



Campaign helps seniors suffering from social isolation and loneliness



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By Karina Shedrovsky

WASHINGTON — Anne Phillips uses a wheelchair and lives alone at the end of a long hallway in a Silver Spring, Md. apartment. Now that it's getting colder out, she says she "rarely gets off the reservation," and may not leave her apartment for weeks at a time.

Phillips, 69, is one of at least 8 million adults over age 50 that are affected by isolation, a problem that can impair mental performance, compromise the immune system and increase the risk of vascular, inflammatory and heart disease.

A campaign launched Wednesday by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a) and the AARP Foundation aims to raise awareness of the growing problem of social isolation and loneliness in older Americans.

Prolonged social isolation can equal the health risks of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, according to a report from the AARP Foundation.

"There's a lot of stigma associated with admitting to even loved ones that you're feeling isolated, that your connections have dwindled," said Dallas Jamison, communications director at n4a. "So we want to combat the stigma issue by getting the word out, letting people know it's OK, and there are resources for people in their communities."

To help seniors and caregivers mitigate the risks of isolation and loneliness, the association created a brochure that outlines risk factors and steps seniors should take to stay “ahead of the connection curve.”

The association recommends that seniors take stock of their network of activities and friends and to evaluate what they can do to make more connections. Some options include: nurture and strengthen existing relationships; schedule time to call or visit friends and family; meet neighbors young and old; and get involved in the community by taking on a cause.

The brochure also provides resources for seniors who feel they are already socially isolated or grappling with chronic loneliness. It advises they visit a primary physician to explain how they are feeling, because “recognizing that you feel isolated or that you’re having trouble maintaining a social network that meets your needs is the first step to improving your quality of life”

The association’s members make up a national network of 622 area agencies nationwide that provide community-based services such as rides, meals or personal in-home care to seniors. Many have joined the effort to combat isolation and loneliness.

“Because these agencies are on the front lines of helping older Americans live with dignity and independence in their homes, connecting them to an array of in-home services so vital to their well-being, they are often the first to realize that an older adult is isolated and lonely,” n4a CEO Sandy Markwood said in a statement. “That’s why we believe their participation in this campaign can have such a major impact.”

Once a local agency identifies that there’s a problem, it may refer seniors to programs such as Friendly Visitor in Montgomery County, Maryland, which recruits and trains volunteers who visit lonely, isolated and homebound seniors for at least one hour per week.

Friendly Visitor set Phillips up with Omar Bashir, 33, a year ago, and they meet every weekend to “pig out” at a local restaurant and to discuss current events.

Program director Tammy Schmidt takes the time to get to know every volunteer and client before making a match. “Our goal of the program is to not only match people, but to find people that will really create a true deeper relationship, a real friendship,” she said.

Phillips and Bashir are one of Friendly Visitor’s many success stories. Phillips says she would adopt Bashir if she could. “He’s enriched my life enormously,” she said.

Markwood says these connections at a local level are key to mitigating a sense of isolation and loneliness.

“Oftentimes people think this is a normal part of aging, and it isn’t,” she told USA TODAY. “If we can get people engaged with services and supports and with their community it’s a win-win for everybody because no matter what age you are, you have so much to give and give back.”

Information: If you are looking for assistance for yourself or a loved one, call the Eldercare Locator call center at: (800) 677-1116