

Findings & Recommendations from the
Social Isolation Subcommittee of the
Senior Millage Allocation Committee

March 5, 2021

Defining the Issue

Loneliness and social isolation among older adults have been identified as leading issues among those 60 years and older for decades, but the recent COVID-19 pandemic has brought the social well-being of older adults to the forefront of the public mind. From these concerns, the Senior Millage Allocation Committee formed a Social Isolation subcommittee, tasked with researching the topic and developing specific and appropriate recommendations for the Senior Services office, its vendors, and the Senior Millage Allocation Committee.

As part of their efforts, the subcommittee heard from local experts about their views on loneliness and social isolation. Professor Maureen Mickus, with Western Michigan University, was particularly helpful with her presentation on defining terms, and efforts she has seen around the world that may be worth replicating in our local community.

For the purpose of this report, loneliness is defined as “an excruciating painful emotion evoked by the realization of a lack of meaningful contact with others” or “a discrepancy between desired and actual contact with others.” Social isolation, while similar, is defined as “the absence or only having a small number of meaningful human relationships.”

Social isolation and loneliness are important to address among older adults because these conditions can lead to depression and other health problems. When an older adult experiences both depression and feelings of loneliness, combined with the physical limitations that can accompany aging, they can find themselves at increased risk of premature death, confusion, or worsening health conditions as they neglect self-care, consume a poor diet, and practice low medication compliance.

Social isolation is particularly difficult to combat, as the number one way to stay engaged and connected is to develop and maintain meaningful personal relationships. As older adults retire; move to new communities; experience the death of a spouse, children and/or close friends; or find themselves unable to do activities they once enjoyed due to worsening health, they lose those connections and interactions that come naturally throughout day-to-day life experiences. In 1985, a study found that 10% of Americans lack a close confidant. A similar study was repeated in 2016 and showed that nearly 25% of Americans lack a close confidant. These two studies show that social connections are decreasing in our society.

While those who are socially isolated are at higher risk for loneliness and depression, we cannot assume every socially isolated person is lonely, or that every person who is surrounded by people is content. This is especially important because since the early 1900s, the number of older adults living alone has increased, largely due to gains in life expectancy. Nationally, over 40% of people age 89 or older, live alone.

Though loneliness is not solely an older adult issue, risk factors of loneliness include advanced age, loss of life partners through death or divorce, poor health, reduced mobility, and cognitive

impairment. All these factors are more likely to be experienced by someone who is 60 years or older.

Social isolation and loneliness for some older adults has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the need to be social distancing and sheltering in place. While older adults are at heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing complications from the virus, the closures of restaurants, senior centers, libraries, and other recreation centers have left many older adults feeling alienated and alone. Because of these reasons, the Social Isolation subcommittee has developed the following statement of philosophy and list of recommendations.

Statement of Philosophy

The Social Isolation subcommittee believes loneliness and social isolation pose a very real threat to Calhoun County seniors, age 60 and over. The COVID-19 pandemic has made addressing these issues more important than ever. To best use resources, the subcommittee has identified the following three pillars to build recommendations around:

- Encourage seniors helping seniors
- Explore local solutions
- Strengthen and promote human connection

It is also important to the subcommittee that the Senior Services office does not replicate any existing services currently provided by other aging service providers.

Recommendations

1) Recruit and support Senior Ambassadors: Local Senior Outreach Volunteers

Develop and support a network of local senior outreach volunteers at the township/local level. Volunteers will provide resource information and referral to seniors in their townships and communities, support the organization and implementation of programming, serve as a resource to township supervisors and other local officials, and assist the Senior Services Office to identify current needs and emerging issues for older adults at the local level. The subcommittee is proposing that part of the specialist's job description includes the oversight and recruitment of these volunteers.

2) Senior Wellness Action Teams (SWAT)

Organize and coordinate local Senior Wellness Action Teams (SWAT) that can assist older adults with one-time tasks or projects, particularly those that are time sensitive. Examples could include helping an older adult move to a new apartment; conducting a major house cleaning; helping with downed tree limbs or other property issues; or reorganizing an apartment to make it wheelchair accessible. Teams may consist of local church members, service organizations, college student groups, scouts, and/or other community entities. While the Senior Millage offers twenty-two programs that cover a wide variety of services, there are still gaps in those services and SWAT groups would help to cover these gaps as much as possible.

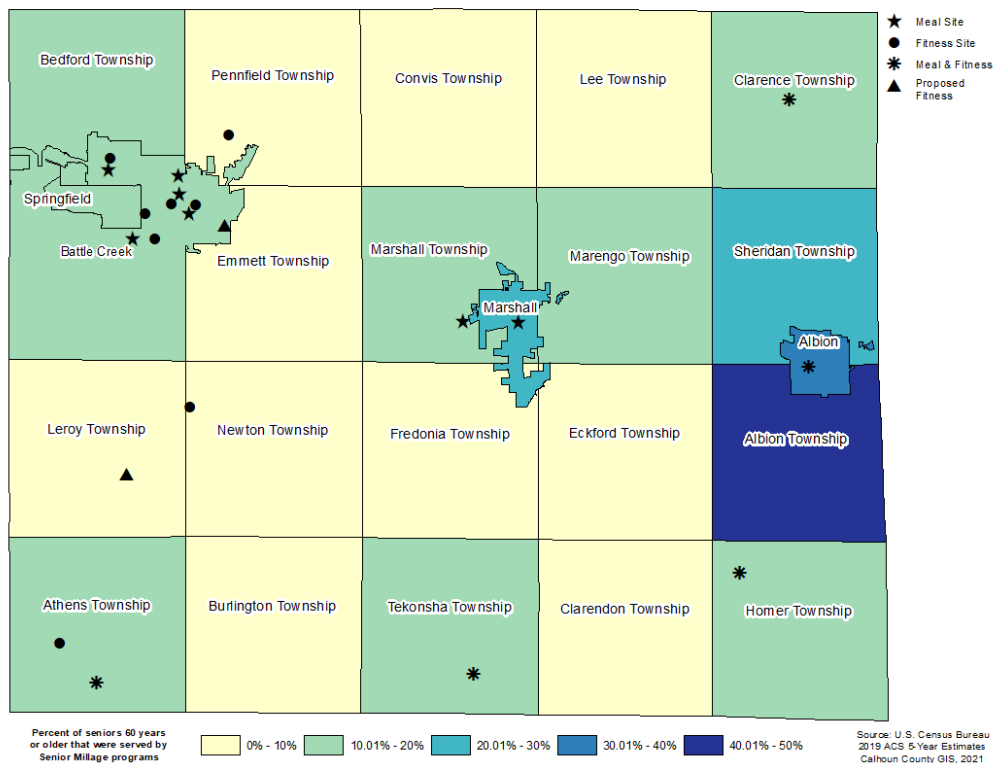
3) Birthday Recognition

Building off the success of recognizing Calhoun County Centenarians, those older adults who have reached the age of 99 and over, the subcommittee recommends recognizing the birthdays of those 90 and older. Emphasis would be given to those living in townships that currently have low utilization of senior services. Based on 2019 numbers of older adults served this includes Convis, Fredonia, Lee, Leroy, and Pennfield townships. This program could function as a pipeline for identifying centenarians for future recognition events.

4) Work with other providers of aging services to host and schedule Outdoor Events

Explore opportunities to provide group social interactions within the township/local community such as outdoor music events, exercise, and/or educational programming. As COVID-19 vaccine efforts ramp up, it will still be several months before it is safe to gather in large groups in-person, but meeting outside, in a way that is socially distanced, holds promise. The recent passage of the Parks Millage could hold promise for future partnerships.

During the summer of 2020, Senior Fitness & Fun, administered by Senior Health Partners, converted their indoor, seated exercise classes to walking clubs. This may be something to continue when the weather allows in 2021. The following map identifies current sites for exercise and congregate meals, and the two locations that are being considered for new programming when COVID restrictions ease: the Leroy Township Hall and Kingdom Builders in the Post Addition of the City of Battle Creek. The data points are overlaid the 2020 Seniors Served map, with the legend at the bottom explaining the different colors. A list of current sites can be found in Appendix A.



- 5) Encourage intergenerational relationships to bring young people and older adults together in joint programming

Develop opportunities for intergenerational relationships and connections, such as matching area high school students with older adults in their neighborhoods. Loneliness is not solely a problem experienced by older adults, as demonstrated by a large 2016 study of college students that found 30% of those surveyed felt “very lonely” in the past two weeks. Students could assist with chores around the house, using technology, or simply stop by for social visits. This program could loosely model the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program. Helping younger generations to see aging as a normal process and something to look forward too would make strides in reducing attitudes of ageism. A similar program, called Legacy of Learning, was in place in the late 1990s/early 2000s. High school students volunteered to provide six weeks of in-person, one-on-one training to older adults at several locations in and around the City of Marshall. The program was discontinued when funding ran out after five years, but it is estimated that over 200 high school students participated over the course of the program. Another avenue for intergenerational programming could be replicating Northern Michigan University’s “Make a Difference Day” leaf raking campaign. A common request that the Senior Services office receives in the fall is for leaf raking. While the Handy Helper program, run by Senior Services of Southwest Michigan, can do one-time yard clean-up, the demand is bigger than the capabilities of one staff person. Modeling after the university, the Senior Services office would lead the efforts for volunteers to spend one day assisting seniors with leaf raking in the late fall. Whether this is in conjunction with the local colleges (Kellogg Community College and Albion College), high schools, service organizations, or the Boy Scouts are all potential options that could be explored.

- 6) Focus on Sub-Populations including outreach to men and racial minorities

Initiate activities and programs focused on specific groups of older adults and engage older adults in the planning and implementation of these programs. Examples could be replicating the popular Men’s Shed program, or Tools on Tuesday to target older men. One subpopulation to consider reaching is the Burmese community in Battle Creek. While this group is still relatively young, they will continue to age and having trusted ambassadors already in place will assist them with utilizing Senior Millage programming, particularly those programs aimed at social isolation and loneliness. Another subpopulation to consider reaching are those older adults who do not have children or grandchildren, as these are people often at highest risk for loneliness, depression, and social isolation.

As COVID restrictions ease, congregate meals sites will reopen, and several may transition into restaurant dining programs. National studies have shown that restaurant dining programs are more popular among younger seniors and men.

- 7) Explore Technology – How can technology reduce social isolation and loneliness and how can the digital divide be addressed to teach older adults to be comfortable with technology

Support expanded use of GrandPads and other technology to enhance the ability of isolated adults to stay connected with family, friends, health care providers, etc. while understanding

that technology is not a complete replacement for in-person interaction. Continue to advocate for better broadband access and cell service across the county.

Implementation

To make measurable progress towards these recommendations, the subcommittee is recommending that the first item to tackle be the recruitment and training of Senior Services ambassadors in each municipality. It is recommended that the job duties similar to those of an outreach coordinator be rolled into the current specialist position to oversee these ambassadors. As the Senior Services office hires an administrative assistant after nearly a year with that position vacant, several of the specialist's current tasks will be off-loaded to the new hire, allowing for a seamless transition. This will further assist in clearly delineating between the three staff positions in the office.

It is expected that the new administrative assistant will be hired and well into their first months of training by May 1st, which will allow the current specialist to begin the rollout of the township recruitment campaign by June 1st. To assist with efforts, Commissioner Gary Tompkins will lead the efforts in his district, which encompasses the east side of Calhoun County, and will also work to rally his fellow commissioners in identifying older adults in their own districts who may be interested in volunteering with the Senior Services office.

Moving forward, as the outreach coordinator responsibilities grow, creating a fourth part-time position could be considered, perhaps as early as the 2022 budget process. In the meantime, Senior Services staff will work to create a job description for these township ambassadors.

Once ambassadors are identified, training would be held to explain the ambassadors' purpose, the ins and outs of Senior Millage, and the subcommittee's recommendations would be shared. It is expected that regular trainings would be held on a monthly or quarterly basis to keep ambassadors up to date in their knowledge, and to use the group dynamic to problem solve around particularly difficult cases. Extra attention would be given to those representing Convis, Fredonia, Lee, Leroy and Pennfield townships, as these municipalities saw less than 10% of their seniors served in 2019. Due to COVID-19, several more townships saw decreased service in 2020, but the emphasis of these five remain. Maps showing seniors served by municipality can be found in Appendix B.

The ambassadors would then work to identify possible SWAT members in their area and recruit these people to be available on an as-needed basis when immediate needs arise that are unable to be addressed by one of the twenty-two programs funded by Senior Millage. One possible example could be a senior who needs to move and is unable to do so on their own, has no family or friends capable of helping, and cannot afford a moving company. Another example would be for SWAT groups to plan to volunteer for the Make a Difference Day leaf raking effort.

As ambassadors and SWAT groups are put into place, the outreach coordinator/specialist and ambassadors could then work on the remaining tasks of birthday recognition for those 90 and older, planning safe outdoor programming, creating intergenerational programming, identifying subpopulations in each community that need specialized attention, and figuring out what technological solutions may be feasible in their area. In this way, the Senior Services office will ensure buy-in from the ambassadors, and give ambassadors a voice in projects they undertake.

Resources

Men's Sheds: <https://usmenssheds.org/>

Campaign to End Loneliness: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

Northern Michigan University's Make a Difference Day: <https://nmu.edu/studentenrichment/make-difference-day?q=make-difference-day>

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System by the National Academic of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

Appendix A: Current Congregate Meal & Exercise Sites

Congregate Meals

Bedford Manor, Battle Creek
Cherryhill Manor, Battle Creek
Clarence Township, Albion
Forks Senior Center, Albion
Heritage Commons, Marshall
Homer Presbyterian Church, Homer
Lakeview Meadows, Battle Creek
Lighthouse Events Center, Athens
Marshall House, Marshall
Springview Towers, Marshall
Tekonsha Township Hall, Tekonsha
Westbrook Place, Marshall

Exercise Sites

Battle Creek Y Center, Battle Creek
Christ United Methodist Church, Battle Creek
Clarence Township, Albion
Forks Senior Center, Albion
Hickory Hills Village, Battle Creek
Homer Presbyterian Church, Homer
Kool Family Community Center, Battle Creek
Lighthouse House Events, Athens
Marshall Trinity Episcopal Church, Marshall
Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi, Athens
Tekonsha Township Hall, Tekonsha
Trinity Neighborhood Center, Battle Creek
Village of Mill Creek, Battle Creek

Appendix B: Seniors Served by Municipality Maps, 2019 vs. 2020

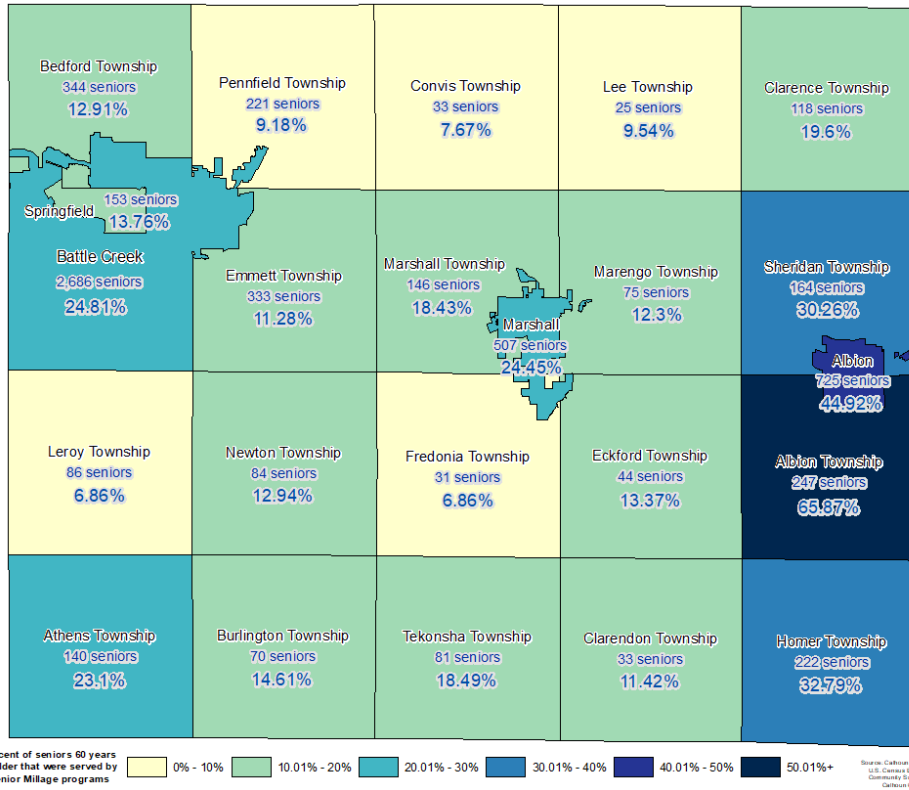


Figure 1 Seniors Served by Senior Millage Programming 2019; 6,568 seniors; 20.25% countywide

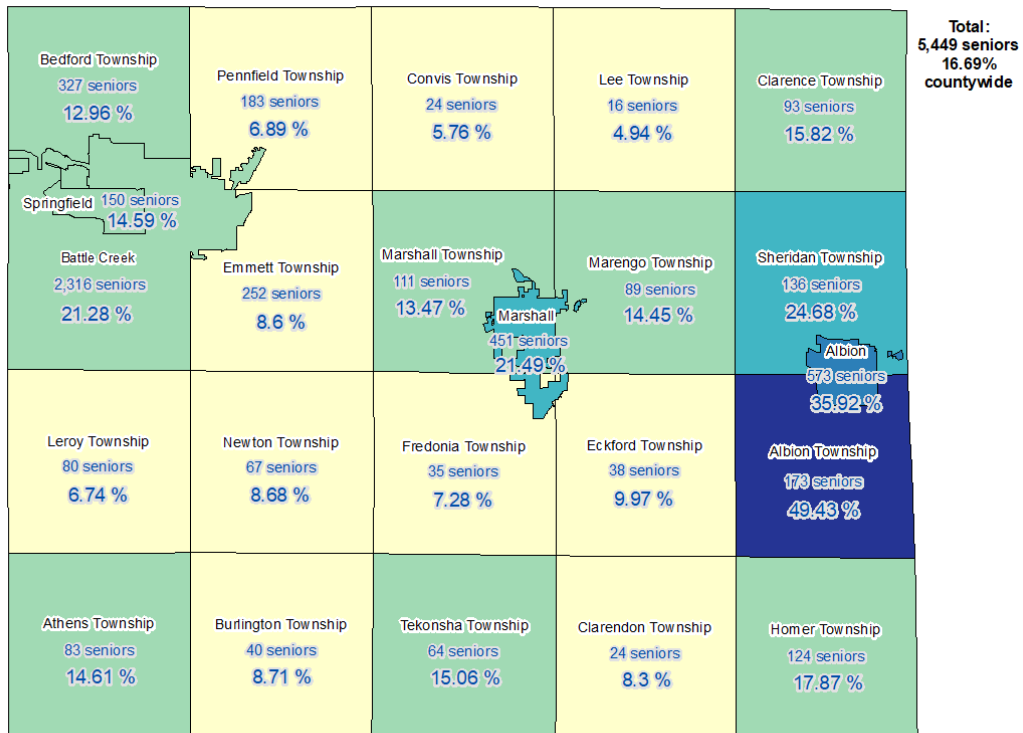


Figure 2 Seniors Served by Senior Millage Programming 2020; 5,449 seniors; 16.69% countywide