



South Carolina Institute of
Medicine & Public Health

SOUTH CAROLINA OFFICE OF
RURAL HEALTH

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POLICY BRIEF | APRIL 2024

Social Connectivity among Older Adults in Dillon County



About the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health

The South Carolina Institute of Medicine & Public Health (IMPH) is an independent entity serving as an informed nonpartisan convener around the important health issues in our state, providing evidence-based information to inform health policy decisions. For more information on IMPH publications, initiatives and events, please visit www.imph.org.

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For questions or more information about this report, please email info@imph.org.

Authors

Amelia Wilks

Project Coordinator

South Carolina Institute of Medicine
and Public Health

Erin Haire, JD

Associate Director

South Carolina Institute of Medicine
and Public Health

Report Graphic Design

Rebecca Rebl

Flock and Rally

Editors

Maya H. Pack, MS, MPA

Executive Director

South Carolina Institute of Medicine
and Public Health

Yair Centeno

Director of Operations

South Carolina Institute of Medicine
and Public Health

Acknowledgments

Shelia Welch

Director

Vantage Point, Pee Dee Area on Aging and
Disability Resource Center

Background

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people experienced social isolation due to physical distancing guidelines put in place as a preventative measure.¹ Throughout this time, people began to feel what many older adults have been facing for years due to social isolation factors such as declining health, spousal death and transportation issues.² Older adults who live alone, who have lost a spouse or who have lost some independence due to other factors are more likely to experience social isolation. Nearly a quarter of the older adult population is considered socially isolated.³

In 2020, nearly 19% of South Carolina's population was 65 years and older.⁴ In Dillon County, 17% of the population is 65 years and older.⁵ The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 24% of South Carolina's population will be composed of older adults by 2035.⁶

Social isolation is an often overlooked social determinant of health, yet social connections are essential to mental and physical health.⁷ Without social relationships, there is an increased chance of premature death.⁸ There is a strong correlation between social isolation and health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, depression, poor cognitive functioning and dementia.⁹ Social isolation is also linked to suicide risk and unintentional deaths caused by drug and alcohol misuse.¹⁰ Some older adults consume alcohol as a coping mechanism that leads to medical, psychiatric and physical problems. Older adults who are unmarried or facing homelessness are more likely to use negative coping mechanisms to deal with social isolation.¹¹

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Supporting Existing Services

Local decision makers can mitigate some level of social isolation by improving access to services and communication technology. It is critical to collaborate with stakeholders who are already working with the older adult population.¹² The South Carolina Department on Aging (SCDOA) has divided the state into ten regional Area Agencies on Aging (AAA).¹³ These districts provide community-wide coordination of services within the region. Housed within CareSouth Carolina, a community health center, the Pee Dee Area Agency on Aging serves Dillon County through partnerships with local contractors that provide direct services for older adults. AAAs are tasked to collaborate with community and business leaders and elected officials to develop a coordinated service delivery system.¹⁴ County leadership should work with AAAs to determine gaps in services and resources and determine how to fulfill the county's aging population's needs.

In *Addressing Social Isolation in Older Adults as a Determinant of Health*, released in June 2023 by the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health (IMPH) and SCDOA, a recommendation was made for developing funding models to support increased programming to foster social connectedness within communities.¹⁵ Counties can provide financial support to community senior centers to develop and expand programs that foster social connections. The Dillon County Council on Aging provides programs and services for older adults in the county, including local transportation, group and home-delivered meals and social and recreational activities.¹⁶ Experts believe that community support resources like these can build resilient communities that combat loneliness. Evidenced through the Village-to-Village Network, a member-based nonprofit organization working to build community among older adults, knowing as few as six neighbors reduces the likelihood of feeling lonely.¹⁷

Community support resources can build resilient communities that combat loneliness.



Expanding Access to Technology

Information and communication technologies have been identified as significant contributors to maintaining social connections.¹⁸ During the pandemic, researchers concluded that technology could improve and maintain social connectedness and emotional support.¹⁹ As of 2021, 22 million older adults in the United States did not have internet access in their homes.²⁰ County officials should continue to invest and advocate for broadband investments to develop the necessary infrastructure that will provide older adults with internet access so they can take advantage of social opportunities online. When developing infrastructure, it is important to keep

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affordability for residents at the forefront; currently, only half of South Carolina's residents can obtain broadband internet for \$60 per month or less.²¹ County government can seek out programs that help relieve the financial burden of broadband internet. In 2023, Orangeburg and Bamberg Counties participated in the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Affordable Connectivity Program.²² The program served households whose income was at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level or if a member was a Medicaid or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipient.²³

In 2022, Spectrum, an internet service provider, announced that they would be installing broadband infrastructure for nearly 95% of Dillon County.²⁴ This multimillion-dollar investment was partially funded by the Dillon County Council through American Rescue Plan Act funds.²⁵ According to the South Carolina Broadband Dashboard, as of March 2023, 20% of households in Dillon County remain underserved in terms of broadband access.²⁶ To continue existing infrastructure development, local elected officials should continue to work with and alongside the South Carolina Broadband Office (SCBO) established by the South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff (SCORS). SCBO was created to coordinate with federal, state and local entities to continue the development of broadband infrastructure.²⁷ Office personnel are equipped to engage and educate elected and appointed county leaders to maximize resources to expand broadband.²⁸ This office also manages grants received by the state to fund broadband expansion, which funds internet service providers so that they can install the necessary infrastructure in communities.

Community-based organizations and libraries have developed training sessions for older adults to improve their confidence in their ability to use computers and software. To reduce loneliness, these individuals must have the ability to use the internet safely, meaning avoiding data sharing and falling victim to fraud. Utilizing existing community pillars, such as county libraries, that have a reputation of being inclusive to all community members will create a receptive environment where all ages can learn.²⁹ County leadership could consider providing financial or in-kind resources, such as volunteers or equipment, for county library locations to host and administer a series of in-person computer classes for older adults. This will provide people with the necessary tools to utilize the internet safely.

Conclusion

There are many ways that county and municipal government can help ensure the older population has opportunities for meaningful social engagement. An increased level of investment by local government into existing programs that reduce isolation is an excellent place to start. Utilization of programs and funding made available by existing state entities and advocacy groups working in the area is also critical as our state's population continues to age.

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Please direct any questions to: info@imph.org

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1301 Gervais Street
Suite 300
Columbia, SC 29201

 @SC.IMPH  @SC_IMPH

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