

EXPERTS' VOICES | DAVID BLUMENTHAL – May 29, 2018

The High Health Cost of Social Isolation – and How to Cure It

A call from your doctor's office inquiring whether you have plans for Thanksgiving may not be typical, but it is an innovative way that one health-care system is addressing a clear threat to its patients' health—social isolation. To be socially isolated doesn't simply mean dealing with the occasional bout of loneliness. It means being substantially disconnected from other people and society in general.

Evidence shows that social isolation is bad for your health, and that is especially true if you are older or a high-need patient— meaning you have two or more chronic illnesses and physical or cognitive limitations. That is because if you're sick, being socially isolated makes you sicker and can even cause early death. Like the chronic illnesses it complicates, social isolation can be treated. A review of 32 studies targeting social isolation among older adults found that several initiatives could improve patients' physical and mental-health outcomes. Interventions like connecting patients to social-support services have had success at lowering healthcare use and costs.

A number of U.S. health-care systems are experimenting with such remedies. CareMore, a health-care delivery system that operates Medicare Advantage plans in seven

states, launched a "Togetherness Program" last May. It focuses on building personal connections with patients at risk of social isolation. For example, around Thanksgiving last fall, CareMore staff called seniors to ask if they had a place to go.

LinkAges leverages technology and social interactions across generations to help older adults continue to live independently but remain engaged in their communities. One component of the LinkAges model is a "TimeBank," through which participants earn hours by providing services (cooking, driving, sharing hobbies) in return for services, help or instruction.

—*Dr. Blumenthal is the president of the Commonwealth Fund, a national healthcare philanthropy based in New York.* **The Experts** are industry and thought leaders who write on topics of their expertise. You can read this full blog post and others at [WSJ. com/Experts](https://www.wsj.com/Experts).



