

Options for Connecting Remotely with Program Participants

Social Interaction is essential for physical and mental health and well-being. There are many ways nutrition programs can provide participants with socialization opportunities, even in a remote environment. The following comparison provides an overview of a few commonly used methods.

Outreach type	Overview	Pros	Cons
Automated telephone calls	Participants receive daily automated phone calls. If they do not answer after three attempts, the service notifies a relative, friend, or neighbor. If no one on the notification list answers the phone, the service alerts the local police to check on the program participant.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not require staff or volunteer support. • The only technology required is a telephone. • Participant has a frequent check-in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No person-to-person contact, and therefore no feedback on the health and well-being of the participant. • If the automated calling system fails, a participant could be missed since there is no human involved.
Wellness calls	Connects isolated older adults with friendly volunteers 1-2 times per week. Focused on providing a touchpoint and connecting participants to services or programs, volunteers ask questions focused on how the person is doing physically and emotionally rather than simply having a conversation. Example questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you doing today? • Do you have concerns around your personal safety? • Do you have food in your house? • Are you taking your medications? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteers are vetted (background checks) by the program. • Easy and safe access to clients via telephone. • Check-ins are based on how participants are personally doing. • Volunteers can provide connections to community resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No visual confirmation of physical health, general well-being, home surroundings, and mental health. • Requires training and retention of qualified volunteers. • Utilizes closed questions, which do not usually generate conversation, especially for those more guarded. This can make it difficult to get the full picture of how the participant is really doing.

Outreach type	Overview	Pros	Cons
Comfort calls	An effective intervention to combat social isolation and loneliness. These open-ended conversations focus on connecting and mutual interests instead of a basic check-in. Callers contact program participants 1-2 times per week and talk about whatever they choose. Volunteers can be matched with program participants based on interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Callers and participants develop meaningful relationships. • Volunteers have been vetted (background checks) by the program. • Easy and safe access to clients via telephone. • High touch, low-cost conversations. • Open-ended questions deliver better insight into well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pairing up people can be time-consuming. • Volunteers must be trained to engage in conversation and be good at active listening. • Volunteer recruitment and retention may be difficult.
Virtual Programming	Virtual programs provide an opportunity for isolated older adults to stay in touch with their friends, loved ones, and/or local aging network through video platforms. These programs provide an opportunity for participants to engage from various locations and with games, activities, exercise, or support groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many tools are free or low cost. • Volunteers have been vetted (background checks) by the program. • Easy and safe access to clients via the internet. • Face-to-face contact increases the social connection between parties. • Flexibly works for small or large groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability and use of internet, software, and hardware may be challenging for some. • Privacy and security may be a concern for some. • Additional staff/volunteer support is often needed due to event planning, facilitation, and technical support to participants.

Outreach Examples and Additional Resources

- [Maryland Senior Call Check Program](#) — Automated call program from the Maryland Department of Aging
- [Project Hello](#) — Comfort call program from the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging
- [The Daily Call Sheet](#) — Comfort call program from the Motion Picture and Television Fund
- [Project Vital: Virtual Inclusion Technology for All](#) — Initiative from Florida Department of Elder Affairs and the Alzheimer's Association
- [Village Connector Experience](#) — Virtual service from the Juanita C. Grant Foundation
- [Enhancing Socialization Through Making Meaningful Volunteer Connections During COVID-19](#) — Resource Center tip sheet
- [Tools for Reaching a Remote Audience](#) — Tips from NCOA on delivering services virtually