Community Development Counteracts Isolation

Community Development can address the negative health impacts of isolation

Found in both urban and rural communities, social isolation can reduce access to support systems, sense of security and affordable community services, undermining mental and physical health and reducing quality of life. As a growing epidemic in the US, social isolation is as significant a health hazard as alcohol and smoking, and more hazardous than obesity. Social isolation and loneliness increase a person's risk of premature death, is associated with increased risk of dementia, and can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.

Multiple factors can contribute to social isolation: from redlining, discriminatory housing policies, living in rural areas and gentrification, to resource constraints and societal barriers of aging. Isolation disproportionately affects marginalized communities including older adults, minorities, rural residents, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, and immigrants.

When it comes to determining one's health, ZIP Code is more important than genetic code; Community Development is in the ZIP Code improvement business. This series of fact sheets from NeighborWorks America and the Build Healthy Places Network highlights the common aims, evidence base, and what works for health and community development.

The Importance of Community Development in addressing Isolation

- Healthcare sector spends over $1 Trillion each year treating preventable conditions caused by poverty and social inequity. The costs of treating patients experiencing social isolation are comparable to those spent treating chronic conditions. In addition, socially isolated patients with chronic conditions have longer hospital stays and higher readmission rates.

- Healthcare sector is increasingly taking upstream approaches to address social determinants of health (factors such as quality affordable housing, good jobs, access to good food, education, and safe neighborhoods) as a way to improve communities' physical and mental health.

- As an action arm for addressing social determinants of health, community development is in a strong position to cultivate programs, develop infrastructure, and physical and creative spaces that facilitate social connections and cohesion that can mitigate social isolation.

- Community development is often discussed as a key catalyst for improving well-being. Studies revealed that strong social ties can improve mental health, physical health and potentially alleviate increased mortality risks.

Evidence Bites

How Community Development Counteracts Isolation

- **Resourceful Housing:** Intentional design of living spaces can facilitate social interaction such as community rooms, patios, or communal grills. Social programming can be incorporated alongside integrated social services, enabling those who live in rural areas and do not have accessible transportation and resources to obtain timely support.

- **Mixed-age Residences:** Intergenerational housing is designed to connect older and younger people. Mixed-age residences foster interaction through shared common areas including kitchens, dining space and gardens. Mixed-age communities in rural areas are working to counteract isolation worsened by economic decline.

- **Green Spaces:** Accessible green spaces provide key social benefits including community building, engagement and support for all ages. Community development organizations can integrate green spaces with their housing units and assist building green spaces in underserved urban areas.

- **Art & Culture Making:** For communities who experience cultural and language barriers, arts can facilitate culture making as a driver of social cohesion and belonging. Community organizations can support creative projects that strengthen community bonds and reduce isolation in ways that improve mental wellbeing and promote health equity.

- **Community Engagement:** Social Isolation can be reduced through supporting and empowering residents to engage and build community with each other. Community engagement builds social connection and resident leadership across many marginalized groups and underinvested communities, leveraging their collective capacity. Having a say in what happens in their neighborhood can also lead engaged residents to self-identify better health outcomes.

DEFINITIONS

Although the terms loneliness and isolation are used interchangeably, they are not equivalent:

Loneliness is a subjective feeling regarding the perceived quality of a person's relationships, desired levels of social interaction, and whether they feel isolated.

Isolation, defined as a social determinant of health, is objective and can be quantifiable, for example the quality of a person's social network and accessibility to resources.

Isolation can be based on geographical isolation, associated with lack of physical access to community and health services. However, it can also be experienced as social isolation, caused by limited social support and community engagement or social disconnection due to cultural and language barriers.

Evidence In Action

CommonBond

St. Paul, Minnesota

This arts and aging initiative promotes social connection and well-being among senior residents. Working to engage older adults to lifelong learning within CommonBond's affordable housing portfolio, the initiative builds skills and a sense of mastery in art expression, decreasing isolation and improving health. CommonBond brings professional teaching artists into their housing communities to provide classes on storytelling, drawing, singing, and improvisation classes. Participation in the arts based programming increased the social interactions of residents who had previously been isolated in apartments, improving their self-esteem and connections between each other.

Crotona Senior Residences

New York City, New York

Addressing the housing crisis faced by LGBTQ+ seniors, HELP USA's Crotona Senior Residences and LGBT organization SAGE developed the first LGBTQ+ friendly affordable housing with 84 units in the Bronx. LGBTQ+ seniors can face discrimination when seeking housing, and many LGBTQ+ individuals live in states that lack legislative protection from housing discrimination, potentially intensifying the risk of social isolation. As an inclusive housing initiative, Crotona Seniors Residences allocates nearly one third of the unit for homeless seniors. Championed by New York State Homes and Community Renewal, Regions Affordable Housing, and New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the center offers health programs, meals and a computer center.

Unity Park

Richmond, California

Groundwork USA, a national network of community-based organizations that enhances the built environment of underserved communities, mobilized local neighborhoods to design and construct an accessible green space for the public. Transforming an underutilized corridor into Unity Park, residents acknowledge that the collaborative infrastructure enabled greater degree of civic engagement, increased bonding, social capital and reduced isolation and loneliness.

Community Gardens Project

Springfield, Ohio

The $9 million housing project consists of a 50-unit senior living community as the first affordable, pocket neighborhood in Springfield. Addressing the challenge of aging and isolation, the neighborhood is designed to have homes facing one another with front porches, open green spaces and interconnected walking paths. Neighborhood Housing Partnership of Greater Springfield purchased the old community hospital site from Community Mercy Health Partners for $100,000. The project receives support from partners including Buckeye Hope Community Foundation, Ohio Housing Finance Agency, NeighborWorks America and many other agencies.

Where To Start

As you consider possible partnerships with hospitals and healthcare systems, the following questions can help you identify opportunities for collaboration and assess hospital priorities, capacity, and pain points to strengthen your case for partnership:

- What type of hospital are you meeting with and is it part of a bigger healthcare system? Larger systems might have their own Foundations with community investment and be ready for partnership.

- What are the priorities of the healthcare institution as identified through their Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA)? Is social isolation identified as a priority?

- How engaged is the institution's leadership around addressing social determinants of health?

- What are the key healthcare incentives and regulatory requirements at play? e.g. the mission orientation of the institution, a Housing First approach, state level changes (e.g. Medicaid expansion, Whole Person Care Initiative) or city policies.

Tools To Move Forward

- BHPN's Healthcare Playbook for Community Developers helps you build partnerships with hospitals and healthcare systems to improve community health and well-being.

- BHPN's Jargon Buster demystifies common industry jargon across sectors.

- Affordable Housing Investment: A Guide for Nonprofit Hospitals and Health Systems examines nonprofit hospitals and health systems' motivations, opportunities, and barriers to initiate housing investments.

- NeighborWorks America's Community Partnership Readiness Guide.

- BHPN's Crosswalk essay illustrates how community development, health systems and policy makers can form cross-sector partnerships to combat social isolation.

- Learn more about leveraging Arts and Culture for Affordable Housing and Equitable Community Development at a NeighborWorks Training Institute.

- Learn ways to reduce social isolation amongst older adults through NeighborWorks Toolkit "Engaging, Supporting, and Empowering Socially Isolated Older Adults".