

engAGED

The National Resource Center  
for Engaging Older Adults

# WHAT WORKS: Social Engagement Innovations and Best Practices



*Highlights from the Innovations Hub*

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## Introduction

**engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults** is a national effort working to expand and enhance the Aging Network's capacity to promote and offer social engagement opportunities that help older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers thrive. Administered by **USAgging**, funded by the **U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL)** and guided by a **Project Advisory Committee**, engAGED identifies and disseminates best practices and emerging trends, and develops resources and tools that the Aging Network and other organizations can customize to successfully engage older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers in their communities, thereby reducing the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness.

As part of our work, engAGED launched a Call for Social Engagement Innovations in January 2021 to identify innovative social engagement programs and practices. The engAGED **Social Engagement Innovations Hub** launched in July 2021 to showcase many successful social engagement programs and practices that had been submitted in the Call for Innovations via a searchable database and facilitate sharing and replication among Aging Network and partner organizations.

**What Works: Social Engagement Innovations and Best Practices** features 11 of the successful social engagement programs currently included in the Innovations Hub. These examples employ a variety of social engagement interventions and tap into an array of partners to reach older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers in rural, suburban and urban areas. The summaries in this publication reflect program status as of September 2021.

As the 2021 Call for Innovations was launched in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, several of the programs highlighted in this publication and in the Innovations Hub were developed in response to the pandemic. Many of the lessons learned from these programs will be applicable as organizations implement hybrid models of programs and services that offer both virtual and in-person social engagement opportunities.

We hope this publication and the Innovations Hub will inspire your efforts to combat the social isolation affecting older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers in your communities by promoting meaningful social engagement.

**Interested in accessing more social engagement program examples than what is highlighted in this publication?**

Check out the Innovations Hub at [www.engagingolderadults.org/hub!](http://www.engagingolderadults.org/hub!)

*New examples are added on an ongoing basis.*



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# At Home with JABA

Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) | Charlottesville, VA

## Program Description

The Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) created the At Home with JABA program in March 2020 to bring JABA's Community Senior Centers' (CSC) engagement opportunities into the homes of older adults. The program began with Facebook Live events, mailing of activity packets, weekly check-in phone calls and home-delivered meals for CSC participants. Zoom has been incorporated into the At Home with JABA program and an activity calendar is sent monthly to participants. The calendar includes bingo three times per week, weekly exercise programs, biweekly nurse presentations and a variety of presentations from JABA partners and volunteers. All programs can be accessed via the telephone or internet. JABA reported that the program reaches more than 300 CSC participants and 200 home-delivered meal clients.

At Home with JABA offers programming to meet the needs of all older adults. Monthly activity packet mailings that include art activities, brain games, recipes and craft kits provide participants with new ideas, opportunities and experiences that promote brain health, along with physical and mental health. Volunteers, who range from high school students to older adults, facilitate activities, conduct performances and presentations and lead group discussions. Serving a predominantly rural area where internet access can be difficult, JABA volunteers conduct conference calls several times each week and send monthly mailings to reach older adults with limited internet access or discomfort with technology. To help older adults who do have internet access increase their comfort with technology, facilitators added a How to Zoom class and all At Home with JABA participants receive a packet of "how to" technology sheets covering email, Zoom and Facebook. A technology help line is also being explored in which older adults can call and receive assistance on technical issues. With in-person activities resuming, At Home with JABA is collaborating with on-site CSCs for different programs, such as exercise classes, where participants can engage with in-person attendees.

## Partners

Several JABA departments help with presentations. For example, the volunteer department established a committee of volunteers to lead bingo activities, increase volunteer engagement and develop relationships with participants. Partners outside of JABA include medical students from the University of Virginia, as well as hospice, parks and recreation staff, and triad organizations (partnerships between law enforcement, older adult organizations and the community).

*"Crystal I just want to tell you, when we have these activities on the phone or with Zoom it feels like you are here in the living room with me and we are just chatting. I really appreciate all that you do."*

## Outcomes

The At Home with JABA calendar is mailed monthly, reaching more than 300 CSC participants and 200 home-delivered meal clients, who are isolated and often without social supports. Participation in activities is tracked in a web-based data management system, so JABA can track participation data.

## Lessons Learned

JABA staff have found that it is important to collect information from participants in the beginning regarding their access to Wi-Fi and technology such as computer equipment. Assessing participants' level of interest in various program mediums can help better build a budget based on demand and needs from the onset. Using a conference call line that tracks participants effectively is also helpful, as is establishing a Zoom account that staff can easily access. Recruiting and training volunteers to lead calls and activities is critical to the success of the program, as they effectively leverage the agency's limited staff time.

## Resources Needed

To effectively administer this program, investments need to be made in website development, printing, marketing support through branding and outreach, mailing supplies and postage, and conference call line subscriptions. Resources should cover salary allocations for a staff coordinator position to develop and sustain the program. Additionally, resources should be allocated to support volunteers and a Zoom account.

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# Bridging the Digital Divide

Coastline Elderly Services, Inc. | New Bedford, MA

## Program Description

One way that Coastline Elderly Services, Inc., an Area Agency on Aging based in New Bedford, MA, is helping older adults remain engaged in the community is through the AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent Program (FGP). More than 40 older adults serve as mentors and tutors for children in schools through Coastline's FGP service area. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Coastline developed Bridging the Digital Divide to ensure the FGP volunteers could continue to participate in the program virtually and stay engaged with their children as well as one another during the pandemic.

In coordination with Cyber-Seniors, a nonprofit with a mission to connect generations through technology, Bridging the Digital Divide trained FGP participants to carry out their pre-COVID-19 activities in a virtual environment. Beginning with the completion of an assessment survey to determine participants' current competency with technology, the program provided 10 hours of focused training followed by unlimited practice, access to practice sessions, and ongoing support and coaching as needed. The classes offered a chance for social connection and intergenerational engagement between the participants and the trainers. The volunteers have the ability to interact with students through Zoom or to participate in meetings.

## Partners

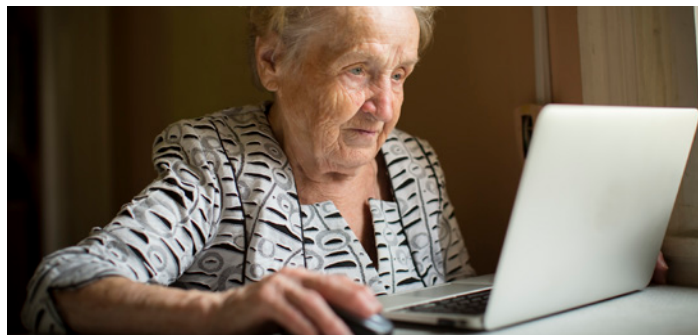
Coastline Elderly Services worked with Cyber-Seniors to offer Bridging the Digital Divide, with young technology mentors from Cyber-Seniors providing the technology training. Cyber-Seniors is the only organization in North America that has developed a standardized technology training program for youth mentors.

## Outcomes

The results of a satisfaction survey given following completion of the program indicated that close to 90 percent of participants increased their knowledge of online platforms. Participants stated that they clearly understood how to use various virtual platforms, including Zoom and Google Meet. FGP participants also learned how to screenshare, use whiteboard tools within the platforms and download other applications, including PDFs.

## Lessons Learned

Prior to the program, some older adults believed they could not learn a new skill and were surprised at how quickly they were able to learn new concepts, platforms and equipment. The program helped older adults hone their technology skills, increase their knowledge



***"The pandemic has greatly disrupted classrooms around the nation, and our Foster Grandparent Program volunteers will be needed more than ever to help children achieve academic success. With computer literacy training provided through the program, the volunteers can now connect to classrooms and stay active and engaged."***

of technology and learn skills that will be helpful in the future.

## Resources Needed

For Coastline Elderly Services, the only cost associated with Cyber-Seniors was for the specialized training provided to FGP participants. At \$50 per participant, the FGP participants were trained in the basics of email, Zoom and Google Meet. Participants also have access to Cyber-Seniors' tools and resources, including more than 1,200 videos. Together these resources provided the opportunity for participants to interact with other older adults online and provided access to the tools necessary to conduct their one-on-one mentorship with a high school or college student.

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# Caring Together, Living Better

AgeOptions | Oak Park, IL

## Program Description

AgeOptions, an Area Agency on Aging based in Oak Park, IL, developed the Caring Together, Living Better Program to reach out to and support Black and Hispanic family caregivers in the western suburbs of Cook County. Recognizing that Black and Hispanic communities may be more likely to access services through churches than traditional social services agencies, AgeOptions engaged faith-based organizations to reach caregivers in their communities. Although originally created to focus on caregivers, older adults and other community members also benefit from the program.

The program involves six faith-based partners that lead initiatives to meet the unique needs of Black and Hispanic caregivers. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program offered regular in-person social engagement programming, including chair yoga events, caregiver support groups and more. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program pivoted to address social isolation by providing the same engagement programming through virtual platforms. Programming includes Facebook Live karaoke sessions, caregiver appreciation nights, evidence-based programming, mental health workshops and weekly Zoom sessions focused on educational or recreational content such as yoga/meditation, trivia, stress management, creative conversation and more. As in-person gatherings become safer, some events will resume in person while others will remain on Zoom.

## Partners

AgeOptions funds, coordinates and provides oversight and support to the six faith-based partner organizations that implement the program. The partner organizations facilitate the on-the-ground programmatic components and engagement of older adult and caregiver participants. As community experts, the six partners design the programming offered and engage communities in ways that are unique and appropriate for the population they want to serve. The six partners are also encouraged when they see or encounter participants with greater needs to refer program participants to other service providers within the Aging Network in Illinois, including Aging and Disability Resource Centers and Caregiver Resource Centers.

## Outcomes

Over the 2020 fiscal year, the program reached more than 3,000 older adults and caregivers in west suburban Cook County. The program has increased access to support services for caregivers through referrals to its designated Caregiver Resource Center. As a result, the program

*"You are a blessing in our lives. You have helped us keep in touch with friends and keep our spirits up. I look forward to Thursday and the creative programs you have planned for us."*

connected hundreds of families to much needed resources during the pandemic such as food, personal protective equipment and care packages for social engagement at home. After Caring Together, Living Better activities and events occur, participants complete a brief evaluation to determine how the events benefitted caregivers and what other events and services are needed.

## Lessons Learned

When implementing community-based programs and partnerships, it is crucial to bring community leaders and experts to the table from the beginning to help spearhead the goals and focus of the program. Providing a space where community leaders and the program convener/funder can share ideas with one another is essential. With the Caring Together, Living Better program, AgeOptions convenes monthly Leadership Council meetings with the program leaders—who are volunteers from church communities—to ensure AgeOptions is providing needed support to the leaders and the program.

## Resources Needed

Staff time, stipends for partners and materials for meetings are some of the resources needed to replicate this program. As the program funder, AgeOptions applies for foundation grants to fund the stipends provided to the six partners. For the 2021 fiscal year, stipend amounts were increased due to the pandemic and the availability of funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Staff time is needed to coordinate meetings and oversee requirements for stipend recipient agencies. When monthly meetings were held in person, AgeOptions provided refreshments, meeting materials and space.

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# COAST-IT (Connecting Older Adults and Students Through Inter-Generational Telecare)

University of Colorado Anschutz Multidisciplinary Center on Aging | Aurora, CO

## Program Description

The University of Colorado (CU) Anschutz Division of Geriatrics and University of Colorado Hospital Senior's Clinic created a social isolation outreach program to address increased social isolation and loneliness experienced by older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic by connecting students who are in the early years of training in the field of health with the opportunity to interact with older adult patients. Connecting Older Adults and Students Through Inter-Generational Telecare (COAST-IT) pairs students from the CU Anschutz medical, pharmacy, nurse practitioner or dental medical school programs with an older adult for regular social phone calls. These intergenerational calls help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation through social connections and provide students with a chance to hone their communication and conversation skills to be stronger clinicians in the future. COAST-IT, which will continue throughout the student's degree program, also fosters the formation of strong mentorship relationships between the students and older adults.

Prior to engaging in phone sessions, students receive a reference handbook and participate in a two-hour training focused on strategies and techniques to engage and communicate with older adults. Students participate in monthly training sessions to address specific geriatric topics they confront during their conversations with older adults. To participate in COAST-IT, an older adult must report that they have felt some mental or physical health effects from social isolation and loneliness due to the COVID-19 pandemic or other recent social changes in their lives, be interested in interacting with a student regularly through the program and consent to be contacted.

## Partners

University of Colorado Hospital Senior's Clinic and CU Anschutz Division of Geriatrics work with on-campus partners, including the University of Colorado School of Medicine, School of Pharmacy, School of Dental Medicine and the College of Nursing, Nurse Practitioner program. Community partners such as libraries help promote COAST-IT, with many library community members participating in the program. Other off-campus community partners who help with promotion and recruitment include long-term care, assisted and independent living communities, Colorado Area Agencies on Aging, senior service operations and human services organizations.

## Outcomes

Prior to the start of the calls, an online survey is given to each student to capture their baseline knowledge of

*"My mom is really enjoying phone calls she is having with a pharmacy student, and I think that it has been a shining light in these lonely times! Thank you for caring for so many people during this awful time, in your own special way!"*

geriatrics and older adults. This survey is given at the beginning and end of every semester to assess each student's knowledge and understanding of geriatrics and identify whether attitudes and experiences have changed.

## Lessons Learned

If implementing a similar program, it is important to understand your community and connect with partners who can help with promotion and recruitment. It is also important to identify key individuals, including a university coordinator to facilitate the participation of schools and colleges across the campus and to develop promotional materials and messaging. A coordinator in each of the schools or colleges helps recruit students from their areas and pairs each with an older adult partner. A facility representative in the long-term care and assisted living facilities assists with recruitment of residents. Developing a handbook and providing training sessions for the students helps strengthen interactions with older adults.

## Resources Needed

At the beginning of the program, approximately 10 hours per week of staff time is needed to match students with older adults. Approximately 10 hours is also needed to create the handbook and monthly training sessions. A point person who has strong community ties and the ability to recruit partner organizations and individuals into the program is also essential.

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# Cognitive Stimulation Therapy

Gateway Geriatric Education Center, Saint Louis University | St. Louis, MO

## Program Description

The Gateway Geriatric Education Center at Saint Louis University in Missouri has implemented the Cognitive Stimulation Therapy (CST) program to provide evidence-based, non-pharmacologic, structured group or individual interventions for people experiencing mild to moderate memory impairment. Since many older adults with cognitive impairment have limited opportunities to engage with others, CST focuses on making social connections for those who are experiencing memory loss.

CST provides an opportunity for social exchanges participants may not have in their day-to-day lives, with a focus on reminiscence. Participants in the CST program meet in groups of five-to-eight people for one hour, two times per week for seven weeks, followed by Maintenance CST for up to one year. Each session utilizes the following elements to promote familiarity: an introductory activity, a group theme song, discussion of a current event, a themed main activity and suggested activities for completion at home that conclude the session. Examples of activities include physical games, childhood experiences, number games, word association and team quizzes, with themes including current affairs, faces/scenes and childhood experiences.

CST was offered as an in-person intervention prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and has since transitioned to virtual delivery with some groups beginning to return to in-person sessions. To address the challenges of technology access and literacy, the CST Team developed strategies to assess and train participants to engage using telephones and video access.

## Partners

The Gateway Geriatric Education CST Team partners with the Saint Louis University Aging & Memory Clinic, Perry County Memorial Hospital, A.T. Still University, assisted living facilities and community-based organizations serving older adults who live alone or with family members. Community organizations, health care providers and family members provide referrals, and the CST Team conducts training for organizations planning to offer the CST program in residential care and adult day centers.

## Outcomes

Research shows that CST offers significant improvement in cognitive function and quality-of-life (**Spector et al., 2003**) and the program is endorsed by the United Kingdom National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence as the only non-pharmacological intervention



***“Her memory may be getting a little better, but the rest of her brain seems to be working so much better than it was even a year ago. She’s wittier, she’s faster, her problem-solving skills seem to have gone up, she’s paying more attention, so there’s a lot of good things that are coming out of this (CST) group.”***

for dementia. CST is shown to be more cost-effective than dementia medications (**Knapp et al., 2006**) and cognitive improvement is sustained by Maintenance CST sessions (**Orrell et al., 2014**).

## Lessons Learned

Because dementia is under-diagnosed by professionals and can be stigmatizing, identification, assessment and willingness to participate pose challenges to recruitment. Professional and community education to raise awareness of the prevalence and need for evidence-based interventions can help promote CST and can help recruit older adults who would benefit from the program. Working with certified trainers who have knowledge of dementia and group facilitation is imperative to maintain the fidelity of the intervention offered by CST.

## Resources Needed

Staff time and materials are required for CST to be optimally effective. CST can be facilitated by paraprofessionals, such as occupational therapy



assistants, or clinically trained professionals, including social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists and physical therapists. Facilitators should have work-related experience with older adults living with dementia and some previous group facilitation experience. For reimbursement purposes, the facilitator would need to be a clinician approved for third-party reimbursement. Co-facilitators help provide consistency and additional support for the CST group, and sessions can be enhanced by the inclusion of activities that stimulate the senses and promote social engagement, which may include materials such as images, audio/visual content and food and beverages. For in-person delivery, costs may include transportation and costs associated with group outings. Cost for virtual delivery may include expenses for the purchase of devices and wireless access for participants.

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# Creative Care Kits

Central Vermont Council on Aging | Barre, VT

## Program Description

The Central Vermont Council on Aging (CVCOA) developed the Creative Care Kit project in response to COVID-19 to reach older adults in their homes with creative opportunities and provide a path to alleviating social isolation and loneliness. Homebound older adults often lack access to arts programming, a gap that was exacerbated during the pandemic. To respond to that need, the CVCOA sends Creative Care Kits to adults age 60 and older upon request. Each kit includes painting supplies, an art exercise book and a resource binder with activities developed by professional teaching artists. Activities are designed to help participants develop and practice skills over several months.

Kit recipients are also connected with a Creative Companion volunteer who is completing the same activities so they can discuss their art and creativity. Creative Companions reach out to recipients a few times per month to chat and check-in, thereby serving as an encouraging and uplifting voice throughout the creative process. Volunteers can also engage with and learn from one another through training and support gatherings.

## Partners

To offer the Creative Care Kits program, CVCOA has partnered with senior centers and nutrition providers who help disseminate information about the opportunity to all home-delivered meal recipients in its service area. CVCOA has also partnered with arts organizations to conduct outreach to older adults in their networks. Additionally, CVCOA partners with the Community Engagement Lab, a Vermont organization that promotes creative programming, to recruit artists to design activities for older adults.

CVCOA has also begun to work with the Vermont Arts Council and Lifetime Arts to increase capacity statewide through kit design, toolkits for Area Agencies on Aging, and training for volunteers and aging professionals so that other agencies and providers have the resources needed to replicate the program.

## Outcomes

In its first year, CVCOA expected to deliver 40 Creative Care Kits to recipients and engage eight volunteers; however, it has experienced significant growth resulting in the delivery of 140 kits to older adults and mobilization of 24 Creative Companion volunteers. Evaluation data indicates that the project has exceeded all expectations

*"Thank you so much for this program. I have made a real friend! We plan to continue to meet over Zoom to do art until we can get together and paint outdoors later this spring."*

and has proven to be an excellent strategy for developing meaningful relationships over time.

## Lessons Learned

The biggest lesson learned during the implementation of the Creative Care Kit project was that participants desire different levels of communication with Creative Companion volunteers. It is important to learn about individual preferences, whether participants prefer regular contact or an occasional voicemail. CVCOA received feedback from several Creative Care Kit recipients that the intentional activity design and high-quality supplies and materials showed respect for older adults. Participants also indicated a desire for additional and varied activities, so CVCOA plans to offer a menu of activities for recipients to choose from for the next project. Additionally, CVCOA has recognized that programs like Creative Care Kits are vital for encouraging older adult engagement with technology, so this project is being integrated with other CVCOA technology initiatives.

## Resources Needed

The program costs approximately \$100 per recipient, which effectively covers all necessary kit supplies plus the staff time needed for implementation. Aside from these costs, strong partnerships for outreach and strong ties to community arts organizations and local businesses are critical to engage participants and design kits using creative aging best practices.

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# Go&Dine

Erie County Department of Senior Services | Buffalo, NY

## Program Description

Go&Dine is a partnership between the Erie County Department of Senior Services, which is the local Area Agency on Aging, and nine restaurants in Erie County, NY, that combines the provision of meals, increased nutritional awareness and supports that combat social isolation among older adults. The program is complementary to the AAA's congregate dining program sites and offered at restaurants in locations where congregate dining sites are unavailable. By providing older adults with an opportunity to access nutritious food with others in their community, older adults can engage with their friends, fellow community members and local businesses, helping them stay connected and building a stronger sense of community. Each month, participants receive a unique ID card that is swiped when they redeem their vouchers at participating restaurants. The only requirement for the program is that participants must be age 60 or older. While participants can choose to make an optional monetary contribution to the AAA, it is not required.

This program, which existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, successfully pivoted to takeout meals in response to the pandemic. Participants are able to see and have socially distanced interaction with others when they use their vouchers to pick up their takeout meal, which is especially valuable for participants who live alone. The AAA distributes a monthly packet to participants that includes vouchers, flyers for other programs, information on nutrition education and a self-addressed envelope for contribution submission.

## Partners

The program is a collaborative effort between several units in the AAA, including nutrition, program development and evaluation, fiscal and contracts. The main community partners are the contracted restaurants. The restaurants provide a specific menu for the older adults in the program that has been approved by the AAA's registered dietitians. Each restaurant is responsible for tracking the vouchers and user swipes per month and submitting the necessary information to the AAA for payment.

## Outcomes

The program has proven to be an effective complement to the AAA's congregate dining program. It allows the AAA to enhance partnerships to serve clients in a creative and effective way that reaches underserved populations in areas where congregate dining is not available. This helps increase nutritional awareness and combat social isolation



*"Thank you so much for Go&Dine! I have never been able to go out to restaurants. If I did, it was a family member or friend who picked up the tab. Again, thank you!"*

among older adults who otherwise would not have access to a nearby congregate dining site.

## Lessons Learned

Participant utilization history can help determine how many vouchers each participant should receive. It is important to follow up with participants who are inactive for a certain amount of time to see if they wish to remain in the program.

## Resources Needed

Funding to support the restaurants and staffing are the main resources required. AAA program staff roles include a person tracking current restaurant contracts and drafting new contracts, an accountant or fiscal department reviewing payment requests and making payments, dedicated staff to communicate with the restaurants, and dedicated staff to assemble the voucher mailers, enter participant information, and track utilization and units of service.

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# ONEgeneration Letters to Our Elders

ONEgeneration | Van Nuys, CA

## Program Description

To help support older adults who have limited access to technology, ONEgeneration created the Letters to Our Elders program to provide older adults with a way to stay connected to their communities without needing to use technology.

Letters to Our Elders is an intergenerational program that brings together and promotes the socialization of older adults and younger students through letter writing. Letters are created and submitted by a variety of students involved in programs at the YMCA, charter schools and universities. Students are given guidance and support with creating personalized handwritten letters, including potential discussion topics to help facilitate back-and-forth communication with their older companions.

## Partners

Current partners include local youth-serving and educational institutions such as the YMCA, charter high schools and universities. ONEgeneration's director of volunteer services recruits students to participate in the program and coordinates the efforts of the students as they remain connected with older adults through their ongoing pen pal letters.

## Outcomes

Program outcomes include increased social connections among older adults who are homebound and have limited access to technology and increased opportunities for younger generations to participate in traditional methods of communication while improving social skills, developing empathy and coming to a shared understanding of commonalities between the generations. Both generations have experienced decreased feelings of overall isolation and loneliness.

## Lessons Learned

Having a support person in place to offer guidance and close follow-through after the first few letters are exchanged is important. The support person should also review the student letters in advance to ensure appropriate content. Support and reminders around completion and delivery of letters can help facilitate continued communication between the older adults and students and allow for a more positive experience.



*"The students in my group really look forward to the replies we receive. We share them aloud and love hearing the similarities of our interests and the differences of the times we grew up in. Thank you for connecting us with such wonderful senior buddies."*

## Resources Needed

Direct expenses to replicate this program are minimal with postage being the only cost incurred. ONEgeneration receives donated stationary supplies that participants can use to send letters. Existing staff assist with outreach and enrolling older adults in the program and existing local school partners help with outreach and recruitment of students. ONEgeneration's director of volunteer services oversees all daily responsibilities and receives support from volunteers to assist with any logistical requirements.

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# Online Intergenerational Chess Program

DOROT | New York, NY

## Program Description

After a mutual love of chess became the impetus for a lasting friendship between a middle school student and a Holocaust survivor, DOROT created its Intergenerational Chess Program. Since 2014, the program has connected older adults and teens through chess for a semester or year-long experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DOROT moved the program online with the help of a teen who assisted in creating the program's online space and guided staff in navigating remote games between teens and older adults. DOROT primarily utilizes a platform by Chess NYC, in which the participants play in pairs or groups of three in Zoom breakout rooms. The online platform broadened the geographic scope of the program, enabling a former resident to continue to participate after moving to Israel and a couple to participate while traveling by train.

DOROT supported older adults' transition online by providing assistance with accessing Zoom and virtual game applications and offering the hybrid option of playing on a traditional chess set while participating remotely. Key program elements retained online include an orientation at the beginning of the semester where participants discuss elements of their preferred chess games and ways to avoid being too lenient or assertive with partners. A professional chess coach provides an interactive lesson at the beginning of each session and visits each pair in their breakout rooms, offering hints and checking the games' progress. Participants may rotate players or choose to grow in friendship with one partner. Both generations grow in confidence about their ability to teach, build and share chess skills.

## Partners

Partners include a high school, which hosts the program after school for its students. Details on the program are provided to more than 50 local school partners, with the posts the schools share with their students attracting 95 percent of the youth participants. To recruit older adults, DOROT communicates about the opportunity with its constituents, posts on various sites like VolunteerMatch and asks local schools and community center partners to also share the opportunity.

## Outcomes

Forty percent of students and 31 percent of older adults continued to participate when the program transitioned online in spring 2020. During the 2020-2021 school year, online engagement reached more than 90 percent of prior in-person participation within each group. DOROT



*"Being trapped indoors due to quarantine, I found a way outdoors through online chess, to free my mind. Thanks, DOROT for another liberating experience."*

compares older and younger participants' outcomes to determine the impact they have on one another. On evaluations from May through December 2020, 100 percent of respondents agreed they enjoyed getting to know someone from another generation. One older adult shared, "The whole new world of Zoom technology is a leap for a low-tech guy like me. In some ways I may have gotten more out of the (instructor's) lesson online, especially as he managed to upgrade the graphics." Feedback from teens indicates sustained satisfaction from the online program: "I connected with people who are different from me in some ways and similar to me in other ways. It made ME feel less isolated, too. It helped me realize that I can teach chess well!"

## Lessons Learned

Participants have gained skills in navigating online applications while sustaining interpersonal connections. Interest has grown faster among teens than older adults, so DOROT staff have continued to reach out to new and former clients, offer Zoom training before new sessions begin and invite experienced older adults to serve as program ambassadors who refer friends to the program. Encouraging teens to connect with chess partners between weekly sessions has also facilitated program retention and relationship building among participants.

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## Resources Needed

An online platform for chess is needed. One option is **Chessnyc.com**, which works with nonprofits on a sliding fee scale. Other key resources include a dedicated staff person to recruit participants and manage the program—including securing permission and other documentation—and a chess coach who adds to the program experience by serving as a Zoom co-host to assist with breakout rooms and other questions. Additional staff time is needed to (1) host an orientation and training session for participating teens and (2) facilitate an introductory session between older adults and teens that will allow them to meet one another.

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# SOLO: Strengthening Older Lives Online

Pennsylvania Council on Aging | Harrisburg, PA

## Program Description

The Pennsylvania Council on Aging (PCoA) launched SOLO: Strengthening Older Lives Online in November 2020. SOLO was developed by older adults participating in the PCoA Social Isolation Task Force based on their year-long research around social isolation. Designed by older adults, for older adults, SOLO includes an interactive guide to meet the mental, spiritual and physical health needs of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Tools within the guide include holistic activities and videos to help older adults stay mentally, spiritually and physically fit, resources to help and short questionnaires to help participants build active health plans.

A training module was developed to accompany the guide and introduce it to older adults through small group, peer-led sessions. The peer-led sessions are offered via computer or smartphone-based platforms as well as over the telephone. By informing older adults about habits they can practice to prevent social isolation, this grassroots effort has reached thousands of older adults and helped to reduce loneliness and social isolation through research-based interventions.

## Partners

PCoA worked with the Pennsylvania Area Agencies on Aging, state assistive technology unit, housing authorities, Aging and Disability Resource Centers and senior centers to inform the implementation of SOLO into older adult communities.

## Outcomes

Since launching in November 2020, the guide has been viewed online more than 4,800 times and 20 peer-led, small group sessions have taken place. One participant shared, "Being a former teacher, I so enjoy presentations that teach me something new or remind me of some things I may have forgotten that will be beneficial to my health. I like that the presenters were lively and knowledgeable. They shared links that I will definitely visit to increase my knowledge."

## Lessons Learned

Having the sessions led by older adult peer professionals was critical for engagement. It is also important to have peers with connections to harder-to-reach communities involved, to help older adults in those communities access culturally-specific programming to reduce social isolation.



*"During these times, when senior centers are closed, it's vital to connect with people my age and sessions like this are perfect for learning and sharing. I'm so excited to be able to have more resources at my fingertips."*

## Resources Needed

The guide, currently available in English and Spanish, is free and available to all to use within their organizations. Older adults interested in leading peer sessions can be trained by PCoA members through the train-the-trainer infrastructure. Access to an online meeting platform or telephone conference line is needed for the sessions, while the website is needed for older adults to self-guide: <https://my.visme.co/view/4d8vmyqz-solo>.

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# Virtual Senior Centers

Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging | Waterloo, IA

## Program Description

Northeast Iowa Area Agency on Aging (NEI3A) launched a Virtual Senior Center program in 2021 featuring interactive games and activities, guest presenters and educational programs to offer senior center participants an opportunity for socialization. Initially the Virtual Senior Center program launched three Virtual Senior Centers, with two currently open two days per week. Programming includes nutrition education, non-evidence-based exercise classes, trivia and presentations from community members, including speakers from the local arboretum, a conservation program, a local bank and hospital.

Held during lunchtime hours, participants are offered a home-delivered meal and encouraged to eat their meals while visiting with other participants virtually. Older adults can participate via computer, tablet or smartphone. For those without internet or a device at home, NEI3A partnered with GrandPad to offer easy-to-use tablets designed specifically for older adults that participants can check out and use. Following a successful pilot period, NEI3A plans to keep one Virtual Senior Center program open on specific days and times to anyone who would like to participate. Staff contact older adults to determine interest in the program and press releases are sent out to the media to promote the opportunity.

## Partners

NEI3A works with the Iowa Department of Public Health to offer the Fresh Conversations program to participants and GrandPad to provide tablets available for checkout for older adults with limited technical knowledge or access to technology to easily interact with their peers through the Virtual Senior Center program. NEI3A also works with other partners to present topics to the participants.

## Outcomes

Participants completed a survey at the start of the Virtual Senior Center program, with 50 percent reporting feeling lonely and 100 percent of the participants living alone. Following an eight-week pilot period, the percentage of participants reporting feeling lonely dropped to 33 percent. All participants reported enjoying the experience, with participants especially appreciating the opportunity to visit with others and hear from guest speakers.

## Lessons Learned

For the first few sessions, the AAA focused on simple activities with no guest speakers to help participants become more comfortable with the technology. Limiting



*"I especially appreciate the Virtual Senior Center because it is my only way of connecting with others. I particularly enjoyed the recipes and nutrition tips. This program is of great value and has improved my overall health."*

participant numbers also helps allow participants to be able to easily see one another on screen and makes for easier communication. For staff coordinating, it is important to be engaging to encourage participants to open up and participate.

## Resources Needed

To replicate the Virtual Senior Center program, a partnership with an easy-to-use technology provider can help ensure more older adults are able to participate, including those without tablets, computers or internet access. A technology platform like Zoom is needed.

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This publication contains a sampling of the innovative social engagement programs the Aging Network has developed and implemented to help older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers remain engaged and connected to their communities. Connect with engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults to learn more about the importance of social engagement and how engAGED can support your organization's social engagement efforts, and to share your social engagement work with engAGED.

For more information on the work of engAGED, visit [www.engagingolderadults.org](http://www.engagingolderadults.org) or contact us at [info@engagingolderadults.org](mailto:info@engagingolderadults.org). To learn more about the Innovations Hub and other programs featured in the Innovations Hub, visit [www.engagingolderadults.org/hub](http://www.engagingolderadults.org/hub). If your organization has social engagement programs serving older adults, people with disabilities or caregivers, consider submitting your programs to the Innovations Hub [www.engagingolderadults.org/submit-to-hub](http://www.engagingolderadults.org/submit-to-hub).

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## About USAging

USAging is the national association representing and supporting the network of Area Agencies on Aging and advocating for the Title VI Native American Aging Programs. Our members help older adults and people with disabilities throughout the United States live with optimal health, well-being, independence and dignity in their homes and communities. Learn more at [www.usaging.org](http://www.usaging.org).



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