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Governor Evers Proclaims Loneliness and Social Isolation Awareness Day as Coalition Efforts Battle Growing Public Health Challenges

(MADISON, WI) Loneliness and social isolation are on the rise in Wisconsin and across the United States, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities can experience loneliness and social isolation, older adults and people with disabilities are uniquely susceptible which puts them at risk for significant health problems. Governor Evers recently declared December 15, 2021, Loneliness and Social Isolation Awareness Day in Wisconsin to bring attention to the growing challenges and new initiatives to support people in Wisconsin communities.

In the U.S., 40% of people who have a disability and 43% of people age 65 or older say they feel lonely some or all of the time. According to a 2020 AARP Foundation report, two-thirds of adults in the U.S. are experiencing social isolation, with 66% reporting that their anxiety levels have increased during the pandemic. Given the scope of the problem, researchers, agencies and organizations throughout the state have joined forces to form the Wisconsin Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness (WCESIL) to address the challenges and find community-based solutions.

While loneliness and social isolation are often conflated, they are distinctly different according to Ellen Rozek, PhD., Associate Professor of Psychology at UW-La Crosse and a WCESIL member. “Social isolation is commonly defined as an objective measure of the number of contacts that a person has,” says Rozek. “People who are socially isolated have very little if any contact with other people. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person’s desired levels of social contact and their actual social contact.” Both, she says, are associated with physical, emotional, and psychological health impacts which include greater risk for cardiovascular events, depressive symptoms, cognitive decline, abuse and neglect, and morbidity and mortality.

While there are inherent challenges in finding and supporting lonely and isolated older adults and people with disabilities, there is also strong interest in finding community-based solutions. As a start, the group encourages people to reach out to those who are isolated and may be lonely, not just during the holidays but throughout the year. Taking a moment to call, video chat or visit can make a big difference in the life of someone who lacks meaningful connections. “Our hope is that by working together, we will better understand and support people who are lonely and isolated by raising awareness, engaging in policy initiatives, and sharing detection and support strategies to reduce loneliness and social isolation and improve health and safety in the process,” says Rozek.

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