Recommendations & Conclusions of the Loneliness Institute

A. Summary

The Loneliness Institute was created to help solve the Loneliness Epidemic — specifically to **find loneliness solutions that could reach populations greater than 1,000,000 and are sustainable long term.** Most existing research on the topic looks at the size and harms of the loneliness problem. Less attention has been paid to finding solutions ("interventions" in an academic research context), which is where we focused.

OUR RESEARCH

Seven full-time staff examined thousands of studies, government programs, news articles, non-profits, startups, one-off projects, and more. We interviewed hundreds of people working on the topic in one-on-one and group calls. We were looking for patterns in the research that would direct us to the highest-impact solutions.

We concluded that the programs most likely to make an impact at mass scale fit into what we call the **TOP Strategy**: Tools, Organizations, and Places:

1. **Tools:** Make it easier for people to connect with widely available, free or low-cost software that helps make connections, find groups, plan events, and organize activities.

2. **Organizations:** Reboot national membership organizations, make it easier to create them, help them scale, and help people find them.

3. **Places:** Open up in-person, no-cost community spaces where people can have recurring social contact and host social activities.

Programs that seemed more successful also shared certain characteristics - the **RAP Elements**:

1. **Recurring contact** — with the same people (enabling deeper relationships to form)

2. **Activities** — something to do, such as a project, sport, or activity that makes it more than just a hangout

3. **Purpose** — a higher-level mission or charitable activity (optional but helpful)

On the positive side, we found incredible well-intentioned individuals and organizations committed to solving this problem. On the other hand, we have substantial concerns that the search for meaningful solutions is not on a path toward success.

1. **Still studying harms, not solutions.** Most resources are still going toward studying the scale and harms of loneliness (which are fairly clear at this point). We now need to pivot and prioritize finding and testing solutions.

2. **Transitory work.** Much of what we found were one-off studies or very small experiments. This is good work, but long-term projects with high impact are less common (and more needed).

3. **Non-serious leadership.** The highest profile voices aren't necessarily helping. The Surgeon General dominates the discussion, but his office has yet to produce an actionable plan for national-scale solutions. The dominant non-profit in the space appears to be a lobbying front for healthcare companies with other agendas.

4. **Lonely-washing.** Many entities are jumping on the loneliness bandwagon to promote for-profit products, startups, or healthcare companies. This doesn't seem to tie back to meaningful efforts to solve the problem — and consumers are likely to be deceived or disappointed.

5. **Paid services.** Fee-based programs and investor-backed startups are unlikely to be sustainable as a population-level solution. Risks include excluding people who can't afford the service, loneliness used as a sales tool for products, and creating dependencies on paid services that would have harmful impacts on individuals if canceled.

CONCLUSION

We know how to solve the loneliness epidemic. There is no shortage of techniques and ideas, including many solutions that have proven effective for generations and just need a reboot. To maximize our impact and the help we can provide, it is time to

1. Focus on finding solutions instead of studying the problem.
2. Create leadership structures to bring together everyone working on the problem.
3. Create an actionable national strategy to fund and sponsor large-scale rollouts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to acknowledge the hundreds of researchers and innovators working on this important topic, especially those who shared their time and insights with us.

NEXT STEPS

At this point, the Loneliness Institute has completed the work that we were set up to do. We would like to find individuals or an organization that would be interested in continuing our work. We will donate our work product, IP, and brand. Our goal is to find a home that is most likely to maximize nationwide impact by funding, staffing, and growing the Institute.

About the Loneliness Institute

The Loneliness Institute brings together researchers and practitioners working on the Loneliness Epidemic to find large-scale solutions. The Loneliness Epidemic is an under-addressed, widespread crisis — and a significant underlying driver of other social and health crises. Many experts are studying and writing about the issue, but there is no center of excellence or primary research institution focused on it. Many programs have shown promise at alleviating loneliness on a small scale, but we need to help initiatives reach broad populations. We are an independent 501(c)3 non-profit funded by private donors.

B. Research Process

Our research process involved a broad survey of everything we could find related to solving the loneliness epidemic. As we gathered information, we built a database to help us start identifying patterns.

SCOPE

- Due to the large volume of studies, we narrowed our search to English-language work focused generally on North America, within the past 5 years.

- Our focus was strictly on studies and projects that presented solutions to loneliness ("interventions" in an academic/healthcare context).

- We excluded the large body of work establishing the scale and harms of loneliness, which is well-covered elsewhere.

SOURCES

We databased and reviewed

- Programs: 193

- People: 726

- Organizations: 573

- Media (Articles, videos, books, etc): 421

- Academic studies: 100+ included, more than 5,000 considered

At this point in the research, we felt like we had sufficient data to share our recommendations. Additional examples that we collected beyond this point seemed similar to items already studied or were very small niche projects. We then pivoted to producing our recommendations.

SOLUTIONS SETS

As patterns started to emerge, we started organizing the data into "Solution Sets" — general categories of solutions, which are not mutually exclusive. For example, a program that addresses loneliness through Christian workout groups would be categorized under Faith and Fitness. Each solution set includes the most interesting programs, experts, media, and research. We started to build resource guides for each solution set.

Examples include:

- Animals
- Art & Music
- Caregivers
- Chronic Illness and Disability
- College Students
- Faith
- Fitness
- General Public
- Housing
- Immigrant
- Men
- School
- Seniors and Older Adults
- Technology
- Underrepresented Communities
- Veterans
- Work
- Youth

C. Recommendation 1: The TOP Strategy

In forming our recommendations, we started with the core premise of our work: **Find loneliness solutions that could reach populations greater than 1,000,000 and are sustainable long term.**

We found many well-thought-out, inspiring, well-run, and promising initiatives — and we have great respect for the researchers and innovators doing this important work. Non-inclusion in our recommendations is in no way meant to diminish these projects. We're supportive of everyone working to solve this epidemic.

When we focus on the specific question of large-scale maximal impact, three key strategies stood out — what we call the **TOP Strategy:**

1. **Tools:** Make it easier for people to connect with widely available, free or low-cost software that helps make connections, find groups, plan events, and organize activities.

2. **Organizations:** Reboot national membership organizations, make it easier to create them, help them scale, and help people find them.

3. **Places:** Open up in-person, no-cost community spaces where people can have recurring social contact and host social activities.

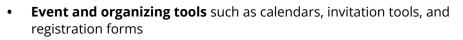## 1. TOOLS: Make it easy for people to stay connected

The early internet featured tools to bring us together, with human connection being a fundamental value of early internet culture. Today it is much harder to connect with real people online, especially between generations.

- **Platform Silos:** Software giants pushing us into isolated platforms that don't interconnect.

- **Social Networking becomes Social Media:** We used to celebrate the way social networking helped us restore and expand personal connections. Now most of these platforms have become social media — where we are fed content from strangers.

- **Lost Technology Access:** People used to have cheap or free access to discussion lists, meetup platforms, shared calendars, registration forms, etc. Most of these have been lost or become inaccessible due to tech consolidation. The average person can't create a discussion list, and most groups are forced to settle for corporate tools such as Google or Facebook groups that have limited functionality, can't reach users off those platforms, and subject participants to advertising and data harvesting.

There are few ways for individuals, small organizations, or classrooms to get their friends together without paying fees or giving their data to monopolies. And it's just too hard.

We recommend the creation of free, accessible, open-source tools such as:

- **Discussion lists** that are fully open and support email, texting, and other widespread forms of communications

- **Event and organizing tools** such as calendars, invitation tools, and registration forms
- **Discovery tools** to find local events and organizations
- **Local community newsletters** produced and moderated by local residents

2. ORGANIZATIONS: Reenergize the proven solution

From Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam to our own experiences, we know that membership organizations were an essential feature of American life that has been in rapid decline. Participation has faded for many reasons, but group membership was historically a primary form of social interaction, organized by institutions that lasted for decades. We're far from the days when small towns posted a sign with logos of all the local groups you could join.

Organizations are one of the few solutions to loneliness that have proven to have **1) mass reach, 2) longevity,** and **3) in-person interaction**. If we want to reach many people quickly, we should undertake a national program to strengthen and spread membership organizations by making it easier to create them, grow them, and find them.

We believe the fastest way to reconnect populations is to reboot the joining habit. On the consumer side that could include:
- **Make it easier to find groups** such as local and national directories
- **Public awareness campaigns** of the benefits of joining groups
- **Subsidies** or tax deductions to cover any participation costs for those in need

We should also remove barriers to starting and managing organizations, which are blocked by unnecessary complexity and lack of access to modern tools:
- **Make it easier to start organizations** with support including fast-track non-profit status, easy insurance and liability protection, and access to membership-management software tools
- **Provide training and support for organizers**
- **Funding** to support growth of membership organizations

3. PLACES: Give us somewhere to go

We need a place to go where we are likely to see and meet people, without cost, for all demographics — open clubhouses, third places, and other public spaces. Organizations shouldn't struggle to find meeting places that don't require fees.

The harsh reality today is that if you are of any age and feeling lonely — in most towns there is nowhere to go where people are hanging out, or where you could expect your friends to be waiting. On a typical evening in a typical city, often the only places to go are bars, gyms, or other places that cater to youth, alcohol, or require payment. Libraries are silent, community centers aren't available in most areas of most cities, and parks require transport and mobility.

The US has never prioritized community spaces such as outdoor plazas or open-access public indoor spaces (essential in many climates). Some cities have healthy community centers, senior centers, YMCAs, etc. But in most towns, there is no equivalent of a public town square where people can just go and meet other people.

Also problematic is that many organizations and programs struggle to find space. It's hard to bring people together when you don't have meeting space, and it's socially awkward to expect organizers to invite people into their homes. For example, book clubs often depend on coffee shops, bookstores, or other spaces where a purchase is expected, and the ability to hang out after the meeting is limited.

We recommend a strategy of making public space available:

- **Public commons:** Places where you can just show up and know people will be there. Ideally, people who are a demographic/interest match. There should be no expectation of payment or purchase.
- **Meeting places:** Venues where organizations can use free or low-cost space for regular meetings.
- **Support:** Increased support for existing community centers and public gathering spaces.

Policies/actions that would help may include:

- **City directories of available spaces.**
- **Policies to encourage private organizations to open up space to the public.** We should take advantage of the current glut of unused office space (and all the empty conference rooms after hours).
- **Opening up municipal spaces and public schools when not in use.** These are spaces already paid for by the public. How many conference rooms could be lent out by city and county governments? Why can't new parents meet up in elementary schools?
- **Policies to make it easier and safer to offer space,** such as liability protection and publicly supported security where needed. Encourage after-hours access and free use of furniture, AV, etc.
- **Zoning changes** to encourage public space close to residential areas.

D. Recommendation 2: RAP Elements — Recurring Contact, Activities, and Purpose

The TOP strategy focuses on the types of programs likely to scale. Additionally, we saw both anecdotal evidence and formal research that speaks to the qualities and features that help people form deeper connections. We see three concepts coming up again and again in various contexts — what we call the RAP Elements:

1. Recurring contact
2. Activities
3. Purpose

If you can add these elements to your programs, you are more likely to have a greater impact, participation, and longevity.

1. RECURRING CONTACT: Interacting with the same people multiple times in a reasonable time window

To provide long-lasting relief from loneliness, people need to build long-lasting relationships and communities that extend beyond a specific activity or interaction. That is hard to do in contexts with one-time interactions that lack the tools or environment to build deep bonds.

Those bonds require repeat interactions with the same people. Participating in programs where we meet new people, while pleasant and helpful short-term, doesn't help fix embedded loneliness until we get recurring interaction.

This is a particular weakness of programs that use professional staff, volunteers, or AI to help with loneliness. The relationship is more transactional, and the long-term repeat contact is dependent on a provider's service model. You aren't building genuine friendships if your relationship depends on continued payment, or if you're talking to people paid to talk to you.

Recommendation: Look for ways to add repeat contact to your programs, including post-event sharing of contact information.

2. ACTIVITY: Something to do more than "hanging out"

For many people, social interaction is hard, and they need more justification than "hanging out" or "making friends." (Research shows this is often harder for men in general.) Without some form of activity, it is:

- Harder to attract people
- Harder to get new people to participate (jumping into a social group is more awkward than participating in an activity)
- Harder to get repeat participation (unstructured interaction doesn't have a next step or goal)

The type of activity doesn't appear to matter — it just needs to be something to do. Participants don't necessarily need to engage deeply in the activity, but need the activity as justification to attend.

3. PURPOSE: A higher-level mission

Not every social connection needs to be mission-driven, but it helps if you can find a higher-level reason to participate.

- Attract participants who want to use their time to give back
- Connect like-minded people who are interested in similar causes
- Address the hesitation to "just hang out"
- Make it feel more important

Charitable, religious, or political missions are common, but it doesn't have to be very deep.

The purpose could be something civic, artistic, or anything that has a give-back element — anything that makes it about more than just your own loneliness.

In some sense, all you need to do is provide a reason that participants can give themselves and others if they need to justify the activity (or don't want to admit that friendship/loneliness is their need).

E. Recommendation 3: Creating a Lasting Infrastructure

To properly address this crisis, we need an ecosystem to support work on the loneliness epidemic. Too much research and innovation is being done in isolation — and we're not achieving critical mass in the search for solutions. At a minimum, we should set up the standard structures to support a true "loneliness solutions community":

1. **Professional Society or Trade Association:** A non-profit group to provide a home for everyone working on this topic. A dedicated organization will help grow the field, attract investment, and create a community. (This could serve as a successor group to the Loneliness Institute.)

2. **Conference and Peer-Reviewed Journal:** There is minimal collaboration across institutions and experts on this topic. Often "loneliness" will be a single paper or panel at a larger forum for more general social or medical professions. We need to achieve critical mass by bringing together everyone working on this topic in a shared environment where true cross-fertilization and collaboration can happen.

3. **Research Center at NIH:** If this is truly a national epidemic, we should establish a proper research center at the National Institutes of Health.

4. **Federal Commission:** A formal public policy body should be created separate from the Surgeon General's office. It should include representatives of academia, healthcare, non-profits, and other stakeholders. We need a national plan and centrally coordinated strategy. Federal legislation has been proposed, but doesn't include substantial funding needed to do meaningful work.

F. Concerns

Our primary interest is in finding how to help mass populations with loneliness. As we conducted our research, we identified obstacles that are likely to hinder this outcome.

A. LACK OF LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION

What is clearly missing are discussions around leadership and process — how we as a society are working on solving this problem. There seems to be little guidance, coordination, and goals. While lots of people are sharing concerns about the problem or praising individual projects, there hasn't been much open talk about our progress (or lack of it).

We need:
- **Critical analysis:** What works, what's scalable, what's cost-effective — and how we make a meaningful impact. And open discussion about what isn't working, in terms of both specific solutions and the process in general.
- **Coordination:** Impartial organizations that can pull together the highly fragmented work and parties involved in this field. We need goals, measurement, and tracking.
- **Communication:** There is no way for parties working on loneliness to share results, ideas, or best practices. We need regular conferences, an academic journal, and a membership organization for loneliness professionals.

B. THINGS THAT ARE UNLIKELY TO SCALE

- **"Lonely-washing"** — Adding claims to "solve loneliness" to products (mostly healthcare and tech startups) to take advantage of this hot topic. Most of these claims do not result in new solutions to loneliness and may be harmful or confusing to people in need.

- **For-profit, fee-based services**
  - » Not sustainable — products will be changed or discontinued, and companies pivot, sell, or close.
  - » Can't reach the whole population — just paying customers.
  - » Unhealthy expectations — users sign up for these services, then can't afford them or they are no longer available, which can lead to major disappointment and possible emotional harms.
  - » Personal relationships built on paid services have limited ways to continue when not paying. (Look at the current scandals with dating apps trying to hook you but not help you find a relationship.)

- **"Pop psychology" advice** — call a friend each day, be intentional with relationships, etc. These are nice, but already exist and there is no evidence they can scale to population-level impact.

C. GENERAL CONCERNS

- **Surgeon General's efforts:** The Surgeon General deserves recognition for calling attention to this crisis — but has delivered little substance.
  - » There has been quite a lot of PR for the SG and his book, he has hired several of the individuals mentioned in his book, and he has raised his personal profile.
  - » It appears that the SG is using government resources to promote himself with what looks like little more than a celebrity book tour. For example, there has been a college tour but not a serious meeting of practitioners.
  - » Recent advice has been little more than feel-good tips ("expressing gratitude, offering support, and asking for help").
  - » Critically, we have not seen any serious national-scale policy initiatives, actionable plans, or federal government efforts.
  - » We call on the Surgeon General to show substantive leadership — or form a new national body under NIH to take the work to the next level, but this also needs to be more than just another committee.

- **Dominance of CESIL:** The organization with the highest profile on this topic has a questionable history, with little meaningful output other than self-promotion and lobbying. They have acted aggressively toward other non-profits in an effort to control the topic.
  - » The Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness (CESIL) is openly a front for a healthcare lobbying firm called Healthsperien. Many CESIL employees are or have been Healthsperien employees and the group is funded by Healthsperien clients. ($195k of CESIL's $245k budget was paid back to their lobbying firm in 2022.)

> » They operate at least two additional front groups: The Foundation for Social Connectedness and the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection. Proper non-profits do not need to invent their own partners.
>
> » Their published policy agenda has little to do with loneliness, and much of it has to do with funneling cash to the hospice industry and other healthcare companies.
>
> » Policymakers have developed inappropriately close relationships with CESIL and its front groups, favored them over independent experts, and given them no-bid federal grants.

- **Little focus on scale:** This is a national crisis, but few people or organizations are talking about initiatives with national impact.
- **Minimal public policy efforts:** Bills have been introduced in the US House and Senate, but they mostly just form committees to study and measure the problem. They don't create meaningful efforts to find solutions. It's cosmetic, not meaningful.
- **Academic isolation:** Vast amounts of great research are being done on this topic — but most of the researchers are isolated from each other. We need to get critical mass of researchers talking with each other and collaborating at a deeper level.

G. We Can Solve This

We don't need another article or study about the size and harms of loneliness. Because we already know how bad it is.

It's time to get to work. We are a nation that knows how to build community. For hundreds of years, we stitched together all types of people from all kinds of backgrounds into a strong and unified people.

Now some things are broken, we're drifting apart, and we're lonely.

Good news: We know how to fix it. We know how to fix it for real (not just patches or feel-good content). We have historical tools that need repair or a reboot (but we know they work) and new techniques to bring us together. ***Let's go!***

AN OPEN CALL TO PROBLEM-SOLVERS

Our role at the Loneliness Institute is to be a catalyst — we jumped in to help focus and energize work on this important problem. The Loneliness Institute is a project of the Interplanetary Help Desk, a 501(c)3 incubator for social-good projects. Our speciality is to **start things** — which means we're ready to move on to the next important cause that needs a jump start.

We are looking for someone (individuals or organizations) to continue our work on loneliness and to take it to the next level. Our goal is to find a home that is most likely to maximize nationwide impact by funding, staffing, and growing the Institute. We are looking for experienced operators or entrepreneurs who know how to scale a mission-driven organization for the long term.

We will donate our assets, IP, and brand (including the valuable domain name) to a good home that will continue our mission. Startup funding is also a possibility. Please contact us if you want to help lead the search for solutions to the loneliness epidemic.