



SUBJECT: Breaking the Cycle of Senior Loneliness: Strengthening Family and Community Support

DATE: March 12, 2025

TIME: 3:30–5:00 PM

Summary

The Senate Special Committee on Aging held a [hearing](#) on 'Breaking the Cycle of Senior Loneliness: Strengthening Family and Community Support.' The hearing emphasized the urgent need to address the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation among older adults, highlighting its severe mental, physical, and financial consequences. During the hearing, Senator Rick Scott (R-FL), Chairman of the Committee, underscored the role of social disconnection in contributing to declining health, increased risk of scams, and higher health care costs. Witnesses, including Andrew MacPherson, Founder and Executive Chair of the Foundation for Social Connection – Action Network; James Balda, President and CEO of Argentum; Suzanne McCormick, President and CEO of YMCA of the USA; and Tori Strawter-Tanks, Director of Clayton County Senior Services Department discussed various strategies to enhance social engagement, such as intergenerational programs, community-based initiatives, and increased funding for critical services under the Older Americans Act (OAA). They stressed the importance of transportation access, digital literacy, nutrition programs, and wellness initiatives to help seniors stay connected. Committee members acknowledged the need for bipartisan solutions, urging stronger public-private partnerships, policy enhancements, and cultural shifts to combat loneliness and promote healthy aging. The discussion concluded with a call for collective action from the government, the private sector, and communities to support older adults and strengthen intergenerational bonds.

Opening Statements

Chairman Rick Scott (R-FL) opened the discussion by highlighting the increasing feelings of isolation and loneliness among seniors, emphasizing that this issue affects everyone. He noted that the cycle of loneliness has widespread consequences, including negative impacts on mental health, relationships, and family structures. Chairman Scott also underscored the vulnerability of lonely seniors to scams, particularly internet-based frauds such as tech support and romance scams. He cited statistics indicating that individuals over 60 have lost \$3.4 billion worldwide due to fraud. To address these concerns, he advocated for the passage of a resolution designating March 6 as "Slam the Scam Day," in collaboration with Senator Mark Kelly (D-AZ). He urged his colleagues to support the SENIOR Act to improve the well-being of older Americans and pledged to continue working on the next steps.

Ranking Member Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) emphasized the importance of preventing loneliness and promoting social connections. She highlighted the role of transportation



services in enabling seniors with limited mobility to participate in community activities. Ranking Member Gillibrand stressed the need to uphold federal funding, particularly for programs under the Older Americans Act (OAA), such as nutrition programs that support senior well-being. She expressed her eagerness to hear from witnesses on various strategies to keep seniors connected and integrated into their communities.

Andrew McPherson (Witness), Founder and Executive Chair of the Foundation for Social Connection Action Network, testified about the critical need to address the epidemic of social isolation. Established in 2018, his organization is a multi-sector coalition dedicated to this cause. He emphasized that loneliness has reached epidemic proportions, affecting public health, increasing health care costs, and diminishing individual well-being. Mr. McPherson cited research showing that 24% of individuals aged 65 and older are considered socially isolated, with a 50% increased risk of severe health consequences. He urged Congress to pass the SENIOR Act to enhance social connection initiatives and ensure that older adults have access to the necessary resources. Mr. McPherson also advocated for investments in shared housing, mentoring programs, intergenerational volunteering, and expanding broadband access to combat digital isolation. He called on Medicare to integrate loneliness screening into annual wellness visits and to enhance non-emergency transportation options to foster social engagement.

James Balda (Witness), President and CEO of Argentum, testified about the profound effects of loneliness among the elderly, particularly those with dementia. He referenced studies from Harvard, Stanford, and AARP demonstrating that loneliness increases the risk of dementia by 50%, leading to a \$230 billion increase in Medicare and Medicaid spending. Mr. Balda highlighted the benefits of senior living facilities, which provide residents with a sense of purpose, companionship, and access to social activities such as gardening, educational programs, and book clubs. He pointed out that only 14% of seniors in assisted living report loneliness compared to 30% in the general senior community. He urged Congress to support Resolution 1812, a bipartisan bill establishing grant programs for assisted living and long-term care centers. He emphasized the benefits of intergenerational programs, pet therapy, and music therapy in reducing loneliness among seniors.

Suzanna McCormick (Witness), President and CEO of YMCA of the USA, described the organization's role in fostering social connections for older adults. She noted that the YMCA serves over 10,000 communities and 17 million Americans, including 4 million individuals over 55 and 2.5 million over 65. Ms. McCormick cited research from the University of Chicago indicating that participation in YMCA programs significantly improves social connectedness, mental and physical health, and overall well-being. She emphasized the YMCA's role in chronic disease prevention, including diabetes and fall prevention programs. Additionally, she called for increased federal funding to support community-based programs, Medicaid assistance for low-income seniors, and stronger partnerships between the YMCA, libraries,



and places of worship to engage more seniors. Ms. McCormick shared personal success stories of seniors who found new communities and opportunities through YMCA programs, reinforcing the importance of social engagement initiatives.

Senator Raphael Warnock (D-GA) introduced Tori Strawter-Tanks and voiced his support for the SENIOR Act, expressing admiration for the efforts of Georgians in addressing senior loneliness.

Tori Strawter-Tanks (Witness), Director of the Clayton County Senior Services Department, emphasized the vital role that senior centers play in providing high-impact exercise programs, cultural engagement, lifelong learning opportunities, and essential services such as wellness checks and transportation assistance. She stressed the importance of continued federal funding under the OAA to ensure these services remain accessible. Ms. Strawter-Tanks highlighted the success stories of seniors who have thrived due to social engagement programs. She noted that congregate meal programs not only provide nutritious food but also foster community and reduce isolation. Without adequate funding, many seniors risk becoming further isolated and food insecure. She emphasized the critical need for accessible transportation services to help seniors attend medical appointments, grocery stores, and social gatherings. Ms. Strawter-Tanks also discussed the economic benefits of supporting active aging. Research shows that engaged and active seniors reduce overall health care costs for themselves and taxpayers. She pointed to the "sandwich generation," caregivers who balance caring for their elderly parents while also supporting their own children, and emphasized how senior engagement programs help alleviate this burden. She urged Congress to expand funding for senior centers, improve transportation access in rural areas, promote digital inclusion, and recognize senior centers as essential infrastructure for aging in place. Ms. Strawter-Tanks concluded by calling for investments in food security, caregiver support, and programs that promote senior independence. She framed senior isolation as not merely an individual problem but a public health crisis, stressing that investing in senior centers strengthens families, supports working caregivers, and ultimately saves taxpayer money. She expressed her commitment to working with legislators to build a more connected future for older Americans.

Discussion

Chairman Scott spoke about the importance of senior centers in Florida, noting that they are vibrant and enjoyable places to visit.

Senator Ashley Moody (R-FL) emphasized the significance of protecting seniors in Florida, sharing her personal connection to the issue through her mother, who dedicated her career to assisting low-income seniors. She praised Chairman Scott's thorough approach to



complex issues and expressed admiration for the testimonies presented. Senator Moody acknowledged that while protecting federal funding for senior programs is essential, additional funding alone is not always the answer. She highlighted the need for creative, cost-effective solutions, particularly in light of pandemic spending and limited taxpayer resources. She cited examples of innovative programs, such as integrating daycare facilities within senior living communities and high school students participating in senior volunteer programs. These initiatives, she noted, provide mutual benefits—offering companionship to seniors while fostering a sense of purpose among young people. She inquired about whether the YMCA is fostering programs that facilitate intergenerational connections between younger and older generations.

Ms. McCormick affirmed that the YMCA is actively working on intergenerational engagement through public-private partnerships. She explained that YMCA facilities frequently collaborate with private organizations and health care providers to maximize community resources without relying solely on government funding. Community service and volunteerism, she stressed, are fundamental to the YMCA's mission, ensuring that individuals of all ages contribute and benefit from shared experiences.

Ranking Member Gillibrand turned her attention to Ms. Strawter-Tanks, asking her to elaborate on the impact of congregate meal programs in reducing social isolation and improving senior health, as well as the sources of funding for such programs.

Ms. Strawter-Tanks explained that transportation for seniors is funded through the OAA, and meals are also provided through OAA funding. However, she acknowledged that budget cuts have occasionally impacted these services. In cases where funding is reduced, local counties attempt to fill the gaps. Senior center staff work closely with attendees to assess their needs and identify alternative solutions in the event of larger funding reductions.

Ranking Member Gillibrand inquired about the potential benefits of allowing seniors to use SNAP benefits (e.g., Electronic Benefits Transfer cards) for meal programs.

Ms. Strawter-Tanks confirmed that such a policy would be helpful, noting that while senior centers generally provide meals, not all seniors qualify for congregate meal programs. She stated that although their centers receive adequate funding, the meal programs remain slightly underfunded.

Ranking Member Gillibrand also asked about the role of home-delivered meal programs in supporting homebound seniors.

Ms. Strawter-Tanks emphasized that all home-delivered meal recipients are assigned case managers who regularly check in and connect them with additional resources. She highlighted the importance of Meals on Wheels, explaining that assigned drivers build personal relationships with seniors, ensuring they are safe and have access to necessary



services. During the holidays, efforts are made to provide special meals, such as Christmas dinners and Thanksgiving turkeys, to ensure homebound seniors are cared for both nutritionally and socially.

Ms. McCormick recalled a visit to Buffalo, New York, where a YMCA hosted a large congregate meal event on Halloween, held on the gymnasium floor. The event not only provided nutrition but also created a social environment where seniors could interact and form friendships. Additionally, seniors had the opportunity to engage directly with their elected officials, who attended the event to hear their concerns. She stressed that these events promote both nutritional well-being and social engagement, helping to combat isolation in festive settings.

Senator Jim Justice (R-WV) reflected on the broader issue of senior isolation, stressing that seniors need more than just contact with other seniors—they need intergenerational relationships, pets, and opportunities to share their wisdom. He highlighted the need for society to do more in addressing loneliness, warning against reducing seniors to mere labels. Senator Justice expressed his belief that seniors have immense value to contribute, and that efforts must be made to retain their knowledge and experience rather than allowing it to be lost. He particularly praised members of the military for their selfless service, stating that they give so much while asking for very little in return. Though he had not been present for the full testimonies, Senator Justice expressed appreciation for the witnesses' work and reiterated his commitment to improving the well-being of seniors.

Chairman Scott expressed concern about seniors falling victim to scams, highlighting the importance of protecting older adults from fraud.

Mr. MacPherson noted that lonely seniors are twice as likely to fall victim to scams, making social connection an essential component of fraud prevention. He emphasized the increased risk of cognitive decline associated with isolation and the need for federal policies to address this issue. He pointed out that the OAA accounts for only a fraction of the federal budget but delivers high-impact benefits to seniors. He called for reauthorization of the OAA, particularly its provisions on elder abuse prevention. Mr. MacPherson referenced the 2023 Surgeon General's report, which underscored the urgency of addressing loneliness as a public health issue. He urged policymakers to integrate social connection initiatives across health care, labor, and other policy areas to create a comprehensive solution to a complex problem.

Chairman Scott asked what the most significant link is between senior living communities and healthy aging.

Mr. Balda cited nutrition, physical activity, mental engagement, and cognitive stimulation as key benefits of senior living communities. He explained that when seniors move into these communities, they often improve in health after an initial decline, largely due to the activities and social engagement opportunities available. He raised concerns about the financial gap affecting seniors who do not qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private senior living



services, estimating that 16 million seniors will face this challenge in the coming decade. Balda stressed the need to develop an affordable senior living model to ensure access for this group. Additionally, he emphasized the cost-saving benefits for Medicaid and Medicare when seniors have access to supportive environments.

Chairman Scott asked about the connection between physical and mental health for seniors.

Ms. McCormick shared the story of Danny Ferry, a retired Army veteran who joined the YMCA's swimming program to recover from a knee injury. His experience at the YMCA provided not only physical rehabilitation but also a sense of belonging and purpose, leading him to become a volunteer and community greeter. She emphasized that senior wellness programs go beyond just physical health—they create opportunities for friendship, community, and emotional well-being. Many seniors, she noted, participate in activities such as chair aerobics, swimming, or social coffee gatherings, often making the YMCA a core part of their daily routine.

Chairman Scott inquired about chronic disease prevention programs for seniors.

Ms. McCormick outlined the YMCA's evidence-based health initiatives, including arthritis management, diabetes prevention, cancer survivorship support, and fall prevention training. She stated that nearly every YMCA in Florida is engaged in these efforts, helping seniors maintain their independence and overall well-being.

Chairman Scott asked how senior activity programs help reduce costs for Medicare and Medicaid.

Ms. Strawter-Tanks noted that senior centers reduce health care costs by keeping seniors physically active, socially engaged, and mentally stimulated. Programs such as fall prevention classes and evidence-based health programs not only improve quality of life but also lower health care expenditures by reducing hospitalizations and emergency care visits. She highlighted that some seniors also gain employment opportunities through senior centers, further improving their economic security and community involvement.

Chairman Scott asked how stronger community ties could protect seniors from scams and fraud.

Mr. MacPherson stressed the importance of community-based interventions, advocating for a multi-setting approach that integrates health centers, senior housing, community centers, schools, and places of worship to strengthen protective networks for seniors. He referenced his organization's 130 policy recommendations, which include federal and state strategies to combat senior fraud and exploitation. He emphasized that expanding funding for the OAA is critical, as it has an outsized impact relative to its cost in the federal budget. He also highlighted the importance of intergenerational programs, referencing the work of DOROT, a



national organization that fosters intergenerational connections as a model for addressing senior isolation and vulnerability to scams.

Chairman Scott asked what the most effective initiative is for combating senior loneliness.

Mr. MacPherson identified raising awareness as a key step, stating that stigma around loneliness prevents many seniors from seeking help. He praised the former Surgeon General's efforts in bringing visibility to the issue and encouraged continued policy expansion in Medicare Advantage plans to cover non-medical benefits such as nutrition services and non-emergency transportation. He pointed out that the 2018 CHRONIC Act, which allowed Medicare Advantage to cover such services, was a bipartisan success, and urged Congress to further expand these benefits.

Chairman Scott asked whether the SENIOR Act would support organizations working to reduce senior loneliness.

Mr. MacPherson confirmed that the previous reauthorization of the OAA had already added "social isolation" as a key issue, leading to a \$250 million funding increase that has been highly successful. He argued that further legislation targeting loneliness as a public health crisis would provide additional resources to combat this issue.

Ranking Member Gillibrand inquired about how health care companies can help reduce senior isolation and improve community support from an insurance perspective.

Mr. Balda pointed to the decline of long-term care insurance, raising concerns about accessibility and affordability for seniors. He suggested expanding insurance-supported programs like SilverSneakers, which provides fitness and wellness programs for older adults. Ensuring that seniors have access to affordable preventive health programs would reduce isolation and improve overall well-being.

Ranking Member Gillibrand asked what programs have been most effective and what recommendations witnesses have for the committee.

Mr. MacPherson highlighted DOROT's "Genuine Connections" program, a virtual volunteer initiative for adults over age 65 that offers workshops on chess, art, and various activities via Zoom. He explained that leveraging existing community infrastructure for such programs would allow scalability and accessibility across the country.

Ranking Member Gillibrand shared her personal experience of how her son and his friends visit local senior centers, emphasizing the mutual benefits of intergenerational connections. She suggested that young people could play a role in educating seniors about digital scams, helping prevent fraud while also fostering meaningful connections between generations. She



then asked about fall prevention and how to address seniors' fear of falling, which often leads them to limit social engagement.

Ms. McCormick explained that fall prevention awareness is crucial, citing a four-year initiative in New York State where YMCAs have enrolled 2,500 seniors in fall prevention programs. She emphasized the importance of bringing these programs directly to community spaces such as churches and senior centers, rather than expecting seniors to travel. She highlighted that building confidence through education and prevention strategies allows seniors to remain socially active and independent.

Senator Justice spoke about the value of family and community in West Virginia, stressing that loneliness has profound consequences for seniors. He shared a personal anecdote about how family gatherings strengthen connections and lamented that many West Virginians have been forced to leave their communities due to economic challenges. Senator Justice called for greater efforts to combat senior loneliness, urging policy action and community involvement. He humorously referenced his bulldog, Babydog, asserting that pets play an essential role in providing companionship and reducing isolation.

Mr. Balda agreed, noting that pets and community engagement programs are among the most effective solutions for improving seniors' well-being.

Ms. McCormick emphasized that beyond the tactical activities and initiatives discussed during the hearing, addressing senior isolation requires a cultural recommitment to shared responsibility. She highlighted the core values of the YMCA—caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility—as guiding principles in fostering a society where every American takes responsibility for one another. She urged for greater awareness and collective action, stressing that society must reaffirm its commitment to honoring and supporting older adults who have lived meaningful and impactful lives.

Closing Statements

Chairman Scott thanked the witnesses and audience for their participation, recognizing the deep personal connection many have to the issue of senior isolation. He stressed the importance of recommitting to solutions and working collectively across sectors—government, private industry, families, and communities—to ensure meaningful action is taken. He concluded by expressing appreciation for everyone's engagement and dedication, underscoring the urgency of finding comprehensive solutions to combat loneliness and improve the well-being of seniors.