



From Aging in the Shadows: Social Isolation Among Seniors in New York City
A Special Report from United Neighborhood Houses of New York, Spring 2005

Executive Summary

As the senior population of the United States swells, and as the movement to assist elderly people to “age in place” gathers momentum, the issue of senior isolation becomes increasingly important. In advancing the laudable objective of helping seniors grow old in their own homes and communities, many experts and advocates stress how important it is for seniors to remain “living independently” and “able to determine their own fate.” At the same time, however, the importance of living *interdependently* as we age must also be acknowledged. If seniors are to avoid institutionalization and premature hospitalization, they require the social, physical, and emotional support of others.

Seniors who are most at risk during emergencies are those who are socially isolated and have nowhere to turn for help. Yet the problems that many seniors experience during emergencies are often the result of factors that were already present, such as physical frailty or lack of a social network. They are living an “emergency in slow motion” every day of their lives, but because it is progressing slowly, no one is coming to their aid. UNH believes we have a shared responsibility for the way our society cares for the elderly, both in and out of emergency situations. Social isolation among seniors is a social problem and requires nothing less than a social solution.

This report poses two questions: What is the role of our society in producing senior isolation, and what can we do as a society to combat it? To answer these questions, we rely on research, interviews, and discussions with service providers, academics, and City government officials. In four parts, this report defines and describes the problem of social isolation among seniors, highlights the particular vulnerability of New York City seniors, gives examples of programs already in place working to combat this problem, and, offers recommendations for change.

Senior Isolation in New York City

Senior isolation results when the conditions necessary for maintaining a functional social network break down. Both individual and societal factors influence the degree to which seniors become isolated. Individual factors include living arrangements, health, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, mobility, gender, and sexual orientation; a host of subjective factors such as individual attitudes and expectations; and the degree to which seniors receive social support from family and friends, participate in activities, and have access to information. Societal factors include the health and cohesion of communities; prejudices such as ageism, racism, sexism, and homophobia; and American society’s emphasis on individual self-sufficiency and remaining independent at all costs.

New York City’s 1.3 million seniors are particularly at risk for living and dying alone. In fact, a citywide formula for disaster is now brewing. Seniors in the City are more likely to be poor, disabled, and to live alone than their counterparts nationwide and many are not getting the help they need. The threat of senior isolation can be found in even the most densely populated areas of New York City; seniors in upper Manhattan, the South Bronx, central Brooklyn, and portions of lower Manhattan are at particular risk. The situation will likely be compounded by the coming demographic surge in the older population. Baby Boomers, who will compose the largest cohort of seniors ever, are even more at risk for social isolation than their parents.

Program Models Working to Combat Senior Isolation

Settlement houses, community centers, and other locally-based service organizations are ideally suited to identify and then help isolated seniors. Their intimate knowledge of their communities, their participation in local networks and associations, and their web of contacts throughout their neighborhoods make them the optimal places to receive and act on information about seniors in distress. In addition, because these organizations offer a range of services in an integrated setting, they are able to address a multitude of causes of senior isolation.

This report describes some model programs that are currently addressing the needs of seniors. Additional support for these varied responses will be necessary to keep up with the population growth. Examples include:

- Integrated program settings, such as those found in most settlement houses and community centers. These organizations address the social and environmental factors affecting seniors *as well as* their individual problems. They often facilitate the social networking and community activities that can address neighborhood problems and keep communities strong.
- Programs that use seniors as resources serving in meaningful roles such as tutors and mentors for children and youth and volunteer companions for other seniors. This ensures that seniors maintain a sense of purpose after retirement while making a real contribution to their communities.
- Programs that bring seniors together, including traditional senior centers as well as alternative senior centers that target specific needs. The success of these programs often depends on the availability of transportation.
- Programs serving seniors where they live, such as Meals on Wheels, home visits, and supportive service programs (SSPs) within naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs).
- Programs to keep seniors connected to others and to social services via technology, including conference calls, telephone reassurance, computerized automatic well-checks, and computer labs with Internet access.
- Case management and geriatric mental health services that are tailored for those seniors with complex and intensive needs who are most at risk of being prematurely institutionalized.
- Social adult day care and elder abuse prevention and support programs, which also target those seniors most at risk.
- Caregiver support, which ensures that existing relationships between seniors and their family caregivers (which is often the first line of defense against isolation) remain intact and beneficial.

Recommendations for Change

This report recommends steps New York City government, along with the nonprofit and private sectors, can take to combat senior isolation:

- To learn more about seniors at risk for social isolation, the City should expand its data collection efforts to better gauge the severity of the problem. A citywide assessment of elderly needs should also be conducted and a voluntary “check-in registry” to track the well-being of seniors should be developed and maintained.
- To strengthen and build on our “sense of community,” the City needs to take the lead in refusing to tolerate ageism and other forms of discrimination toward the elderly. A citywide public education and anti-discrimination campaign might be one way to initiate this effort. The City should also establish a clearly-written,

widely-publicized protocol for individuals to follow when they become concerned about the welfare of a senior in their neighborhood. In addition, a citywide alliance should be assembled to promote and support the development of “elder-friendly” communities.

- To address current service gaps, the City should adequately fund and expand those services that already exist and help nonprofit organizations develop new service models to address emerging needs. The City should also conduct extensive outreach to ensure that seniors are aware of the services available to them.
- To tailor services to the senior population’s unique and changing needs, nonprofit providers need to constantly re-evaluate their approach and consider new, more inclusive methods of outreach and service delivery. The City should be a supportive and flexible partner in this strategic planning process. In particular, plans should be developed to engage seniors in the social service system as early as possible, before a crisis situation occurs or isolation develops.
- To preserve community-based knowledge and relationships between local providers and seniors, the City should continue partnering with nonprofit providers to deliver programming at the neighborhood level.

By addressing the serious concerns outlined in this report, we can take a giant step toward improving life for thousands of New York City seniors who otherwise might be lost in the shadows of a large, impersonal, and complicated city.

ABOUT UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES OF NEW YORK

United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) is the membership organization of independent settlement houses and community centers throughout New York City. Founded in 1919, UNH's membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 36 agencies working at more than 300 sites to provide high quality services and activities to more than a half million New Yorkers each year. UNH supports the work of its member houses through advocacy and public policy research and analysis, technical assistance and funding and by promoting program replication and collaboration among its members.

To view the entire report, please visit www.unhny.org. For more information, please contact Jessica Walker at UNH: 212-967-0322 ext. 330, jwalker@unhny.org.