

U of L research aims to reduce loneliness among seniors

BY TOM LATEK
KENTUCKY TODAY

LOUISVILLE – Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a serious risk to the health and well-being of older adults, linked to heightened risks of depression, cognitive decline, chronic illness and even early mortality. A new research project at the University of Louisville is aiming to tackle this public health challenge.

“Universal belonging: A place-based intervention to reduce loneliness” is being led by researchers at the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute at the university. The five-year project seeks to identify and reduce loneliness among seniors aged 65 and older by combining neighborhood-level data, community engagement and targeted, place-based interventions.

"We are deeply grateful to the Humana Foundation for supporting this effort to find new ways to help seniors live healthier lives in Louisville and across Kentucky," said Ted Smith, Ph.D, co-director of the Humana Center for Community Health Research at U of L.

This initiative builds on the work of the school's Universal Basic Neighborhood Project, which was developed to discover and promote the core resources neighborhoods offer that have been shown to support good health.

Through the UBN project, researchers identified social connection as a key ingredient in healthy communities, and

loneliness, especially among seniors, as a critical risk factor for poor health outcomes. The new project applies UBN's data-driven approach to address this challenge, using demographic, clinical and environmental data.

"This project represents a direct application of this place-based framework to a real and growing need in our community," said Lauren Anderson, a U of L researcher who developed that place-based data model for this work as part of her dissertation research.

The project continues a collaboration with Nancy Seay, Ph.D., with The Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson Sr. Center for Racial Justice and the Department of Sociology at Simmons College of Kentucky, who will lead the asset mapping and community-based research components of the study. The work will focus on identifying both social needs and existing

assets within the neighborhoods selected for intervention, helping to ground the study in the lived experience and local context of older adults.

During the study, researchers will work with community partners to test a variety of neighborhood-based strategies aimed at fostering social connection. The project also will gather new insights on how local infrastructure and community design influence emotional well-being in aging populations.

The project website at louisville.edu/envirome/healthyairwaterand-soil/LonelinessStudy offers more information.

Organizations supporting seniors and interested volunteers should send an email to Cayley.Crum@louisville.edu.

A baseline loneliness survey will be ready in July for seniors willing to enroll in the study.

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