



The Importance of Support Services for Older Adults with HIV Experiencing Community Isolation

Issue Brief

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Introduction

As the population of older adults living with HIV continues to grow, so do the challenges they face in maintaining their health and well-being, particularly when experiencing community isolation and loneliness. The latest U.S. data on HIV indicates that approximately 54% (596,044) of people living with an HIV diagnosis are aged 50 or older, and about 16% of new HIV diagnoses reported in 2022 were also among this age group.ⁱ Older adults are more likely to receive a diagnosis at a later stage of infection compared to their younger counterparts, which can lead to worse outcomes in managing HIV and related conditions.



Community isolation and loneliness, though often used interchangeably, represent distinct but overlapping experiences that impact health. While community isolation reflects a lack of regular interaction with others, loneliness involves distress from feeling disconnected, whether or not someone is physically alone. For older adults with HIV, these challenges may intensify other health-related risks such as managing multiple chronic diseases, navigating polypharmacy, and coping with external stressors like socioeconomic barriers and stigma, both age-related and HIV-related.

This issue brief explores how community isolation and loneliness uniquely affect the health outcomes of older adults with HIV and highlights the importance of support services within public housing communities. This brief also outlines key resources and interventions designed to meet the specific health-related needs of this special and medically underserved population and help connect them to essential care and support.

How does community isolation and loneliness affect the health of older adults with HIV?

Community isolation and loneliness are two terms that are often used interchangeably to describe a person's state of being related to companionship status through human relationships with their communities, family, and friendships. While community isolation is defined as the lack of community contact and lack of people to interact with regularly, loneliness is defined as experiencing the feeling of distress due to being alone or separated from others.ⁱⁱ However, loneliness can also involve a state of solitude in which a person may choose and enjoy being in this state of being alone. The issue of loneliness becomes a challenge when individuals do not choose to be alone and start to have feelings of isolation from people in their communities.

Community isolation and loneliness can have a significant impact on the health of older adults living with HIV. These impacts have been linked to their mental and physical health, HIV management, and stigma. For example, loneliness has been found to be linked to increased rates of depression and anxiety in older adults 50 years and older with HIV and is also linked to functional impairment and reduced quality of life.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, community isolation has been found to be associated with cognitive decline, an increased risk of dementia, and HIV-associated neurocognitive disorders (HAND).^{iv} More specifically, HAND is defined as the spectrum of neurocognitive disorders associated with HIV where HIV can enter the central nervous system (CNS) in early stages of infection therefore causing cognitive, motor, and behavioral impairments.^v

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HIV management is also affected by loneliness in older adults as it leads to non-adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART) due to a lack of community support which may result in increased viral loads and a faster disease progression. Isolated older adults with HIV are at higher risk of missing medical follow-up appointments, delay seeking care, and experience intensified feelings of isolation due to double stigma in which older adults with HIV face because of ageism and HIV-related stigma.^{vi}

How do support services in public housing communities improve the health outcomes of older adults living with HIV?

Support services in public housing communities for isolated older adults living with HIV can help address health-related needs faced by this special and medically underserved population by ensuring stable housing, improving resident connectedness to essential resources for healthy living, and access to health care.^{vii} Supportive services also helps improve the overall health outcomes of older adults living with HIV by improving their physical and mental well-being, decreasing mortality caused by chronic diseases that require extensive management with medications such as diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, and lower the likelihood of getting involved in risky behaviors involving the sexual transmission of infectious diseases, and injection drug use.

Examples of supportive services for older adults living with HIV

Permanent Supportive Housing^{viii}

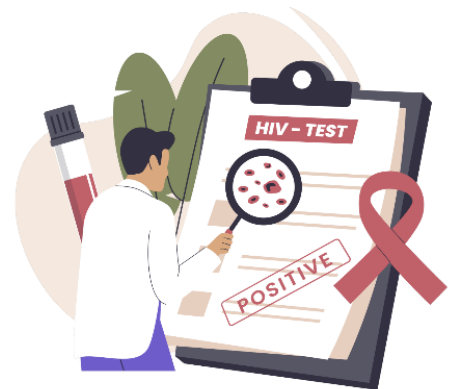
Permanent supportive housing is an effective strategy that involves housing assistance with supporting services provided to assist households that have at least one adult member or child with a disability challenge in achieving housing stability. These supportive services may include case management, education services, employment assistance and job training, food access, housing search and counseling services, mental health services, substance use treatment services, outpatient health services and more.



- The [Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS \(HOPWA\)](#) program is a federal program that aims to address the housing needs of people living with HIV/AIDS and provides grants for local organizations to help low-income persons living with HIV/AIDS and their families.

Access to HIV Testing and Care^{ix}

Timely access to HIV testing that specifically targets older adults living with HIV has been proven to substantially improve health outcomes particularly in addressing age-related neglect. The list of resources provided below provides guidance on where older adults with HIV can obtain access to testing and HIV care that is tailored to their specific needs.



- The [HIV Testing Sites and Care Services Locator](#) allows people to search for testing services, housing providers, and other services provided in nearby communities.
- The Health Resources and Services Administration provides funding to community health centers where people can access health services regardless of health insurance status. The [Find a Health Center](#) website provides a source to find the nearest community health center.
- The [Eldercare Locator](#) provides a source of information to address transportation barriers to receiving HIV testing and health care.

- The [State HIV/AIDS Hotlines](#) connects people with agencies that can help them based on their individual needs.
- The [National Institute for Mental Health \(NIMH\)](#) contains a list of comprehensive resources detailing the intersection of HIV and mental health and the existing available resources to find local mental health support.

Nutritional Support^x

Adopting a healthy nutrition regimen and preventing foodborne illnesses is especially important for older adults living with HIV because of the increased weakening of their immune system caused by aging, the disease, and medication intake due to other comorbidities.



- The [Living with HIV](#) website provides guidance on HIV, nutrition, and food safety.
- The [Nutrition Programs for Seniors](#) lists a variety of national programs for seniors to access food assistance.

Chronic Disease Self-Management Education and HIV^{xi}

Supportive services that provide access to chronic disease management improve the health outcomes of older adults living with HIV through a variety of national programs that aim to educate people on how to have effective communication with their physicians, how to improve medication compliance, and health literacy. This type of supportive service also helps reduce health care utilization such as hospital visits and health care costs.



- The Chronic Disease Self-Management Education (CDSME) Programs are a set of community-based programs designed to enhance self-management of chronic conditions with the most widely disseminated program being the [Self-Management Resource Center](#).
- Depression is one of the leading mental health issues that affects older adults with HIV. [The Program to Encourage Active, Rewarding Lives \(PEARLS\)](#) educates older adults about depression and how to develop skills for self-sufficiency.

Falls and HIV^{xii}

Falls are the leading cause of disability in older adults and an HIV diagnosis may exacerbate the health outcomes in this population after experiencing a fracture or other types of injuries. Supportive services that provide fall prevention interventions in communities where older populations reside may help mitigate the prevalence of falls in older adults with and without an HIV diagnosis.



- The [Evidence-Based Falls Prevention Programs](#) website provides tools and best practices to prevent falls in older adults. The evidence-based programs listed can be adapted to fit the needs of various community organizations.

Conclusion

Older adults living with HIV face unique health challenges intensified by community isolation, including late diagnoses, chronic disease management, and stigma. Support services in public housing communities are vital to improving their health outcomes by providing stable housing, access to care, mental health support, nutrition, and chronic disease education. These services help reduce isolation, promote treatment adherence, and enhance overall quality of life, making them essential for supporting the well-being and dignity of this growing population.

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- ^{xi} Ibid.
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