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Meal deliveries help combat the epidemic of loneliness

A recently released U.S. Surgeon General Advisory calls attention to a health crisis in our country: the far-reaching epidemic of loneliness. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront how isolation fundamentally affects us mentally and physically. This advisory reports that health consequences of the social disconnection can come with living alone include: a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults.

While the epidemic of loneliness is rising as the number of seniors grows, there is a cost-effective and simple solution: social connection on a regular basis. Sound Generations' Meals on Wheels is a prime example of a program that delivers much more than just meals to seniors, including: nutrition services, companionship, safety and wellness checks, and access to many other community-based services that facilitate keeping clients healthy, safe and secure while living independently in their own homes.

Drivers can become trusted friends

Nearly 40,000 people 60 or older in King County experience food scarcity, and many of them have health conditions that have rendered them homebound. For many of these people, Sound Generations MOW is a lifeline. "It is so nice to see a smiling face when my meals are delivered," says one client, who gets meals delivered on a weekly basis. "Sometimes I can feel so alone and apart from the world in my home. The program is so valuable to me."

A nationwide study of more than 200 seniors on a waiting



(Photos courtesy of Sound Generations)



list for home-delivery of meals, conducted by the Gerontological Society of America, revealed that 14% reported having no one to call for help. Twenty percent were in touch with a friend or family member less than once a month. Two-fifths of Meals on Wheels America recipients who answered a survey said they would have little daily contact with people if not for those who deliver their meals.

"Our program fosters a sense of connection and community among the older adults we support with regular well-check visits," says Adam Porter, program director, Sound Generations Meals on Wheels. "Our drivers often become trusted friends. Clients will tell them things they may not even tell their doctor about how they are really feeling."

"I see a lot of clients who don't

have family," says Fai Matthews, a Sound Generations MOW driver for over 17 years. "I'm that person, their girl Friday or their little ray of sunshine."

Listening to diverse client needs

Listening to clients and being perceptive to their challenges and needs is key to being more than simply a service provider.

"We try to be a client-driven program," Porter says. "Our offerings have changed over the years as our communities have changed. MOW has met with nonprofits that support the Asian, African, and other growing

cultural groups in Puget Sound. The MOW registered dietitian also called more than 50 clients to ask what they like and what they want to see more of on the menu. MOW has started offering a greater variety of Asian and Hispanic meals, and they offer rice with every meal instead of just bread to meet the needs of the Asian community.

"You have to be a little bit of everything," says former Meals on Wheels delivery driver Julian Montgomery. "You have to be a therapist, you have to be a counselor, you have to be a friend, somewhat of a family member."

Sound Generations partners with older adults to foster an inclusive, multigenerational community that addresses the diverse needs of all, especially those from low-income backgrounds and people of color. Our mission is to provide essential, accessible and inclusive services, giving people the support they need to age their way. Learn more at go.soundgenerations.org/HJL6.