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Photo: Todd McInturf

## Experts say be aware of elderly isolation at holidays

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By Kyla Smith

“We receive close to 300,000 calls from seniors looking for resources and wellness services,” said Patrice Earnest, Agencies on Aging’s national eldercare locator director. “With our Home for the Holidays campaign we are trying to connect family, friends and caregivers so older adults won’t feel so isolated.”

In the past year, the AARP Foundation discovered that an estimated one in five adults nationwide over the age of 50 are effected by isolation. Researchers also found that isolation and loneliness are associated with a higher rate of heart disease, depression, Alzheimer’s disease, anxiety and death. Prolonged isolation can be as bad as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

When Shelia Peters of Troy suffered from a brain aneurism in 2014 and started to experience some short-term memory loss, her daughters called Visiting Angels, an in-home senior care company to spend time with their mom while they went to work.

“There were times when our mom was by herself and we wanted to make sure someone was with her at all times,” said Peter’s daughter, Colleen Cummings. “During the season, her caregiver helps her put up Christmas decorations and keeps her company until me or my sister comes from work. We never want a time period where she is alone.”

[Visiting Angels](#) provide paid in-home care all year round which includes the delivery of “Holiday Cheer” boxes for the next four weeks. Each box has holiday cookies, candy, an ornament or a gift card to their favorite restaurant or store.

“This can be a tough time for the elderly if their loved ones have moved or can’t visit as often,” said Stephen Novak, owner of Visiting Angels. “That’s why it’s important for us to show our seniors that they are not forgotten.”

“Something as simple as making Christmas cookies with their caregiver or watching a movie together can make a person happier and give them a sense of security during the holidays.”

While many older adults live alone, some don’t know they are at-risk of becoming socially isolated.

“Most adults see themselves as independent and not lonely,” said Dallas Jamison, the Agencies on Aging’s spokeswoman. “We recommend seniors to take a [self-assessment checklist](#) to see if they need to expand their social activities or engage with more individuals.”

A sample of statements on the list include:

- I live alone.
- I see or talk to my family members one or more times per week.
- I generally have a ride or the transportation that I need to get where I want to go.

To keep her mind off the holidays, Staley reminisces about the times when she did see her family for Christmas.

“Besides connecting with family, it’s important to remember what the season is all about,” Staley said. “If you feel alone, tell someone and reach out. You never know how one phone call can change someone’s mood or life.”