

# Socially Connected Communities

## Action Guide for Philanthropic 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 crises<sup>1</sup> (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*. **Philanthropic leaders are well positioned to help.** They can fund pilot programs and innovative research that can be scaled by governmental and other resources to deepen their sustainable impact. Foundations can also support advocacy to shift power and support meaningful community engagement.

Social isolation is prevalent in groups experiencing health inequities and perceived powerlessness in the face of systemic oppression—and foundations are already investing in issues that matter to these groups. Along with the recommendations in *Socially Connected Communities*, the action steps below are intended to spark conversations and ideas for philanthropy to support 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 doesn't require an overhaul of foundation priorities. No matter what issues you invest in, strategies to strengthen social connectedness can be integrated for meaningful 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**

### **Integrate social well-being into all investments.**

All aspects of life intersect with social well-being because human beings, by nature, are social. Philanthropic investments will have greater impact by weaving in strategies that strengthen social health (e.g., civic engagement, intergenerational programs). Dedicated resources for creating socially connected communities are helpful, and much can also be done through integration within existing priorities. Integrating social well-being into all investments is essential, efficient, and likely to deepen the overall impact of every initiative. Build in time for relationship-building and trust, integrate inclusive practices and designs, and align social health with other health measurements. Insisting on this integration will amplify the importance of socially connected communities.

## **ACTION 2**

### **Honor community assets.**

Initiatives are too often framed by the problem that funders think needs to be addressed. Applicants are asked to describe the deficits in their lives and neighborhoods. 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. Grants and other philanthropic supports should recognize and honor these assets, rather than primarily focusing on problems. Prioritizing support for communities of color and those experiencing health inequities can help address legacies of injustice. Funders must

acknowledge these inequities and provide resources and opportunities to address them. This starts with recognizing philanthropy's own history, and shifting from frameworks of charity to justice and social solidarity.<sup>2</sup>

## **ACTION 3**

### **Address community context.**

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building a healthy community. However, social well-being is best achieved when the work is framed and led by community members. Social isolation disproportionately impacts groups of people who are commonly oppressed. To avoid perpetuating or exacerbating inequality, center solutions in inclusive and anti-racist/anti-othering approaches. Philanthropic leaders must also honor communities' cultural and historical contexts. For example, historic injustices rooted in racism, misogyny, classism, transphobia, homophobia, among other systems of oppression, have isolated people in segregated neighborhoods. Violence and disinvestments in specific neighborhoods have driven communities to avoid spending time together in public spaces and to self-isolate. To address these types of histories, local philanthropic leaders must listen to communities, engage in difficult conversations around historic trauma, support trauma-informed practices, and honor diverse cultures, identities, and values. Examples of these approaches are included in *Socially Connected Communities: Solutions to Social Isolation*.

#### ACTION 4

### Support advocacy and relationship-building.

Because trust is a critical foundation for stronger social networks, leadership is more effective when it comes from community-based organizations (CBOs) which already work with traditionally underserved communities. Fund CBOs led by people who represent their communities and prioritize power-building strategies to change structural policies and systems which created, and continue to create, inequities in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Although lobbying support may need to come from private foundations, philanthropists can fund grassroots capacity building among community members and within CBOs to help them lead and sustain meaningful community change. Philanthropists can use their networks, platforms, and influence to advocate for ongoing and diversified resources that support community-led change.

#### ACTION 5

### Reframe the conversation to community-level solutions.

Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to support social connectivity and the root causes of social isolation—reframing the issue through a systems lens and demonstrating that socially connected communities are possible, vital, and key to a thriving life. Funders can structure investments to prioritize sustainable and equitable policy, system, and environmental changes. They can also invest in narrative-building work that lifts the voices and perspectives of those closest to the issue at hand. Powerful storytelling highlights the depth and nuance of knowledge, experiences, and culturally-defined success often overlooked by quantitative measures. This qualitative focus, derived from community-based participatory evaluation methods, defines success on a community's own terms rather than by prescribed or inflexible methods that reinforce power imbalances.<sup>4</sup>

#### ACTION 6

### Advance the field of social connectivity.

Currently, there are no standard definitions or common metrics for social well-being that account for root, systemic causes of social isolation. Foundations can spur quantitative and qualitative research, and formal and informal learning opportunities to demonstrate the relationship between systemic injustices and social disconnectedness. This should be bolstered with support for peer learning within and across communities and countries to include practice-tested approaches. Formal research can also strengthen metrics that measure the integration of social well-being into community-level strategies, such as outcomes from the implementation of "social in all policies"<sup>5</sup> efforts. In all cases, diverse perspectives and populations should inform the learning agenda, and the learning process itself, to advance equity and enhance social connectedness for participants.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> Burton, D. O. & Barnes, B. C. B. (2017, January 3). Shifting philanthropy from charity to justice. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/shifting\\_philanthropy\\_from\\_charity\\_to\\_justice](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/shifting_philanthropy_from_charity_to_justice).

<sup>3</sup> Yañez, E. (2019, February 28). Why we need park equity [Web log post]. Retrieved from [www.preventioninstitute.org/blog/why-we-need-park-equity](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/blog/why-we-need-park-equity).

<sup>4</sup> Chase, R. (2018, September 26). Community led solutions: Building evidence that counts. Retrieved from [www.mncompass.org/data-insights/articles/community-led-solutions-building-evidence-counts](http://www.mncompass.org/data-insights/articles/community-led-solutions-building-evidence-counts).

<sup>5</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J. (2020, June 22). *Social Isolation and Health* (Policy brief). HealthAffairs. DOI:10.1377/hpb20200622.253235