

Socially Connected Communities

Action Guide for Local Government and Community Leaders



We need to address social isolation not as a personal choice or an individual problem, but as a challenge that is rooted in community design, social norms, and systemic injustices.

As covered in [Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation](#), in a healthy community, all residents experience optimal physical, mental, and social well-being. Leaders who strive to create resilient, equitable, and healthy communities often focus on physical and mental health without equal attention on improving social well-being. Social well-being refers to the strength of a person's relationships and social networks. It is strongly linked to social inclusion and a sense of belonging. People living in socially connected communities are more likely to thrive because they feel safe and welcomed. They have more trust in each other and their government.

On the other hand, social isolation is a global concern. Intersecting systemic crises¹ (such as racism, housing and food insecurity, and rising unemployment) are now compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has necessitated physical distancing for long periods of time. Yet, social isolation is currently being defined, discussed, and addressed primarily through an individual rather than a systemic lens. Social isolation is exacerbated by systemic oppression, institutional inequities, and by how the social environment shapes how a person feels about themselves.

Complex problems require collaborative efforts that engage social networks and build trust in each other and in our government. Fortunately, social well-being can be integrated into community-level strategies that address root causes of poor health and social isolation, such as those identified in *Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation*. **Local government leaders and others who influence community-level policies, systems, and environments are well positioned to help.** This includes mayors, city and county managers, councils of government, and leaders in transportation, housing, parks and recreation, and public health. Leaders of other sectors, nonprofits, and community-based organizations can also be allies.

Social well-being is linked to better health outcomes for residents, which benefits local healthcare and workforce sectors. Connected communities can also make small and mid-sized cities more competitive, adaptable, and resilient to demographic and economic changes.² Combined with the recommendations in *Socially Connected Communities*, the actions in this Guide are intended to spark conversations and ideas for local government and community leaders to advance more socially connected communities and, in so doing, greater health and well-being for all.

These action steps are starting points for supporting socially connected communities. Although implementing these will take time, the good news is that prioritizing social well-being can be integrated into every effort for greater and rippling impact. Finally, as you incorporate any of these actions or other recommendations, share your lessons with others to contribute to collaborative learning. Together, we can reduce rates of social isolation, and everyone can experience the benefits of socially connected communities.

ACTION 1

Weave social well-being into your organizational and community cultures.

As a local elected, government, or organizational leader, how you talk about and address social isolation will influence action within your department, organization, and the community at large. Everyone, whether or not they are formal leaders, can help reduce social isolation. Engage with staff across departments to identify how you can weave social well-being into internal practices and policies. Connect with staff across sectors to better understand the community-level policies, systems, environments, and practices that contribute to social well-being. Partner with funders, nonprofit organizations, and universities to host community-wide conversations about the benefits of social connection and explore how to infuse social well-being into every aspect of life. Embrace a "social in all policies"³ framework or include social inclusion in a Health in All Policies approach. Incorporate social connectedness into Community Health Improvement Plans and Community Health Assessments. As you take these actions, be intentional about also addressing legacies of racism and segregation, which are pervasive in many communities. Systemic and structural racism has caused heartbreaking harm and trauma and damaged trust in leaders. As a step toward healing, consider making a public and actionable declaration to address racism as a public health crisis.^{4,5} By integrating social well-being into all policies, practices, initiatives, and conversations, local leaders will help their communities thrive.

ACTION 2

Honor community assets.

Conversations and initiatives are too often framed around problems or deficits that local leaders think need to be addressed. Instead, consider using an abundance-thinking lens, which lifts, celebrates, and reinforces the assets inherent in every community. These assets can include favorite public spaces; faith-based institutions, businesses, and other organizations; neighborhood traditions; diversity of race, culture, skills, knowledge, and perspectives; revered elders and other influential people. Local leaders should honor these assets, prioritizing support for communities of color and those experiencing health inequities in order to address legacies of injustice. Remember that residents should define for themselves what aspects of their neighborhoods are valuable to them, who they see as strong leaders and change agents in their neighborhoods, and what is working well that they would like to build upon.

ACTION 3

Implement community-led and community-based solutions.

Residents should be invited to not only join, but also *lead*, efforts intended to improve their lives. While local leaders and partners can inform conversations with data and perspectives, they must ensure that community residents are able to decide which specific issues and solutions matter most to them. Communities of color in particular tend to have less access to government resources and higher levels of distrust that stem from historic experiences of inequitable practices and discrimination.⁶ Local government leaders can partner with nonprofits, grassroots organizations, and neighborhood associations which have already built trusting relationships with residents. Further strengthening trust will require that leaders cede and shift power.

Coordinating community-led efforts with multi-sector collaborations can effectively drive community change, and local government leaders should engage with a spirit of transparency, respect, and openness. Ideally, residents are funded and offered capacity-building resources (e.g., trainings and liaisons) to lead these efforts in spaces and at times that work best for them. Local government leaders can partner with philanthropy to leverage more resources.

ACTION 4

Use a systems lens.

Viewing social connection with a systems lens enables the recognition of our interconnectedness. For example, just as housing and transportation leaders work together to integrate development decisions, every sector and resident has a role to play in creating inclusive and relationship-focused places. Decision makers, influencers, organizations, and institutions can fortify community-led efforts by using their unique strengths and networks. Community-based organizations may be best suited to provide civic engagement support, while businesses, government agencies, and philanthropies can contribute by assisting with funding and other resources. Philanthropy and advocacy-based organizations can collect stories that contribute to perceptions about social well-being. Government leaders can provide insight into timelines and mechanisms for community development opportunities. Universities can provide capacity for research and evaluation of the integration of social well-being into community-level strategies, such as outcomes from implementing a "social in all policies"³ framework. In all of these efforts, partners should take their cues from residents' stories, experiences, and interests.

ACTION 5

Allocate resources toward assets that strengthen connectivity.

Budgets are a reflection of values and priorities. While it's not easy to meet the complex needs in communities, *Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation* and this Action Guide illustrate how integral social well-being is to a thriving community. Prioritize resources and funds for community assets that strengthen social connections, such as community centers, gathering spaces, libraries, parks, youth employment opportunities, and important frontline services such as mental health, housing, and substance use services. These are also "essential services" which can be integrated within other priority areas to improve overall impacts.

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- ¹ Dowler, C. (2020, October 12). Introduction: Intersecting crises [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://americanethnologist.org/features/pandemic-diaries/introduction-intersecting-crises/introduction-intersecting-crises>
 - ² *Creating Connected Communities: A Guidebook for Improving Transportation Connections for Low- and Moderate-Income Households in Small and Mid-Sized Cities* (p. 12, Policy Guide). (2014, April). Center for Transit-Oriented Development. Retrieved from www.huduser.gov/publications/pdf/Creating_Cnnted_Comm.pdf
 - ³ Holt-Lunstad, J. (2020, June 22). *Social Isolation and Health* (Policy brief). HealthAffairs. DOI:10.1377/hpb20200622.253235
 - ⁴ *Racism as a Public Health Crisis: Three Responses*. (2021, January). County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. Retrieved from www.countyhealthrankings.org/racism-as-a-public-health-crisis-three-responses
 - ⁵ *Advancing Racial Equity in Your City*. (2017). National League of Cities. Retrieved from www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/NLC-MAG-on-Racial-Equity.pdf
 - ⁶ Solomon, D., Maxwell, C., & Castro, A. (2019, August 07). Systemic inequality: displacement, exclusion, & segregation. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472617/systemic-inequality-displacement-exclusion-segregation/