

Case Study: Reducing Social Isolation Through Virtual Group Activity



Well Connected
A COVIA COMMUNITY SERVICE

leadingage.org/cast

Categories:

- ◆ Reducing Social Isolation
- ◆ Reducing Feelings of Loneliness
- ◆ Increasing Resident Engagement and Satisfaction
- ◆ Increasing Social Networks
- ◆ Increasing Quality of Life

About the Organization

Organization Name:

Covia

Main Contributor:

Amber Carroll, Director,
Well Connected

Organization Type:

Housing with Services

Organization Description:

In over 50 years as a nonprofit, public benefit organization, Covia promotes positive aging by cultivating healthy and engaged communities with a continuum of innovative services that actively support intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being.

Project Description

Well Connected and Well Connected Español, Covia Community Services, are a community of participants, staff, facilitators, presenters, and other volunteers who value being connected. 365 days a year, groups meet via phone or web conference for 80+ weekly activities. The primary audience includes English- and Spanish-speaking older adults (60+) living anywhere in the United States.

Socialization Modality

Video Chat, Audio Chat, Art, Games, Exercise, Music, Facilitated Communications and Conversations.

System Embodiment

Participants access Well Connected and Well Connected Español utilizing their own devices, including tablet, desktop computer, laptop, all-in-one computer, captioned phone, smartphone, voice activated assistant technology, or landline.

Business Model

No cost to consumer – The Well Connected programs are funded by Covia with additional financial support from individual donors and foundations.

Implementation Approach

Well Connected and Well Connected Español offer over 80 activities each week, covering a range of topics, including art, history, music, museum tours, armchair travel talks, lectures, brain health classes, yoga, meditation, philosophy, support groups, games, and much more. All activities are accessible via phone and/or web conference.

Older adult participants call to register and then receive an updated catalog of offerings. They are welcome to join as many calls as they would like. Additionally, the majority of our facilitators are participants themselves so we welcome dual-involvement in the community, to create the largest impact on one's sense of connectedness. We also partner with our sister program, Social Call, to pair people for individual weekly phone visits.

In addition to individuals joining the Well Connected programs, residential staff or activity coordinators can host a selection of group events as a group activity. This is an affordable and easy way to increase wellness offerings and engage residents.

Outcomes

Reduce Social Isolation; Reduce Feelings of Loneliness; Reduced Depression; Increased Resident Engagement and Satisfaction; Increased Social Networks; Increased Quality of Life; Increased Staff Efficiencies

Well Connected participants self-reported the following impacts of the program:

- ◆ 83% increased intellectual stimulation.
- ◆ 76% increased social connections.
- ◆ 63% improved mental health.

Challenges and Pitfalls to Avoid

In some ways, virtual communities have their own social norms. Nonverbal behavior must be adapted for the phone, so everyone can feel heard and welcome. We have community guidelines to help with that and we work one-on-one with participants and facilitators to ensure the program is a good fit. If you are considering referring a participant to Well Connected, the ideal candidate is over 60, able to participate in a group social setting, and interested in connecting with peers.

In addition, like in-person events, it can be difficult for individuals to try something new. Participants who have a friend or staff join them for the first call or two have an easier time engaging in future virtual group activities. If one group or topic isn't a good fit, just try a different one!

Lessons Learned/Advice to Share with Others

Some activity coordinators feel hesitant to promote a virtual activity program, as the first response is, "But I want residents to come out of their apartment!" We hear you; we want that too. We have learned (and research proves) that chronic feelings of loneliness can create distrust of others, people respond to that distrust in a way that confirms one's suspicion, and thus, the cycle continues. It is imperative that we offer many creative opportunities for individuals to engage in social connection so that we can break that cycle. We find, once an individual gets a taste of healthy social connections, they want more. They begin to seek other opportunities within the residence or in their local community. In addition, we have activities that are perfect for group engagement in your community room. If your goal is to increase resident engagement, we'll help get you there.