

Spotlight Article

Fighting Social Isolation: A View from the Trenches

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It is a sad paradox that the technology revolution which has done so much to connect the world has in many ways been a source of increasing alienation and isolation for senior citizens. More than 25 years after the invention of the World Wide Web, one-third of Americans over the age of 65 report never using the Internet, and half lack a home broadband connection. This translates into more than 15 million older adults who can't use email, follow a family member on Facebook, or search for local events online. Information and communications technologies are a lifeline for the socially disconnected, and programs that engage and train older adults in using these tools are on the front lines of efforts to overcome the epidemic of social isolation among senior citizens.

Founded in 2004, New York City-based nonprofit Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) has taught over 30,000 free technology classes to people over the age of 60, and in the process has experimented extensively with strategies to address social isolation, learning important lessons about program models, training methodology, and outcome measurement. This article is a brief summary of these lessons.

When OATS launched its first trainings in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, nearly fifteen years ago, the organization initially sought to fill gaps in service delivery related to technology training and technology access. As one senior center director interviewed by OATS explained the need, "We have seniors and, in some cases, technology labs—but no curriculum, trainers, or funding." As home to nearly 250 government-funded senior centers, New York City had an extensive network of locations where older adults could receive services and meals, and a small number of these centers had computer rooms. But legacy funding restrictions and

limited organizational capacity meant that computer programs were typically episodic, volunteer-driven, and short-lived. In response to this need, OATS designed a technology training for older adults with little or no computer experience that, meeting twice a week over ten weeks, achieved strong results in terms of program enrollment, skills development, and program sustainability. As word of mouth spread, thousands of seniors signed up for the program at senior centers across the city, and City Council funds enabled consistent program development and growth.

In these early years, all participants were asked to fill out program evaluations via digital survey, and these included a question regarding to what degree the course helped the respondent "feel more connected to friends, family, and community." Self-reported improvements on this attitudinal measure were very positive, with 70–80% of respondents typically reporting progress in social engagement as a result of the course. Placing these results in context was challenging, however, since public agencies and foundations did not require reporting on outcomes such as social engagement. Seeking more systematic results, OATS secured funding for a social impact study of its programs and hired the New York Academy of Medicine to conduct an independent review. Published in 2010, this analysis found that 65% of participants reported improvements in social engagement when interviewed six months after completion of a basic computer course, and over 90% of participants were still using the internet on a daily basis (Gardner, Kamber, & Netherland, 2012).

These efforts to clarify the effect of technology training reflected a framework for analysis that was then in development—and still is today. Contrary to a field such

as housing, where commonly used metrics have long been available to document rent burden, housing adequacy, and residential segregation, serving as benchmarks against which community practitioners can assess impact, no such agreed-upon standards existed in the early 2000s to assess baseline social isolation and evidence of change. The most commonly cited report in New York City during this period was published by a city-wide nonprofit, United Neighborhood Houses, and focused exclusively on measuring risk factors related to isolation (living alone, widowhood, low English proficiency, etc.), not actual measured levels of isolation or loneliness (Walker & Herbitter, 2005).

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OATS developed a new strategic plan in 2010 wherein the organization raised the priority of program outcomes related to "changing the way we age," and decided to concentrate its efforts on five impact areas where technology learning and use could lead to measurable change: social engagement, health, financial security, civic engagement, and creative expression. This new focus on the social impact of OATS programs coincided with the organization receiving a three-year \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce Broadband Technology Opportunities Program. In partnership with the City of New York, OATS was able to build 24 new technology labs around the city, including its flagship Senior Planet Exploration Center (the country's first technology-themed community center for older adults); revamp its curriculum offerings; and launch SeniorPlanet.org, a website devoted to the notion of "aging with attitude." These investments provided new impetus for the OATS efforts to combat isolation. The Senior Planet Exploration Center received national attention for its efforts to create a community of participants who were using technology to connect to one another, garnering press coverage in national print and radio, and even hosting a segment for *The Today Show* at the center.

The most recent phase of OATS efforts to address social isolation began with "Connecting to Community," a partnership with AARP, Family Matters (a senior services organization in Washington DC), Comcast, the Evangelical Lutheran Good Samaritan Society, and the University of South Dakota in Sioux Falls. Tasked with creating an initiative to harness technology to overcome isolation, OATS designed a six-month training initiative wherein a total of 100 socially isolated individuals in two cities would receive an iPad and free broadband at home while agreeing to attend two classes per week for 26 weeks on how to increase social engagement using digital tools. Training was provided by local volunteers coordinated by Family

Matters and the University of South Dakota. Outcomes were based on a pilot study sample of 100 participants but researchers found improvements on measures such as companionship, access to someone to talk to about personal matters, and feelings that participants' daily activities were worthwhile for the community (AARP Internal Memo, 2014).

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This initiative revealed several lessons regarding programmatic strategies for overcoming isolation. To begin with, the decision to expand and intensify program services for isolated individuals proved successful. Participants attended a total of 52 sessions over 6 months and committed to using their iPads to build a network of friends and family, learn effective techniques for communicating via email, text, Facebook, and Twitter, attend community events and activities, and finally, complete a creative project (using Tumblr) and post it online. Program attendance was excellent (over 90%) and the support from the volunteer trainers was consistent and effective.

OATS had never utilized volunteers in a training capacity before and had substantial concerns about the risks associated with recruiting, training, deploying, and supervising unpaid instructors who were being asked to spend three hours per week in the classroom in addition to preparation and program coordination. As it turned out, nearly all of the 30 volunteers participated actively and with great enthusiasm. OATS provided the volunteers with a three-day intensive skills training covering classroom techniques, technology devices and applications, public speaking, and strategies for working with socially isolated older adults, along with a 52-module printed curriculum, trainer's guide, and weekly telephone-based coaching. They also had use of iPads and connectivity for the duration of the program, if needed.

OATS has revised the 26-week curriculum and launched a program called "Connect!" (though with paid trainers rather than volunteers) at the Senior Planet Exploration Center in New York City. In addition, OATS worked with Cornell University Sociology Professor Erin Cornwell to develop a 59-question survey, based on validated research studies, to assess and evaluate before-and-after change in social isolation for community participants.

Finally, these efforts have provided important opportunities to gather unique data about the state of social isolation among older adults, as well as ways to measure progress in addressing its effects. OATS programs are open to all enrollees, free of charge, as long as they are over the age of 60. Of

those who attend the Senior Planet center in Chelsea, 56% report living alone. In a 2016 face-to-face survey of 266 seniors in public housing, OATS found 27% had attended no social events in the past three months, 26% had gathered “not at all” with neighbors just to chat or for a social visit, and 10% said there was no one they could rely on if they had a problem or needed help. Post-course surveys indicated progress on a number of key variables and, as more data are gathered, OATS intends to identify baseline levels of social isolation, as well as contribute to the analysis of the expected effects of different kinds of social isolation programs.

Community-based efforts such as these, which aim to reduce social isolation among seniors through a series of programmatic innovations, with evaluation and metrics developed by practitioners in the field, can offer important information about the state of social isolation among older Americans. These studies are necessarily

heterogeneous and lack the careful research design and administration of formal academic initiatives, but they offer important color to the discussion around patterns of isolation among older adults, and more importantly, around measuring the relative benefits of diverse models of programs to help alleviate this serious problem among older Americans.

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