



Post-Event Summary Report
Prepared for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging
May 20, 2005

◆ Name of Event:	<i>Aging in the Shadows: A Public Forum on Senior Isolation</i>
◆ Date of Event:	Friday, April 22, 2005 (9:30 am – 11:30 am)
◆ Location of Event:	Con Edison Building; 4 Irving Place; New York, NY
◆ Number of Attendees:	Approximately 200 people
◆ Sponsoring Org.:	United Neighborhood Houses
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BACKGROUND

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. 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. For over 85 years, UNH has worked with its members to strengthen families and improve neighborhoods throughout the City. UNH supports the work of its members through advocacy and public policy research and analysis, technical assistance and funding and by promoting program replication and collaboration among its members. Most recently, UNH has worked to shed some much-needed light on the issue of senior isolation and its detrimental effects.

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.

On April 22nd, UNH hosted a public forum to highlight the important issue of social isolation among seniors. The event coincided with the release of UNH’s groundbreaking new report, *Aging in the Shadows: Social Isolation Among Seniors in New York City*. 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. The report concluded that senior isolation will likely increase as the coming demographic surge in the older population takes hold. Baby Boomers, who will compose the largest cohort group of seniors ever, are even more at risk for social isolation than their parents.

ABOUT THE EVENT

To present these alarming findings to the larger community, UNH held a public forum on April 22, 2005 with support from The New Community Trust and Con Edison. At the forum, UNH Executive Director, Nancy Wackstein, gave welcoming remarks; UNH Policy Analyst and the principal author of the report, Jessica Walker, presented the report's key findings; then an esteemed panel responded to the report and took questions from the audience. The panel was comprised of:

- Eric Klinenberg, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology at New York University and author of *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*;
- Edwin Mendez-Santiago, M.S.W., Commissioner of the City Department for the Aging;
- Lloyd Sederer, M.D., Executive Deputy Commissioner for Mental Hygiene at the City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; and,
- Martha Sullivan, D.S.W., Executive Vice President of the Lower Eastside Service Center.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the knowledge gained by preparing the report and from the thoughtful discussion at the resulting public forum, UNH respectfully offers the following recommendations to the White House Conference on Aging. We look forward to working with you to bring about these necessary changes to effectively combat senior isolation.

→ Priority Issue #1: Fostering age-affirming, elder-friendly communities

Communities are the foundation for social life. They are, as sociologist Eric Klinenberg writes, “the soil out of which social networks grow and develop or, alternatively, wither and devolve.” As such, a community has the potential to either promote or combat senior isolation among its residents. The physical characteristics of the community, such as deteriorated sidewalks, lack of public space and parks, high levels of crime, inadequate public transportation, and insufficient community-based programs and services can limit the degree to which individuals interact, thus promoting social isolation. We must work to create age-affirming, elder-friendly communities that prevent and combat isolation by addressing seniors’ basic needs, optimizing their physical and mental health and well-being, promoting their social and civic engagement, and maximizing independence among the frail and disabled.

Barriers

The major barriers to fostering age-affirming, elder-friendly communities include:

- ***Community assets and social capital are not being maximized.***

In recent years, academics have argued that American society is undergoing a process of civic disengagement that is eroding our communal structures (i.e., volunteerism and civic associations). Social capital, such as neighborliness and harboring a “sense of community,” are reportedly declining as a result. Americans are thought to be growing more and more individualistic at the expense of “the glue that holds us together.”

The negative implications are clear: people in need are less willing to reach out for help, and those who do are less likely to find the community support they need. This loss of “generalized reciprocity” often stems from privacy concerns, fear of others, time constraints, declining health, and a lack of community facilities that promote social interaction. In this context, social isolation is an extension of changes occurring throughout our society.

- ***Ageism and other forms of discrimination hinder social integration.***

Opportunities for social integration among older adults are eroded by ageism, defined as “any attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of age or any assignment of roles in society purely on the basis of age.” The elderly are frequently stereotyped and viewed—not as human beings—but as objects so that their rights and opportunities can be more easily denied. It is no wonder some seniors choose self-imposed isolation to avoid these ageist attitudes.

- ***Not enough is known about seniors at risk for social isolation.***

While there is widespread agreement that senior isolation is a major problem, we simply do not know enough about the magnitude and unique characteristics of senior isolation in the United States. As sociologist Eric Klinenberg writes in his notable book *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, “In surveys and censuses isolates and recluses are among the social types most likely to be uncounted or undercounted because those with permanent housing often refuse to open their doors to strangers and are unlikely to participate in city or community programs in which they can be tracked.” It is difficult to effectively help seniors when we simply do not know who they are or what they need.

Proposed Solutions

Therefore be it resolved by the 2005 White House Conference on Aging to work to foster age-affirming, elder-friendly communities by:

- Raising public awareness about senior isolation, its detrimental effects, and what can and should be done to combat it.
- Expanding data collection efforts in order to better gauge the severity of senior isolation.
- Engaging in a thoughtful planning process to proactively develop age-affirming, elder-friendly communities throughout the country.

- Facilitating assessments of community needs in order to fully understand what is necessary to help turn them into age-affirming, elder-friendly communities.
- Assisting cities and other local communities to establish protocols for individuals to follow when they become concerned about the welfare of a senior in their neighborhood.
- Working to combat ageism and other forms of discrimination toward the elderly, perhaps by initiating public education and anti-discrimination campaigns.

➔ **Priority Issue #2: Supporting neighborhood-based service providers in their efforts 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. Many seniors who might otherwise be socially isolated have been helped significantly by these organizations, which often act as surrogate families for those who no longer have their own. This invaluable work must be supported whenever possible.

Barriers

The major barriers to supporting neighborhood-based service providers in their efforts to combat senior isolation include:

• ***Service gaps still exist.***

Despite the many exemplary service models currently in place, the nation remains ill prepared for the coming surge in the elderly population. Funding for most social service programs for seniors has remained relatively flat for several years. New money to cover increasing costs, such as salaries, rents, and insurance premiums, has seldomly been made available. Some programs have reached, or exceeded, their allocated funding to serve clients and have stopped doing outreach to locate seniors in need. As a result, it is hard to know how many seniors are not receiving the help that they require. This can become a vicious cycle where programs are going underutilized even though there is actually a great need for them.

• ***Not enough has been done to tailor service approaches to the changing elderly demographic.***

The next wave of seniors is expected to be even more socially isolated than the current generation. This requires not merely an expansion of services but a new, more inclusive approach, tailored to the unique characteristics of the Baby Boomers. Some of the current approaches to service delivery can be alienating for seniors who are made to feel like outsiders or “needy clients” when partaking in programs. Programs must meet the needs of a more diverse senior population. Seniors who do not feel welcome at a program are less likely to use services. In addition, many seniors do not feel as though they should seek out

services in the first place because they do not see themselves as “seniors,” or at least the type of people they believe would use “senior services.”

- ***Many government agencies are moving toward a business model of providing programs and services for the elderly.***

Generally speaking, government is increasingly moving toward a market-based model of service delivery. The result is that “the bottom line” is increasingly affecting the quality and depth of the services. Some agencies are turning away from non-profit providers and using for-profit companies to operate less expensive human services. In addition, an expectation often exists that seniors will be active consumers of these services. This phenomenon is troubling because it implies that people who need help are either already receiving it or do not want it. This is not always the case; many isolated seniors do not know how to get help, do not have the means to do so, and/or have subjective reasons for not utilizing the services that they desperately need.

Proposed Solutions

Therefore be it resolved by the 2005 White House Conference on Aging to offer more support to neighborhood based service providers in their efforts to combat senior isolation by:

- Continuing to partner with nonprofit providers to deliver programming for seniors at the neighborhood level. Such organizations offer compassionate services tailored to a specific community and are often the most appropriate providers to identify and help isolated seniors.
- Dedicating additional resources to adequately fund and expand the effective neighborhood based services that already exist to combat social isolation among seniors.
- Developing new neighborhood based service models to address emerging needs among the elderly, especially in the areas of caregiver support and geriatric mental health.
- Facilitating extensive outreach to ensure seniors are aware of the services available to them.
- Developing strategies to help service providers to engage seniors in the social service system as early as possible, before a crisis situation occurs or isolation develops.
- Allowing service providers the needed flexibility to amend their programs and meet the unique and changing needs of their community’s senior population.