Social Isolation In Hamilton: Indicators as a Local Call to Action

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We've known for a long time that social isolation is bad for people's health and well-being. Although it has been gaining a lot of attention in the last couple of years – the UK just named its first Minister for Loneliness – social isolation has long been a concern for older adults and people who care for them. Starting in 1965, a research team conducted a study in the San Francisco Bay area – the Alameda County Study – that followed a group of people over the age of 50 with questionnaires and vital records for more than 30 years. This study found that social isolation was as great a risk factor for premature death as smoking. Since then, the relationship between social isolation, social support (from the people around us), and well-being, has been demonstrated in hundreds of studies and further clarified among older adults.

Why is Social Support So Important

The researcher Weiss developed an easy-to-understand framework in 1974. According to Weiss, there are **six key things** that social relationships provide:

1. **Attachment:** emotional closeness from which you draw / gain a sense of security

2. **Social Integration:** a sense of belonging to a group that shares similar interests, concerns, and recreational activities. This can provide comfort, security, pleasure and a sense of identity.

3. **Reassurance of Worth:** recognition [by others] of your competence, skills and value

4. **Reliable Alliance:** the assurance that others can be counted upon for tangible assistance

5. **Guidance**: advice or information

6. **Opportunity for Nurturance:** the sense that others rely upon you for their well-being

These attributes of social support suggest it is multi-dimensional and complex and cannot be easily assessed with simple measures, like number of close friends or whether someone lives alone. Unfortunately, the complexity of social isolation also means it is not easy to 'fix'.
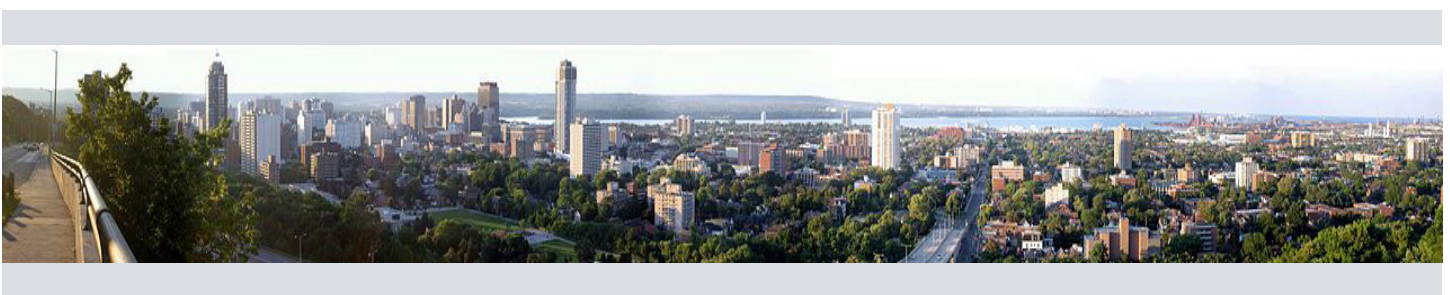
WHAT CAN BE DONE?

A recent report on social isolation in Hamilton provides a snapshot of some aspects of social isolation in Hamilton, such as the areas of the city with the highest numbers of older people, locations with higher rates of older people living alone, poverty rates and access to transportation. Although more detailed information is needed about how to best access isolated seniors, it is not too soon to act! We know, based on this and other population studies, that there are many, many people experiencing social isolation in Hamilton right now. This is having a profound impact on their cognitive health, their use of social and health services, their longevity and their quality of life.

One worrying aspect for the future of our aging population are the interconnections between older people and urban form, housing and transportation. Since drivers over the age of 80 are required to demonstrate their fitness to drive every two years (or lose their license) and the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), where Hamilton is situated, is a highly suburban car-dependent region, there are critical questions about how older people will get around and where they can best live independently in the future. The magnitude of the problem is illustrated by the estimate that there will be an additional 700,000 people over the age of 80 by 2041.

Knowing this, how can we plan now to prevent social isolation for these residents, stuck in the suburbs without a driver's license or adequate public transportation? Are there cost-effective ways to provide formal supports or organize informal supports through clubs or non-profit organizations? Or are there ways to build age-friendly and age-optimizing cities and affordable, trusted housing options to better support independent aging and social engagement for more people for longer in the future? The Hamilton report and population trends point to the importance of urgently tacking such questions.

More information about our attempt to address isolation through the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan can be found on our project website: http://socialisolation.ca

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Learn more about the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan:

Website:
http://socialisolation.ca

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Materials developed by Gilbrea Centre for Studies in Aging, McMaster University   gilbrea centre for Studies in Aging

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