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Contact: Jessica Walker, Policy Analyst, 212-967-0322 x330, jwalker@unhny.org

First Ever Study of Senior Isolation in NYC Finds Elderly at Significant Risk of “Aging in the Shadows” with No or Limited Social Contact

UNH Study Identifies Several Acute Risk Factors for NYC Seniors vs. U.S. population

Most at-risk are seniors residing in upper Manhattan, central Brooklyn, the South Bronx, and portions of lower Manhattan

NEW YORK (April 22, 2005) --- New York City’s 1.3 million older adults are at great risk of experiencing social isolation and its detrimental effects, according to a new report released by United Neighborhood Houses of New York, the nonprofit membership organization of settlement houses and community centers throughout the City. Social isolation among seniors, commonly referred to as “senior isolation,” occurs when an older adult has such limited social ties that there are few places to turn for help or for social support when the need arises. Moreover, this trend is expected to worsen in the coming decades as a demographic surge in the elderly population takes hold. As a group, baby-boomers harbor even more risk factors for senior isolation than the current generation of seniors; as such, a formula for disaster exists that will require the attention of government, business leaders, and top officials across the nonprofit sector.

“The thought that someone could be alone and unable to receive the help they need in a city of eight million people is very troubling,” said Nancy Wackstein, Executive Director of United Neighborhood Houses of New York. “We hope that our report sheds some much-needed light on those seniors aging all alone in the shadows, and call upon concerned government, business, and nonprofit leaders to focus on a multi-faceted effort to combat such dangerous and unnecessary isolation among older New Yorkers.”

A recent example of the danger posed by senior isolation occurred in Harlem when a 92-year-old woman fell in the shower and was impaled on her bathtub faucet. She was alone in her apartment and had to scream and bang on the walls for help. It took over six hours for neighbors to find her and get her medical attention. News reports indicate that she lived alone, had no children, and had trouble walking. A neighbor said she was too “stubborn” to hire a full-time health aide. Her unfortunate injury resulted from problems that were present prior to the incident: this senior lacked an adequate social network that could have assisted her immediately after the fall or even prevented the accident from happening altogether.

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Key findings from the UNH report, *Aging in the Shadows*:

1. **Risk factors for senior isolation are identified.** 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. These include living arrangements, health, socioeconomic status, mobility, and the degree to which seniors receive social support from family and friends, among others.

2. **Currently, seniors in New York City are at particular risk for experiencing social isolation.** 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.

SEVERAL RISK FACTORS FOR SENIOR ISOLATION: NEW YORK CITY VERSUS THE ENTIRE NATION (2000)

Selected characteristics of persons age 65+	New York City	Nationwide
Living alone, non-institutionalized	32%	28%
With disabilities	46%	42%
Difficulty going outside the home because of disabilities	8%	5%
Below poverty level	18%	10%
Speak English less than "very well"	27%	7%
Never married	11%	4%
Divorced, separated, or widowed	51%	45%

SOURCE: U.S. Census 2000.

3. **The most at-risk communities for senior isolation in the City are identified.** 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. Of course, senior isolation can occur anywhere and should be addressed everywhere.

4. **A formula for disaster is now brewing: baby-boomers in New York City are at unprecedented risk for social isolation.** Baby-boomers, who will compose the largest cohort group of seniors ever, are more at-risk for social isolation than their parents. As such, the already elevated risk in the City is expected to worsen.

5. **There is hope: many worthwhile programs and services are now in place to help some seniors.** Settlement houses, community centers, and other locally-based service organizations are ideally suited to identifying and helping isolated seniors. Many operate programs, which serve seniors in their homes, bring them together to socialize, and address their complex needs, although their scope is often limited due to a lack of funding. Examples include Meals on Wheels service and senior centers.

6. **To build on this hope, policy recommendations are offered.** Recommendations are made to help City government, in collaboration with the nonprofit and private sectors, learn more about seniors at risk of isolation, strengthen and build on our "sense of community" to help these seniors, address current service gaps, tailor services to the senior population's unique and changing needs, and preserve community-based knowledge and relationships in the provision of these services.

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“The threat of senior isolation among the City’s current generation of elders is alarming enough,” says Wackstein. “But with the baby-boom generation on the verge of retirement—a group that will be at unprecedented risk for senior isolation—we must act now to ensure that our elderly population does not fall through the cracks.”

Copies of the executive summary and the full report may be found at www.unhny.org.

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United Neighborhood Houses of New York (UNH) is the membership organization of 36 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.