements

This data brief was produced by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), the lead organization for engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults. n4a administers engAGED with funding from the U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL). engAGED is guided by a **Project Advisory Committee** with representatives from national organizations and resource centers who identify and share social engagement insights from their fields of expertise.

The engAGED Project Advisory Community consists of the Administration for Community Living (ACL), American Association of Service Coordinators, American Library Association, RUSA/RSS-Library Services to an Aging Population Committee, Arts for the Aging, Diverse Elders Coalition, Generations United, Independent Living Research Utilization and the National Center for Aging and Disability at TIRR Memorial Hermann Research Center, National Alliance for Caregiving, National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs, National Council on Aging, National Indian Council on Aging, National Recreation and Park Association, National Resource Center for Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS), SHIP National Technical Assistance Center, SMP National Resource Center and YMCA of the USA. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, serves as the Project Research Advisor. A special thanks is extended to ACL Project Officer Sherri Clark and the engAGED Project Advisory Committee for their guidance and support in the development of this poll and data brief.

About n4a

The National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) is a 501(c)(3) membership association representing America's national network of 622 Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs) and providing a voice in the nation's capital for the more than 260 Title VI Native American aging programs. n4a's primary mission is to build the capacity of our members so they can help older adults and people with disabilities live with dignity and choices in their homes and communities for as long as possible. Learn more at www.n4a.org.



advocacy | action | answers on aging



Funder Acknowledgement

This project was supported, in part, by grant number 90EECC0002, from the Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC 20201. Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration for Community Living policy.