



## Seniors face growing health risk from social isolation

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The string of tragedies that threw Linda Shomberg's life into disarray started with her husband's diagnosis of Alzheimer's and him losing their life savings. It ended with her having a stroke.

During that time, Shomberg, 72, became socially isolated, rarely interacting with other people or leaving her home. It's a condition that researchers and social workers say impacts an increasing swath of Colorado's rapidly growing senior population.

Social isolation can be as harmful for senior citizens as smoking 15 cigarettes per day and can lead to higher rates of chronic disease, depression, dementia and death, experts say.

But those dangers can be combated with activities such as exercise, social interaction or simply getting out of the house.

"Get your hair done, get out to the library, go to church; those are really important for people's lives," said Jayla Sanchez Warren, director of Denver's Area Agency on Aging. "When they lose that, they start to isolate and life isn't the same."

Shomberg described her previous life as "middle class." A former legal researcher and law librarian, she and her husband, Bernard Shomberg, had a nest egg in the form of an apartment complex he helped develop in Greeley. Before Bernard died, they lost the property through fraud, she said. With her safety net gone, Shomberg was suddenly thrown into poverty.

"I'm learning to navigate to the poverty minefield and all its collateral damage," she said. "There was nothing left of my old life, except for memories and my old furniture. ... Foreclosure and repossession were living, breathing words every day."

Colorado is home to some of the most rapidly aging counties in the U.S., according to the [Pew Research Center](#). And close to one-third of Denver's 69,000 residents over age 65 are at risk of isolation, Warren said.

"This is a problem that is only going to grow, especially in Colorado," said Dallas Jamison, spokeswoman for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

Isolation has multiple causes, including the size of a person's social network and their level of mobility. Many seniors can become isolated because of health issues, the death of a partner, outliving family and friends or a growing fear of getting injured outside their home.

To help address these issues, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging has been running its yearly "Home for the Holidays" campaign, which encourages Americans to reach out to seniors at risk of isolation.

The campaign also promotes awareness of the association's tools such as the [Eldercare Locator](#) and the national hotline, 1-800-677-1116, which seniors can use to find help from local agencies.

Advocates say there's often a stigma surrounding isolation.

"How many people want to admit they're isolated? Sometimes they're outliving family and friends. Who wants to admit I don't have family and friends anymore?" Jamison said.

Programs such as Meals on Wheels provide vital lifelines to the elderly across the country, beyond a warm meal. "That might be the only interaction they have that day," she said.

Mobility is also a serious issue for isolated seniors, especially in rural areas.

Volunteer drivers from the nonprofit Neighbor Network helped Shomberg turn her life around, she said. They take her to doctor appointments and help her run everyday errands such as grocery shopping.

Shomberg recently started a new ministry at her church called Blessing Bags, to provide food and supplies to the homeless. She believes that isolation is a solvable problem.

"You take a psychological hit because of the sadness and loneliness, but with help from organizations, and sometimes just an attitude change, you come out of yourself."