



To: Governors' Offices

From: The National Governors Association

Date: August 7, 2020

Re: Strategies to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness During COVID-19

As governors continue efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and reopen the economy, the psychological toll of the pandemic remains a critical challenge. This resource provides a review of the impact of social isolation and loneliness, strategies governors and private sector entities have taken to address these challenges, and an appendix with additional resources.

The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness

The negative impacts of COVID-19 are being felt across the country, affecting millions through [increased](#) unemployment, housing and food instability, and overall financial distress. COVID-19 is also creating conditions for increased social isolation and loneliness as stay-at-home orders, distancing protocols and other aspects of the coronavirus response limit interpersonal connections. Social isolation and loneliness were a [growing challenge](#) prior to the pandemic, and early [data](#) suggest COVID-19 is exacerbating the issue, with findings of increased loneliness and associated depression in [some studies](#) as high as 30 percent. Challenges are particularly acute for certain populations, such as [older adults](#) and [young adults](#) (e.g. Generation Z), who have historically reported higher rates of social isolation and loneliness. These subjective struggles are linked to a multitude of health problems, including [heart disease](#), [high blood pressure](#), and [increased risk](#) of depression, cognitive decline, dementia, and [mortality](#). These potential impacts compound broader worry and stress related to COVID-19, which have already been [associated with](#) reduced sleep quality, worsening health conditions, and increased intake of alcohol and drugs. While some recent [surveys](#) suggest resilience among certain communities, more data are needed to fully understand both the immediate and long-term effects of COVID-19 on social isolation and loneliness. Addressing these persistent challenges will be critical to improving health and wellbeing looking forward.

State Efforts to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness

Though governors have begun phased reopening of their states, social interactions are still significantly restricted, and, for many Americans, social isolation and loneliness will undoubtedly persist. These issues may remain particularly difficult for high-risk individuals who are encouraged to continue to isolate as society reopens for others. Considering these challenges, governors across the nation are taking steps to foster connections and reduce loneliness to help mitigate both the short and potential long-term consequences for health and well-being. Specific actions include using technology to foster



virtual connections, dedicating resources to the issues, creating hotlines, and establishing unique approaches for vulnerable populations. Addressing social isolation and loneliness is one aspect of the broader effort to address mental and behavioral health during the pandemic. Next steps include expanding access to [critical services](#) and adapting [telehealth](#) and [workforce](#) policies to meet increasing and evolving demands.

Hotlines and Other Resources

Many states have adapted existing or have established new hotlines and other resources to help individuals connect with others and access support. The following are selected examples:

- [California](#) – Established a COVID-19 resource page that offers an array of emotional support and referral resources for individuals suffering from loneliness, anxiety, suicidal ideation, domestic violence, and child abuse as a result of the pandemic.
- [Illinois](#) – Started a statewide mental health support line called Call4Calm. The hotline offers free support services for residents experiencing emotional and mental health issues related to the pandemic.
- [Michigan](#) – Began a mental health warm line to connect residents in need of mental health support and social connection to certified peer-support specialists.
- [New Jersey](#) – Adapted New Jersey Mental Health Cares, a behavioral health referral service, to provide support for individuals suffering from anxiety and depression due to COVID-19 by fostering social connection.
- [New York](#) – Added an Emotional Support Line to provide social connection and emotional support to residents experiencing increased anxiety or grief during the pandemic.
- [Texas](#) – Launched a COVID-19 support line that offers trauma-informed care and psychological first aid to individuals in need of emotional connection and other supportive services.
- [Washington](#) – Increased social and emotional support in the state's reopening plan, including resources and support to help residents cope with stress and anxiety, and methods for mitigating social isolation.

Targeted Strategies for Older Adults

Many states have developed targeted strategies for older adults given their elevated risk for social isolation and loneliness. The following are selected examples:

- [California](#) – Created a campaign called Neighbor-to-Neighbor which encourages Californians to connect using the Nextdoor website or application. Volunteers are able to use the site to safely check in on and connect with neighbors, with a focus on older adults.
- [Florida](#) – Launched Project VITAL (Virtual Inclusive Technology for All), which uses virtual technology to relieve social isolation for residents in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. The state has also [delivered](#) over 375 robotic pets to



- socially isolated seniors and adults living with Alzheimer's and related dementia to help combat social isolation and depression.
- [Nevada](#) – Developed a COVID-19 Aging Network Rapid Response Plan, which includes a Social Support Action Team (SSAT) that provides social support to the elderly by increasing their engagement in meaningful social interactions and assessing other social and community needs. SSAT provides one-on-one check-in calls, and small-group peer-support opportunities.
 - [New Mexico](#) – Purchased and distributed 350 tablets to licensed long-term care facilities across the state in an effort to ensure people living in nursing facilities remain connected with their loved ones.

As part of phased reopening, [many states](#) have also adapted guidance to loosen restrictions on visitation at long-term care facilities under certain conditions, such as conducting visits outdoors and under strict physical-distancing protocols. These efforts aim to maintain important protections for these populations, while allowing for increased connections between residents and their loved ones.

Federal and Private Sector Efforts to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness

In addition to state-led efforts, the federal government and private sector have ramped up initiatives to provide resources and support to populations experiencing social isolation and loneliness during the pandemic. The following are selected examples:

- [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD](#) – Developed an application called Covid Coach, which offers resources on coping strategies, wellbeing exercises, and guidance for tackling loneliness. Covid Coach is free to both veterans and the general public.
- [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) – Issued an innovation challenge that will award cash prizes to entities that develop a software platform that increases awareness, access, and use of social engagement technologies and programming to help curtail the impact of loneliness and social isolation.
- [Humana](#) – Launched a public health awareness campaign called Far from Alone in partnership with other organizations. Far from Alone provides tips, resources and information on ways to reduce feelings of loneliness.
- [AARP](#) – Added resources for improving loneliness and fostering connection during the pandemic through their Connect2Affect program, which also offers a free connectedness risk assessment.
- [Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan](#) – Offered a Virtual Well Being program that provides live weekly webinars to support improved well-being and includes a focus on social connectedness.
- [NovuHealth](#) – Created a Healthy Connections program to combat social isolation and loneliness, which includes providing direct outreach to explore emotional and mental health needs and connect individuals to appropriate services.



- [ConnectiCare](#) – Developed the Peace of Mind initiative which uses nurse care managers to deliver telephone-based mental-health services to its most vulnerable members, including those most at risk of being lonely and isolated during the pandemic.

Additional Resources

- [SAMHSA's Tips for Social Distancing and Isolation](#)
- [NAMI COVID-19 Resource and Information Guide](#)
- [WHO Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health](#)
- [VA Mental Health Fact Sheet: Isolation & Loneliness](#)
- [NASEM Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults Opportunities for Health Care Systems](#)
- [AARP Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50](#)
- [Addressing Loneliness in the Era of COVID-19](#)
- [Community Catalyst: Tools to Help Advocates Reduce Social Isolation During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Advancing States: Addressing Social Isolation for Older Adults During the COVID-19 Crisis](#)
- [Commonwealth: Solutions from Around the World: Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation During COVID-19](#)
- [Health Affairs: Social Isolation And Health](#)
- [RHI Hub: Social Isolation and Loneliness - Insights from Rural Clinical Providers and Other Experts](#)
- [Cigna: Our Loneliness and the Workplace: 2020 U.S. report](#)

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