

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND AGING

By Susan Evans, Mason County Senior Services

Mason County Senior Services has launched a new program designed to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older adults. The Friendly Caller program matches volunteers with older adults who are interested in receiving calls. Volunteers choose when and how often they make calls. The call can last two minutes or more. Volunteers complete a brief report after the call which can generate additional outreach to the older adult with information about community resources available. Volunteers must be at least 18 years of age, must have access to cell phone service and internet, and a background check is required. All calls route through a central phone number so neither the volunteer phone number nor the senior phone number are shared with one another.

According to the World Health Organization Commission on Social Connection in 2025, “social connection can protect health across the lifespan. It can reduce inflammation, lower the risk of serious health problems, foster mental health, and prevent early death. It can also strengthen the social fabric, contributing to making communities healthier, safer and more prosperous.”

The Alzheimer’s Association Public Health Center of Excellence reports “... social engagement may lower risk of cognitive decline by as much as 70% in those who frequently socially engage.”

Based on a 2023 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, “... loneliness – a related construct to social engagement – can shorten a person’s life by an estimated 15 years, or the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes per day.”

Social isolation is the absence of contact with others while loneliness is a subjective term. Can someone be socially engaged and still feel lonely? The answer is yes, and you may have even experienced feeling alone or lonely in a room full of people. On the other hand, a socially isolated person may not feel lonely at all. You may know or be someone who is quite happy to be left alone. Even the most social individuals may at times prefer to be alone. It appears then, that it is the state of discontented loneliness that creates the risk to our health rather than just being isolated.

The 2025 Mason County Senior Services Survey indicates 43% of our adults age 60+ live alone and 10% are caregivers which is more than 4,000 individuals. Both situations increase the risk of social isolation and loneliness. Similarly, the 2024 Area Agency on Aging of Western Michigan (AAAWM) Needs Assessment indicates 53% of older adults in Mason County (or around 4,000 individuals) report feeling lonely or isolated often or sometimes. Please consider helping an older adult seeking social connection by spreading kindness in a phone call for a few minutes every week or two.

Volunteers of all ages are welcome but if you know any younger adults who would like to become more comfortable talking to others, this is a great opportunity to work on communication skills. *Psychology Today* (2025) suggests that young adults in Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) who lack soft skills such as communication should seek

opportunities to improve through practice. The Friendly Caller Program provides an opportunity for younger volunteers to practice light conversational and rapport-building communication skills.

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—World Health Organization
Commission on Social
Connection in 2025



If you or someone you know is interested in receiving phone calls from a Friendly Caller Volunteer, would like to be contacted when the next training orientation is scheduled, or if you have questions about resources for seniors, email Susan Evans at [new address] sevans@masoncountymi.gov or call 231-316-6523.

Seniors who need help finding programs and services can also contact AAAWM at 888-456-5664 Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. or one of the four senior centers in Mason County. Another helpful resource is the **Active for Life** publication for seniors available at senior centers, at various locations throughout the community, and online at www.scottvilleareaseniorcenter.com.

Two inaugural one-hour training sessions were held February 25, 2026. Call now to be notified when the next orientation is scheduled!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Friendly Caller Program



FACT: 53% of older adults in Mason County report feeling lonely or isolated often or sometimes.
Source: AAAWM 2024 Community Needs Assessment

FACT: Strong social connections can lead to better health and longer life.
Source: World Health Organization, 2025

Do you have a few minutes to make a friendly phone call? You can make a positive difference in someone's life!

JOIN NOW!

 (231) 316-6523 or sevans@masoncounty.net
 Volunteer Orientation Wed 2/25 9am or 1pm at Mason County Airport
 Please call or email to RSVP. Background check required.

