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**Governor Proclaims Social Isolation & Loneliness Awareness Week as**

**Coalition Efforts Battle Growing Public Health Challenges**

(MADISON, WI) Loneliness and social isolation are on the rise in Wisconsin and across the United States, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While people of all ages and backgrounds experience isolation and loneliness, older adults and people with disabilities are uniquely susceptible which puts them at risk for significant health problems. Governor Evers recently declared November 12-18, 2023, as Social Isolation & Loneliness Awareness Week in Wisconsin to bring attention to the growing challenges and new initiatives to support people in Wisconsin communities.

A 2023 U.S. Surgeon General’s [advisory](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf) raises alarms about the mental, physical and societal impacts of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection. According to the report, about half of adults in the U.S. indicated that they experienced loneliness even before the pandemic which can increase the risk for early death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Given the scope of the problem, individuals and organizations throughout the state have joined forces to form the [Wisconsin Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness (WCESIL)](https://wihealthyaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Coalition-on-Loneliness-and-Social-Isolation-Overview-10.27.23.pdf) to address the challenges and find community-based solutions. The group is planning a series of [public webinars](https://wihealthyaging.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Loneliness-Webinar-Flyer-2023.pdf) and an outreach campaign during awareness week to share strategies for greater connections among individuals and in communities.

Loneliness and social isolation are often conflated, yet they are distinctly different according to Kris Krasnowski, Executive Director at the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging and a WCESIL member. “Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that a person has,” says Krasnowski. “People who are socially isolated have little if any contact with other people. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person’s desired levels of social contact and their actual social contact.” Both are associated with a lack of meaningful connection leading to health impacts including a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of dementia as well as a significant increased risk for depression and anxiety.

While there are inherent challenges in finding and supporting lonely and isolated older adults and people with disabilities, there is also strong interest in finding solutions at the individual and community levels. The coalition aims to raise awareness, engage in policy initiatives, and share detection and support strategies to reduce loneliness and isolation and improve health and safety in the process. As a start, the group encourages people to reach out to those who are isolated and may be lonely, not just during the holidays but throughout the year. “We encourage random acts of connection,” says Krasnowski. “Taking time to call, video chat, visit or plan an outing can make a big difference in the life of someone who is isolated and feeling lonely. Staying connected let’s that person know you care.”

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