

**NC Department of Health and Human Services**

**Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services**

# **Winter Wellness: Supporting Mental Health for Older Adults and Caregivers**

**Renee Rader, MA**

**Deputy Director & Chief Operating Officer, DMH/DD/SUS**

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**Adults/Caregiver Community Outreach Team Lead**

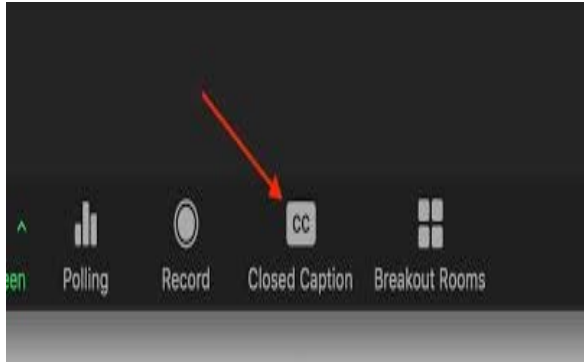
**Advocacy & Empowerment Team, DMH/DD/SUS**

**November 19, 2025**

# Housekeeping

- Reminders about the webinar technology:
  - Please make sure you are using a computer or smart phone connected to the internet, and the audio function is on, and the volume is turned up.
  - Please make sure your microphone is muted for the duration of the call.
  - Questions can be submitted any time during the presentation using the “Chat” box located on your control panel.

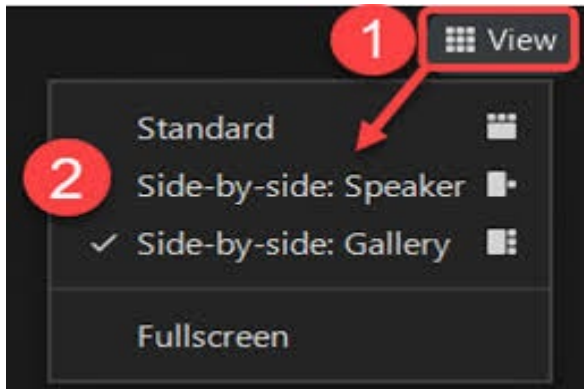
# Housekeeping



- American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreters and Closed-Captioning
  - ASL Interpreters and Closed-Captioning options will be available for today's event.
  - For closed-captioning options select the "Closed Caption" feature located on your control panel.

Intérpretes en lengua de signos americana (ASL) y subtítulos:

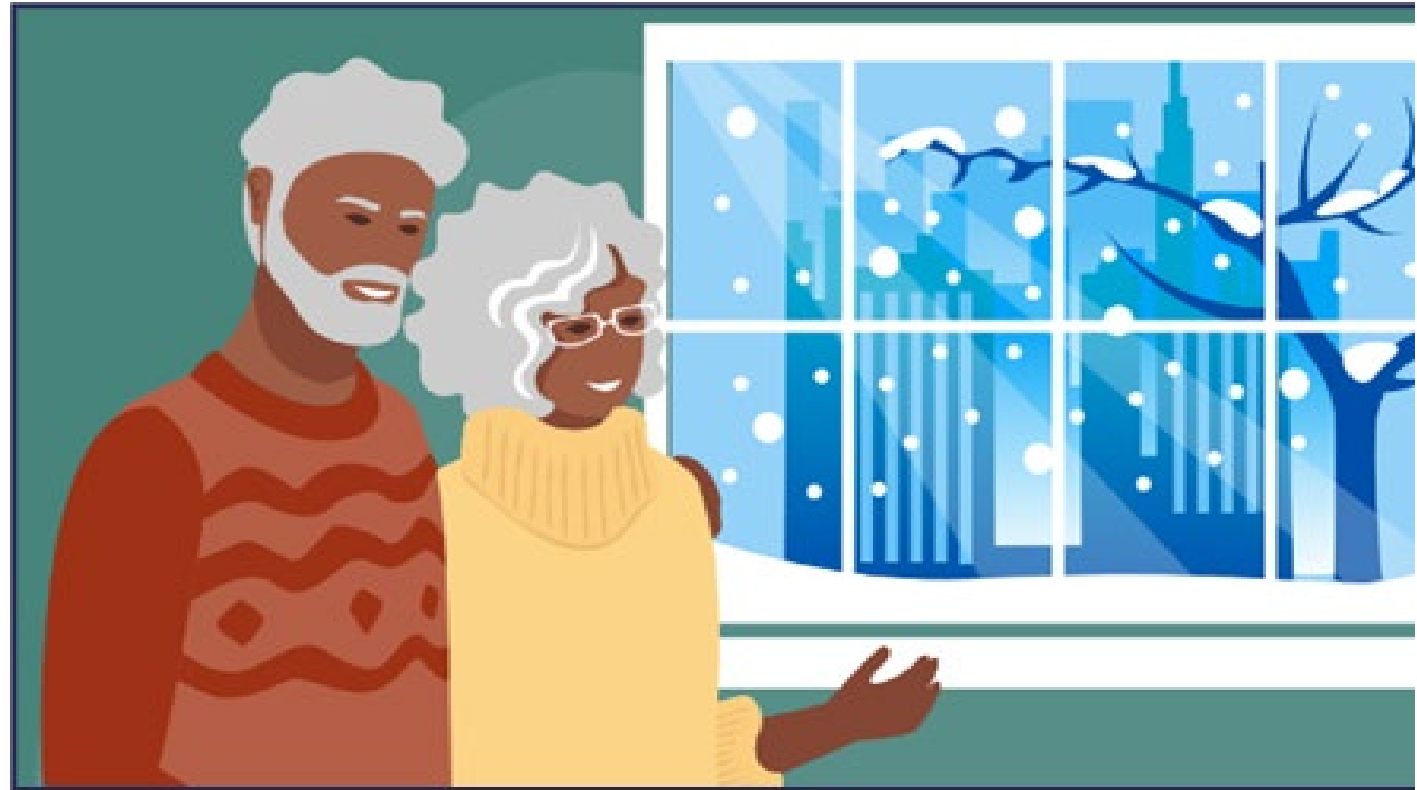
Habrán intérpretes de ASL y opciones de subtítulos disponibles para el evento de hoy. Para opciones de subtítulos, seleccione la función "Subtítulos" ubicada en su panel de control.



- Adjusting Video Layout and Screen View
  - Select the "View" feature located in the top-right hand corner of your screen.

# Agenda

- Welcome and Introductions
- Understanding Isolation in Older Adults
- The Impact of Isolation
- Preventing Isolation: A Collective Responsibility
- Activities That Inspire Hope



# Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Use Services



**Renee Radar, MA**

Deputy Director & Chief Operating Officer

- 30+ years in Behavioral Health System
- 13 years at NCDHHS
- DMH/DD/SUS since 2019
- Oversees business strategy and operations
- Provides strategic leadership on Department and Division priority initiatives

Website: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/mhddsus>

# Connect with someone now: 988 Lifeline and Peer Warmline

## 988 Lifeline

- Call or text 988 or chat online at [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org)
- For help in Spanish: press 2 or text AYUDA to 988.
- For specialized support: Press 1 for the Veterans Crisis Line
- If someone is Deaf, Hard of Hearing or has hearing loss: Call 988 by Videophone or connect through the web portal: [988Lifeline.org/deaf](https://988Lifeline.org/deaf)

## NC Peer Warmline: 1-855-PEERS NC (1-855-733-7762)

- Free, confidential, available 24/7 (English only)
- Connects callers with Peer Support Specialists, who are living in recovery and use their experience to help others.
- Learn more at [NCDHHS.gov/PeerWarmline](https://NCDHHS.gov/PeerWarmline).





# Understanding Isolation in Older Adults

## Southwestern AAA



**Sarajane Melton**

Director, Area Agency of Aging

Website: <https://regiona.org>

- Sarajane Melton received a Bachelor of Social Work from Western Carolina University in 1984, a Certificate in Gerontology in 2008 and a Master of Health Science with a concentration in Gerontology from Western Carolina University in 2010.
- She has worked for Southwestern Commission Area Agency on Aging (AAA) since 1997. She served as the LTC Ombudsman from 1997-2013 and became the Director of the AAA in December of 2013. Ms. Melton is also an adjunct faculty member in the Social Work Department for Western Carolina University.
- Before working for the Area Agency on Aging, she worked for Department of Social Services, REACH of Jackson County, Guardian ad litem, Park Avenue Adult Day Program and Disability Partners in South Carolina.
- Ms. Melton lives in Sylva, NC with her husband Gary.

# What is Social Isolation?

## Social Isolation:



When we are physically separated from others

Often stems from limited social outlets, physical or sensory challenges, or lack of transportation

Can be linked to financial barriers, distance from family and friends, or loss of mobility

May lead to lower self-confidence, declining self-esteem, or caregiver stress

Makes building or maintaining social connections harder, especially when the efforts feel overwhelming



# What is Loneliness?

## Loneliness is:

Personal and emotional  
experience that brings  
sadness or distress

A feeling of disconnection  
or not belonging, even  
when surrounded by others

A sense that meaningful  
people or things are missing  
from our lives

A perception of not “fitting  
in” with family, friends, or  
social groups

Potentially harmful to  
physical, emotional, mental,  
and spiritual health

# Barriers Caused by Isolation

## For the older adult:

### **Broadband and Connectivity:**

- Limited or no internet access increases feelings of disconnection and restricts access to telehealth, online activities, and loved ones.

### **Caregiving Responsibilities:**

- Isolation can intensify caregiver stress, leave little time or energy and limit their availability for the individual they are caring for.

### **Mobility Limitations:**

- Physical challenges become more pronounced when movement is restricted, reducing social contact and independence.

### **Transportation Challenges:**

- Inability to travel compounds isolation, preventing access to community spaces, appointments, or social visits.

# The Effects in Older Adults

**It is important to remember that loneliness is a common emotion. It is likely that at some point in our lives and at whatever our age we will experience it. We all desire to have “full lives” but sometimes that is just not possible.**

**While we may desire to always be surrounded by those we hold dearest, it is likely that we may be socially isolated. Our isolation may be the result of our own doing(s), or it may be the result of things beyond our control.**

# What does this mean for me and those I hold dearest?



Feelings of defeat and frustration will strain existing relationships and limit the development of new relationships



Attempts to deny and/or minimize the importance of these feelings may lead to physical and emotional health issues

- **43% of older adults are impacted adversely by loneliness and social isolation** (See: “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness,” NY Times, Sept. 2016)
- **32% increase in the risk of a stroke** (See: “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness,” NY Times, Sept. 2016)

# Opportunities

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**Community Engagement**

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**Senior Centers**

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**Senior Games**

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**Libraries**

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**Parks and Recreation**

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**Schools**

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**Faith-Based Organizations**

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**Food Banks**

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**Volunteer Opportunities**

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**Etc.!!!**

# The Impact of Isolation

## Kellin Foundation



**Dr. Kelly Graves**

President and CEO

Website: <https://www.kellinfooundation.org>

- Dr. Graves is a clinical psychologist and retired tenured professor. She co-founded the Kellin Foundation and serves as the President and CEO.
- She trains internationally in the areas of trauma and trauma-informed care.
- She has sat on Think Tanks at the White House and serves on multiple workgroups and boards, including the NC Institute of Medicine Editorial Board and the NC Essentials for Childhood Steering Committee.
- She has received numerous awards, including the American Psychological Association Division 56 Trauma Award, named as a Top Psychologist with the International Association of HealthCare Professionals, the UNCG Distinguished Alumni Award in Psychology, the North Carolina Psychology Association Sally B. Cameron Award, and most recently, a Coin of Excellence for her service and support for military and veteran families.

# The Impact of Isolation

## Emotional and Psychological Effects

- Increased risk of depression and anxiety
- Heightened feelings of loneliness and sadness
- Loss of sense of purpose or belonging
- Cognitive decline linked to chronic loneliness

## Social and Behavioral Implications

- Withdrawal from community and family activities
- Reduced engagement in preventive health care
- Increased reliance on emergency or crisis services



# The Impact of Isolation

## Physical Health Consequences

- Higher risk of heart disease, stroke, and hypertension
- Weakened immune system and slower recovery from illness
- Increased risk of falls and functional decline
- Comparable health risks to smoking or obesity

## Cognitive and Neurological Impact

- Accelerated cognitive decline and memory loss
- Greater likelihood of developing dementia or Alzheimer's
- Reduced mental stimulation due to lack of social interaction

# The Impact of Isolation

## Economic and System-Level Impact

Higher health care utilization  
and costs

Greater strain on caregivers  
and health care systems

Need for expanded social  
support and community  
programs

# Inspiring Hope: Kellin Foundation

## Protective Factors and Solutions

- Building social connections and community engagement
- Promoting earlier and easier access to services
- Integrating mental health screening into primary care and/or other health care settings
- Encouraging volunteerism and intergenerational programs

# Activities that Inspire Hope: A Collective Responsibility

## NCDHHS Division of Aging



**Rebecca Freeman**

Section Chief of Aging Services Operations

Website: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/divisions/division-aging>

- Began career at local senior center in Wake Forest, NC
- Oversaw senior centers, communications and advocacy in Johnston County
- Received Masters in Public Health with concentration on health policy and management from UNC
- Graduate of Leadership DHHS

# Key Steps to Reducing Loneliness and Isolation

**UNDERSTAND** loneliness and social isolation and their effects on older adults

**IDENTIFY AND ASSESS** loneliness and its risk factors in older adults

**CONNECT** lonely or socially isolated older adults to services or resources  
*matched to their needs and preferences*



# Reasons for Loneliness and Suggested Resources

Limited social skills

**Improve social skills – Increase verbal and non-verbal communication skills**

- *Online skills training, psychotherapy*

Low social support

**Increase social support**

- *Friendly visitors, virtual connections, in-home support services, meal delivery*

Limited access to social interactions

**Increase access to social interactions**

- *Telephone outreach, online chat, hearing aids, social activities, transportation*

Unhelpful thoughts about social situations

**Change unhelpful thoughts about social situations**

- *Cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness medication*

# Social Bridging NC

## Social Isolation Self-Assessment

If you are unsure if you are experiencing social isolation, take our online [Social Isolation Self-Assessment](#) to learn more about your risk of social isolation.

This assessment called the Lubben Social Network Scale (LSNS-6) is a validated tool designed to measure social isolation risk by measuring the number and frequency of social contacts with family and friends. This brief six question assessment can be self-administered. Scores of 0-12 suggest that an individual is at-risk for social isolation. Scores of 13-30 suggest stronger social connectedness.

## Virtual Events

Find fun and engaging virtual events offered throughout the state of North Carolina.

Our platform is easy to use, accessible from any device with an internet connection, and free of charge to you. Simply browse our events, choose one you're interested in, and follow the registration/join instructions on the event page – it's that easy!

[VIRTUAL EVENTS CALENDAR](#)

*Are you a community organization and want your events featured on our website? [Submit your virtual event here!](#)*



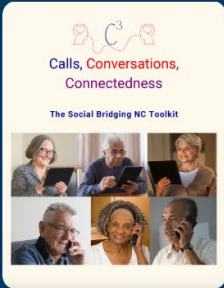
[www.socialbridgingnc.org](http://www.socialbridgingnc.org)



## Promoting Social Connectedness and Expanding Awareness about Social Isolation and Loneliness

*This toolkit was developed through a partnership between the [North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Aging](#) and the [North Carolina Center for Health and Wellness](#) at the University of North Carolina Asheville with funding provided by the Division of Aging*

*Authors: Louise Noble, Senior Research Associate, Natasha Vos, Senior Project Manager, and Emma Olson, Interim Executive Director.*

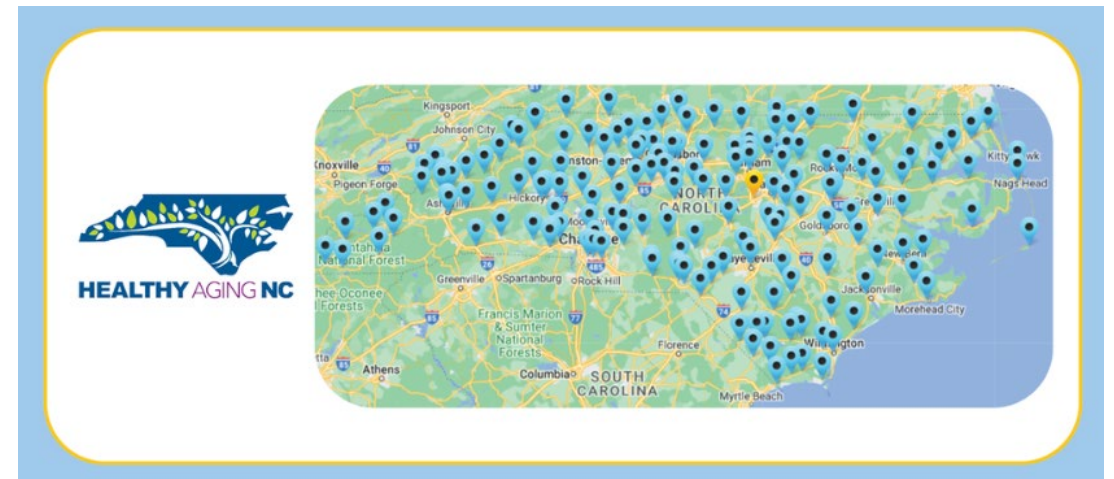


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# North Carolina Senior Centers



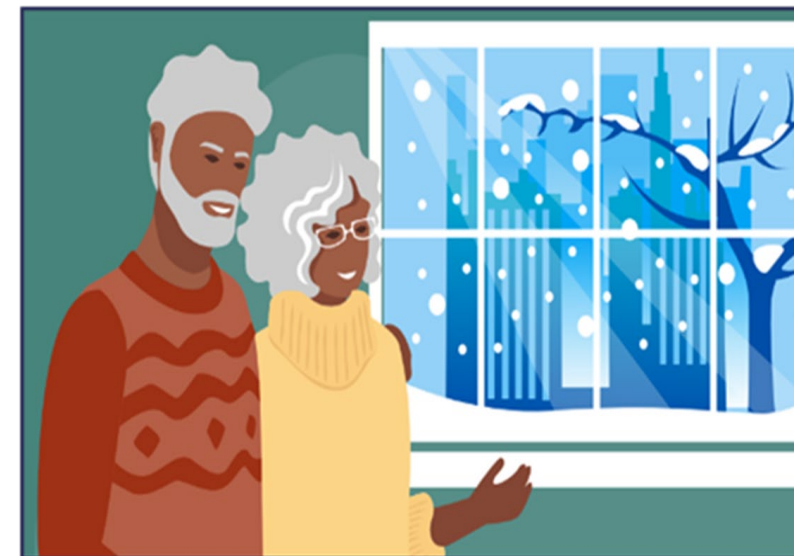
[Find a Senior Center Near You](#)

[Benefits of Participating at a NC Senior Center](#)

# Polling Question

**Which of the following actions are you most likely to take after this webinar?**

- Reach out to an older adult.
- Share resources with a caregiver.
- Volunteer at a local program that supports older adults.
- Start a conversation about mental health.
- I am not sure.



# Questions



Questions and feedback are welcome at  
[BHIDD.HelpCenter@dhhs.nc.gov](mailto:BHIDD.HelpCenter@dhhs.nc.gov).



The recording and presentation slides for this webinar will be posted to the [Community Engagement & Training](#) webpage.



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**  
Division of Mental Health,  
Developmental Disabilities and  
Substance Use Services

# Stay Connected with DMH/DD/SUS



Join our [Side by Side Webinars](#)



Join our [Mailing List](#)

# Additional Resources

- [Adapting Activities for People With Alzheimer's Disease | National Institute on Aging](#)
- [Holiday Drinking: Helping Older Adults be Happier and Safer | E4 Center](#)
- [How to Help a Caregiver: Simple Ways to Provide Support & Care](#)
- [Gerri – Recognizing my depression | E4 Center](#)
- [Gerri – Where to start | E4 Center](#)
- [Mary – Ask for help | E4 Center](#)
- [Supporting Your Mental Health During the Holiday Season | SAMHSA](#)
- [Support During the Holidays | SAMHSA](#)
- [Top Caregiver Tips for Caring for a Loved One](#)