



FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT®
FOR HEALTHY LIVING
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

IN THE MIDDLE OF EVERY DIFFICULTY LIES OPPORTUNITY – ALBERT EINSTEIN

YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) is deeply grateful to the John A. Hartford Foundation (JAHF) for the opportunity to “bridge-build” from our collaborative work in diabetes prevention to our future work in sustaining healthy aging. Your support allowed us to engage a subset of local Ys to harvest the best practices and learnings around the virtual engagement of services for older adults, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Specifically, funding helped us to capture the crucial learning that occurred when Y facilities were abruptly closed during the national shutdown, triggering a rapid transition to remote service delivery for older adults. During this time, local Ys remotely engaged older adults and added new services to support their health, well-being, and social connectedness. Through surveys, interviews, and virtual harvest sessions, we learned how older adults changed the ways in which they interacted with the Y, and how local Ys best responded to meet those needs. During the course of the project, it became clear that engaging older adults during the pandemic was an effort to address social isolation and loneliness. The lessons learned can be categorized into the four below subthemes.

Consistency and Communication. YMCAs indicated consistent communication and intentional outreach were key to serving older adults throughout the pandemic. Types of communication and outreach ranged from conducting wellness checks, to scheduling virtual classes that mirrored pre-COVID fitness times, and even recreating former in-person experiences virtually.

- **Key learning:** YMCAs can best help older adults by building a new routine that reassures structure to their daily lives.

Transportation. The lack of transportation in many communities in which YMCAs are present is a major concern of older adults, contributing to social isolation, food insecurity, and inaccessible medical care. Without the presence of reliable transportation for older adults, YMCAs stepped in, often using commercial vans or buses, to transport older adult members to the YMCA and deliver meals, care packages, and essential supplies.

- **Key learning:** YMCAs can help provide older adults with transportation options to the facility as well as help meet needs such as delivering meals, care packages, and essential supplies.

Community Partners. YMCAs uplifted other community-based organizations to maximize collective impact in engaging older adults. Partners included insurance companies, hospitals, restaurants, local/state health departments, local businesses, senior centers, faith-based organizations, and Area Agencies on Aging, among many others. Together, YMCAs and their partners engaged in a meal distribution, senior celebrations, essential supply drives, personal protective equipment (PPE) dissemination, and wellness checks. Although the YMCA is a credible and multi-faceted organization, sometimes our best strength is convening stakeholders around a particular cause.

- **Key learning:** The Y is a trusted partner that can work collaboratively with other community organizations to maximize collective impact with older adults.

Addressing COVID-19 Fears. Although older adults were more susceptible to the virus, they were often the first members to return to YMCA facilities. For other adults though, the fear of the unknown contributed to increased isolation from their community at the Y. As such, Ys helped older adults by acting as a clearinghouse, conducting frequent cleanings, offering exclusive older adult utilization times, providing personal protective equipment (PPE) free-of-charge and more.

- **Key learning:** YMCAs need to be prepared and willing to address the COVID-19 fears and concerns of older adults.

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was the need for Ys to be prepared and willing to answer the frequently asked questions of their staff and volunteers as well as the need for transparency in communicating all matters related to the pandemic with YMCA members. For more details, see the attached **Healthy Aging Harvest Project Final Report** as well as List of Participating Ys.

THE IMPACT OF YOUR GIFT CANNOT BE OVERSTATED

THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROSITY, YOUR LEADERSHIP, AND YOUR SUPPORT. We strongly believe the lessons learned during this crisis will help create best practices that enhance social connectivity and engage older adults beyond this current challenge. Your collaboration helped us to identify key learnings in program operations, services, and virtual engagement of older adults. We aim to share these learnings with all Ys as they look to increase access and engagement of older adults in the communities they serve.

We are also grateful for your permission in sharing these learnings with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), as they have expressed an interest in what lessons have been learned in this space.

We look forward to continuing our relationship with JAHF, as we work together to support family caregiving and create age-friendly health systems.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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**YMCA Healthy Aging Harvest Project
FINAL REPORT
December 2021**

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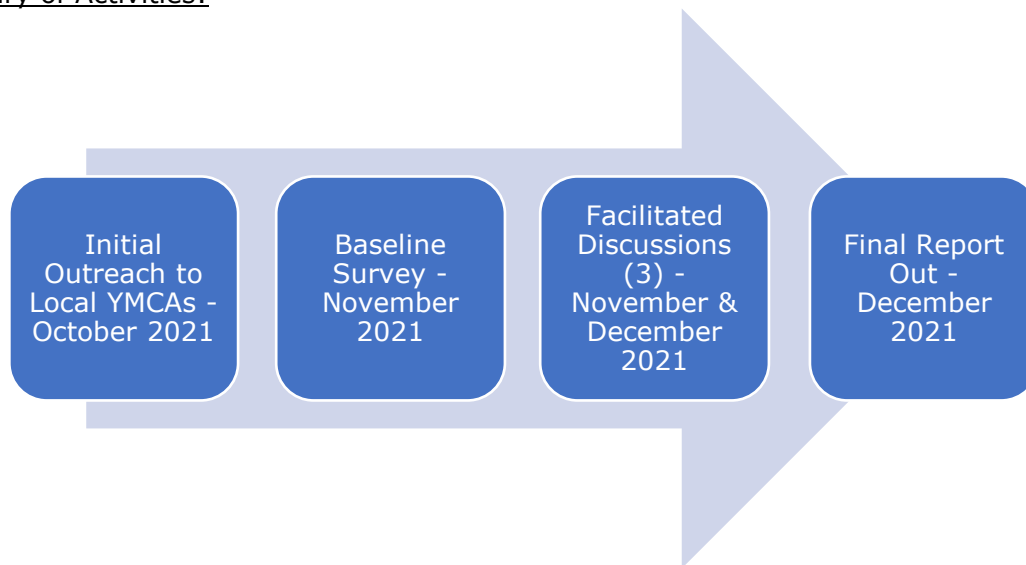
Participating YMCAs:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Albany Area YMCA | 12. Walla Walla YMCA |
| 2. Boothbay Region YMCA | 13. Waynesboro Family YMCA |
| 3. Central Lincoln County | 14. Whatcom Family YMCA |
| 4. Gateway Region YMCA | 15. YMCA of Greater Nashua |
| 5. Great Plains Family YMCA | 16. YMCA of Greater Cleveland |
| 6. Greater Kingsport Family YMCA | 17. YMCA of Greater Dayton |
| 7. Keene Family YMCA | 18. YMCA of Greater Indianapolis |
| 8. Mount Desert Island YMCA | 19. YMCA of Midland |
| 9. Muskegon YMCA | 20. YMCA of Greater San Antonio |
| 10. Pocono Family YMCA | 21. YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties |
| 11. San Angelo YMCA | 22. YMCA of Rapid City |

Project Overview:

1. Harvest learnings from the recent and rapid transition to remote engagement of older adults (55+)
2. Catalog what worked, what did not work, and what YMCAs would do differently if they had to arrive at these leading practices to support older adults again in the future

Summary of Activities:



Summary of Findings:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness and social isolation were prevalent across the United States (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017) and were often described as a “behavioral epidemic” (Jeste et al., 2020). These circumstances have only worsened as a result of the spread of the novel coronavirus (Hwang et al., 2020), especially for those with the greatest risk of infection, typically older adults (over the age of 60 years) who are already at a heightened

risk of severe illness, hospitalization, intensive care unit admission, and death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

Social isolation is defined as the level and frequency of one's social interactions. Social isolation, in conjunction with loneliness, have a detrimental effect on one's health, especially for older adults (Hwang et al., 2020).

Throughout the Healthy Aging Harvest Project, it became clear that the work conducted by YMCAs engaging older adults throughout the pandemic was an effort to address social isolation and loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed not only basic community needs, such food insecurity or access to transportation, but it also exposed the extreme levels of loneliness and social isolation older adults are experiencing.

The information shared by YMCAs in a baseline survey and facilitated discussions can be categorized into four subthemes: consistency, transportation, community partners, and addressing the fear of COVID-19.

Consistency & Communication

Participating YMCAs indicated that consistency was key to serving older adults during this unprecedented time. The YMCAs' communication and outreach efforts with their older adults YMCAs became more intentional and less than transactional throughout the pandemic. For example, YMCAs began using facility usage reports not to track who is coming into the building each day, but to learn who is *not* coming into the building and why.

From conducting wellness checks, to scheduling virtual classes that mirrored pre-COVID fitness times, and even recreating former in-person experiences virtually, YMCAs helped older adults build a new routine that reassured structure to their daily lives.

For example, one YMCA explained the importance of calling an older adult member during a time when they typically would have been at the facility for a group exercise class, lap swim, or a cup of a coffee. Other YMCAs described transitioning their group exercise classes to a virtual format, ensuring that each class remained at the same time of day with the same instructor. YMCAs were creative in their approach to offer virtual social gatherings, such as "Community Cafes," birthday parties and celebrations, and socialization time before and after virtual group exercise classes.

YMCAs discourage the assumption that older adults cannot and will not use technology. Virtual offerings are here to stay and offer a unique opportunity for YMCAs to connect with older adults unlike ever before. YMCAs suggest providing technology tutorials and support for older adults moving forward.

Daily communication was critical in understanding how older adults were feeling during this time and learning what additional resources or supports the YMCA could provide them to lessen the effects of social isolation. Many YMCAs created messaging scripts for staff so that calls were purposeful, but also allowed flexibility for conversation.

During a facilitated discussion, one YMCA explained, "We (the YMCA) created these habits, and change is not welcome." YMCAs do create the habits that our older adults repeat each day, and as such, YMCAs must make consistent touch points to avoid stress, anxiety, and fear during times of crisis.

Transportation

YMCAs reported that transportation was and still is a concern impacting its older adult members. The lack of transportation in many communities where YMCAs are present is a contributing factor to not only social isolation, but also access to food and medical care. This was especially true for older adults in lower income communities.

While some seniors can afford their own modes of transportation, many YMCAs shared that seniors have expressed other factors, such as lack of confidence and presence of a disability are barriers to traveling to the services they need.

Without the presence of reliable transportation for older adults, YMCAs stepped in, often using commercial vans or buses, to transport older adult members to the YMCA and deliver meals, care packages, and essential supplies.

In the future, YMCAs expressed interest in providing their own transportation or partnering with a school district or other community-based organization with access to buses and vans during the day.

Community Partners

In many cases, the efforts by local YMCAs to engage older adults during the pandemic would not have been possible without the help of their community partners. YMCAs indicated several partners throughout this project that came together to maximize their collective impact. Those partners included insurance companies, hospitals, restaurants, local/state health departments, local businesses, senior centers, faith-based organizations, and Area Agencies on Aging, among many. Together, YMCAs and their partners engaged in a meal distribution, senior celebrations, essential supply drives, personal protective equipment (PPE) dissemination, and wellness checks.

One YMCA shared that corporate volunteers were an invaluable resource during this time, especially in conducting wellness checks for older adults. The YMCA hopes to continue utilizing this group, especially when YMCA staff capacity is limited.

Another YMCA encouraged others to “Be a convener when it doesn’t make sense to be partner.” Although the YMCA is a credible and multi-faceted organization, sometimes our best strength is convening stakeholders around a particular cause. Throughout the pandemic, YMCAs recognized their individual strengths and catered their services to those strengths and uplifted other community-based organizations doing the same.

Addressing the Fear of COVID-19

A final subtheme YMCAs shared throughout this project was addressing the fear of COVID-19 among older adults. Although older adults were more susceptible to the virus, in many cases they were the first members to return to the YMCA facilities. But for others, this was not the case and the fear of the unknown contributed to the growing rate of isolation from their community at the Y.

YMCAs indicated the following efforts were helpful in addressing COVID fear:

- Serving as the information clearinghouse; or sharing timely and accurate information through a variety of mediums
- Conducting frequent cleanings
- Implementing exclusive older adult utilization times throughout the facility
- Providing on-site COVID-19 vaccination clinics; and
- Offering personal protective equipment (PPE) free-of-charge

Perhaps the biggest lesson YMCAs learned through this experience was to be prepared with frequently asked questions for staff and volunteers of all levels; and be transparent with your members, otherwise YMCAs explained they risked never seeing those older adults again.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, YMCAs are continuing to learn to operate differently as the pandemic progresses. Throughout this project, YMCAs affirmed the importance of engaging with older adults, especially given the rising concern of COVID-19 variants across the United States. Moving forward, YMCAs understand the value of letting older adults lead, not vice versa.

Additional Resources:

- [Baseline Survey](#)
- [Facilitated Discussion – Slide Deck](#)
- [Presentation of Findings – Slide Deck](#)
- [Presentation of Findings – Recording](#)

References

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, March 27). Severe outcomes among patients with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – United States, February 12–March 16, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.
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- Hwang, T.J., Rabheru, K., Peisah, C., Reichman, W., & Ikeda, M. (2020, May 26). Loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 32(10), 1217-1220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1041610220000988>
- Jeste, D.V., Lee, E.E., & Cacioppo, S. (2020, June 1). Battling the modern behavioral epidemic of loneliness: Suggestions for research and interventions. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 77(6), 553-554. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0027>
- Leigh-Hunt, N., Bagguley, D., Bash, K., Turner, V., Turnball, S., Valtorta, N., Caan, W. (2017, September 12). An overview of systematic reviews on the public health consequences of social isolation and loneliness. *Public Health*, 152, 151-171.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2017.07.035>

LIST OF PARTICIPATING YS

Y ASSOCIATION	CITY	STATE
YMCA of Greater St Petersburg	St Petersburg	FL
Albany Area YMCA	Albany	GA
YMCA of Greater Indianapolis	Indianapolis	IN
Central Lincoln County	Damariscotta	ME
Boothbay Region YMCA	Boothbay Harbor	ME
Mount Desert Island	Bar Harbor	ME
Muskegon YMCA	Muskegon	MI
Gateway Region YMCA	St. Louis	MO
Keene Family YMCA	Keene	NH
YMCA of Greater Nashua	Nashua	NH
YMCA of Greater Cleveland	Cleveland	OH
YMCA of Greater Dayton	Dayton	OH
YMCA of Greater Toledo	Sylvania	OH
Great Plains Family YMCA	Weatherford	OK
YMCA of Ashland	Ashland	OR
Eugene Family YMCA	Eugene	OR
Pocono Family YMCA	Stroudsburg	PA
YMCA of Rapid City South Dakota	Rapid City	SD
Greater Kingsport Family YMCA	Kingsport	TN
YMCA of Greater San Antonio	San Antonio	TX
YMCA of Midland Texas	Midland	TX
San Angelo YMCA	San Angelo	TX
Whatcom Family YMCA	Bellingham	WA
YMCA of Pierce & Kitsap Counties	Tacoma	WA
YMCA of Walla Walla	Walla Walla	WA
YMCA of Greater Waukesha County	New Berlin	WI