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# Isolation is an epidemic among seniors. The antidote to this scourge isn't another law.

By [Susan Collins](#)

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America is an aging nation. There are [about 43 million people age 65 and older](#) in our country today, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2050, that number is expected to nearly double. The fastest growing age group is what's called the "oldest old," those 85 years old and older. Maine's median age is the oldest in the country, and it's rising faster than the national average.

Though we pride ourselves on our tight-knit communities where neighbors still care for one another, the numbers show a portion of our aging population is falling through the cracks. In fact, [one out of every three senior citizens](#) in our country wakes up every morning isolated or lonely. For that older American, the common cold is dangerous and a fall in their home could be deadly.

Recently, the [Senate Aging Committee](#), which I chair, held a series of hearings to investigate social isolation and loneliness in seniors, starting with consequences and ending with cures. The consequences are severe. Dr. Len Kaye, director of the Center on Aging at the University of Maine testified, "Let there be no doubt, social isolation is a killer and more Americans are living in isolation than ever before." Seniors who are isolated or lonely have a 45 percent greater risk of dying. They have higher rates of heart disease, and they are more likely to develop diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. They are more prone to live with depression and anxiety. I was astonished to learn that the health effects of prolonged isolation are comparable to [smoking 15 cigarettes per day](#).

The antidote to isolation is connection. Here in Maine, Piscataquis County is one of only two frontier regions east of the Mississippi river with six people per square mile. Isolation is a real threat. Meg Callaway, project director at the Piscataquis "[Thriving in Place Initiative](#)," discussed the work being done to coordinate existing resources to connect seniors with communities, from local farms that provide fresh meals to seniors recovering from extended illness to libraries that are responding to the needs with caregiver supports and resources.

In New York City, a metropolis with more than 1 million seniors, the Age-Friendly Initiative has worked to transform streets and outdoor spaces to make the city more welcoming for seniors. Age-Friendly NYC worked with partners to redesign 600 dangerous intersections and install 1,500 new benches.

In Little Havana, a diverse neighborhood in Miami, which has the largest number of seniors in the state of Florida, leaders developed an age-friendly business district to incentivize seniors to visit local shops. In York County, Pennsylvania, which includes 71 boroughs and townships, the Embracing Aging Initiative has promoted volunteering and civic engagement to reduce isolation.

At the heart of it, the antidote to isolation is the fabric of our society. Friends, family and neighbors are the cure. This community spirit is what makes America great. In my earliest memories, I recall, when a new neighbor moved in, my mother would knock on their door with a freshly baked loaf of bread to say welcome. From small actions like knocking on a neighbor's door and calling friends and family members to say hello to bigger actions like employers making businesses friendlier for seniors and policymakers making streets safer for all ages, these steps to reduce isolation are part and parcel of what makes America.

In the midst of the health care debate in Washington, with instances of Alzheimer's, diabetes, and some cancers on the rise and cures not yet in sight, the state of public health in America may seem grim. While we tread the path toward curing and preventing deadly diseases, I invite you to join me to help ease an epidemic that exists within every American community. For some of the greatest public health threats, the antidote is not a prescription drug or a bill in Congress. We can take arms against isolation and loneliness among seniors in America, with words of kindness and actions of service.

*U.S. Sen. Susan Collins is chairwoman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging.*

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