



Building Connections for Mental and Physical Health

NEWSROOM

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After more than a year of social distancing to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, we are more aware than ever before of the strength we draw from the people in our lives. We've missed sharing meals and activities at the senior center, easy conversations with a friend who stops by for tea, and casual interaction with staff at a movie theater or grocery store. Study after study shows that this kind of connection is good for our mental and physical health, and we are worse off without it.

While older adults are particularly at risk, many of us have experienced how isolation affects our overall well-being. Recently, rates of depression, substance use, and anxiety have soared in all age groups. More than ever, we see the critical importance of access to behavioral health services. Older adults—especially those from marginalized communities—experience barriers to these services.

Identifying and overcoming these barriers to increase access to behavioral health services was the recurring theme at the [Older Adult Mental Health Awareness Day](#) (OAMHAD) Symposium on May 6, 2021. This was the fourth year that ACL, the National Council on Aging (NCOA), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) collaborated to shine a light on the mental health of older Americans. After a year of adjustment, innovation, and pivoting programming amid the pandemic, aging experts and diverse community members shared personal stories about how they continued to connect and support each other while following social distancing precautions.

They had a lot to share.

Presenters at the symposium explained how the pandemic has increased awareness of long-standing inequities stemming from discrimination based on race, language, culture, sexuality, or gender identity. It has also made obvious—and more urgent—the need for providers and services that are multilingual, culturally competent, and representative of the communities they serve. There is also a pressing need for data on diverse communities and evidence for effective behavioral interventions to address social isolation, loneliness, and mental health.

One aspect of the symposium in particular touched my heart and really made me think about serious mental illness for older adults across the country. In the [Lived Experience session](#), we heard personal stories of hope and resilience. Despite coming from a variety of places and backgrounds, these older adults shared common threads in accessing mental health services. They encouraged providers to hear them, listen to their issues, and focus on the individual in their care. I do not think there was a dry eye in the virtual room, as their words were simply inspiring. We need to continue to advance partnerships in this area.

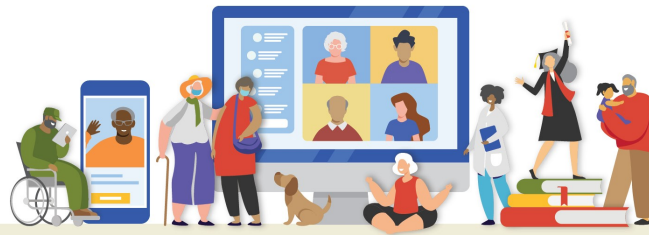
The aging and disability networks continue to work to move initiatives and programs for mental health supports forward, all while developing new ways to reach out and connect with older adults during the pandemic. Acting ACL Administrator and Assistant Secretary for Aging Alison Barkoff highlighted these efforts in her opening remarks at OAMHAD. “In the wake of COVID-19, our networks mobilized across the nation to ensure older adults had their most basic needs met, the ability to stay safe, and the opportunity to remain connected to their communities and one another.”

In countless ways, the aging network and partners have developed new ways to reach out and connect with older adults. Volunteers tucked notes into “contactless” home-delivered meals and other deliveries. Teams organized activities like intergenerational pen pals to keep people connected. Peer counseling, friendly visitors, and support groups switched from in-person meetings to video and phone conferencing. Memory Cafés geared for specific communities, like Korean Americans and LGBTQ+ older adults, continued to bring people and their caregivers together via Zoom for conversation, music therapy, and sing-alongs. Working with trusted partners like faith communities and libraries, organizations reached older adults who weren’t regular attendees at senior center events.

Through examples like these, as well as presentations and other comments shared at the OAMHAD Symposium, it is encouraging to see innovative ideas and promising practices exchanged. We continue to find new inspiration in stories from across the country and recognize the tremendous accomplishments of—and work still ahead for—older adults, communities, and the network.

As author, activist, and OAMHAD keynote speaker Ashton Applewhite pointed out, when we make the world a better place to grow old in, we make it better for all community members.

And it starts with connection.



This year's theme for Older Americans Month—Communities of Strength—is both a celebration of connection and a reminder of the role older adults play in cultivating the strength of our communities. Faced with hard times and good times, older adults have come through stronger and more resilient. The healthiest communities tap into the strength of older adults in ways that build a mutual support system that benefits people of all ages. For ideas and inspiration for building connection and increasing access to behavioral health services, visit [ACL.gov/CommitToConnect](https://acl.gov/CommitToConnect) and check out these [resources from our OAMHAD partners](#).

Special thanks to the OAMHAD Program Committee members who volunteered their time to plan this Symposium. As co-chair, I saw the expertise and energy they brought to ensuring this event's success.

- Kathleen A. Cameron, Co-Chair, National Council on Aging*
Collette Adamsen, National Resource Center on Native American Aging
Ellen Blackwell, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
Angie Boddie, National Caucus and Center on Black Aging, Inc.
Michele Karel, Veterans Health Administration
Lauren Lowenstein, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
Christy Malik, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors
Joel Miller, American Mental Health Counselors Association
Shannon Skowronski, Administration for Community Living
Janine Simmons, National Institute on Aging
Eric Weakly, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
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