



**COVID-19**

# Homeless System Response: Social Distancing: Inspired Ideas for Addressing Loneliness

The novel coronavirus has brought unique challenges to the homeless system. The virus spreads voraciously and has a high mortality rate. Currently, there is no vaccine and no clear path to treatment. The best prevention strategy has been sheltering in place, which means sacrifices due to decreases in face-to-face interactions and connections.

Sheltering in place has been difficult for everyone, but people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness potentially carry a larger burden—one with significant health risks. A review of the effects of social isolation across the lifespan revealed that loneliness can be detrimental on physical, mental, and cognitive health. Add the unusual stressors attending the pandemic—lost income, fear, anxiety, and concern about loved ones—and we have a perfect storm. So how can we help our clients get through these difficult times despite their homelessness and without disrupting social distancing?

## Inspired Community Ideas

### *Artistic Outlets*

Along with a group of arts organizations, students from the University of Southern California (USC) Roski School of Art and Design believe that creative outlets are a lifeline during social isolation. In response to social restrictions, they produced arts care packages for Skid Row residents. In April, they distributed 170 packages that included sketchbooks, pen and pencil kits, fabric bags, in-ear headphones, hand-sewn masks, and a zine designed by students. The project let the Skid Row community know that they were not forgotten during these frightening times.

### *Bringing Generations Together*

Jordan Miller, age 16, helped his grandparents learn to use their smartphones when he was in middle school. When he realized that many more people could use help, he started running weekly classes at his New York high school. Topics ranged from video chat to using smartphones for online banking. Once the city shut down because of COVID-19, he moved his classes online. Participants report that the technical skills they learned have helped them better connect with family and friends despite the physical isolation. Other schools have set up pen pal programs to connect students with senior citizens. Handwritten letters help students—and their pen pals—overcome loneliness. Another group of high school students in Calgary, Canada created a hotline called the Joy4All Project. Students record jokes, short stories, and poems to share on the hotline, which is accessed by dialing 1-877-Joy-4All. The hotline has already received 17,000 calls.

### *Feeding People Experiencing Homelessness*

The Barn Steakhouse in Evanston, Illinois has been making hundreds of meals, from breakfast burritos to sandwiches, for the local homeless community. The team makes foods that are easy to wrap and distribute. Meals go to the community resource center and local hotels housing people during the pandemic. Other restaurants also participate, providing lunch and dinner to 150+ people a day.

## Ways You Can Help

### *Connect*

*Stay in touch.* Take time to reach out through regular phone calls, texts, emails, letters, or video calls. If someone is isolated in a facility, you can arrange a call or visit that takes place outside their window. Connect at the same time or day so that the individual has something to look forward to. Wave. Talk (from 6–10 feet away). Ask if anything is needed...groceries, prescriptions, household goods, or other help.

### *Create a care package and leave it by the door*

*Let someone know you care.* Flowers, snacks, household goods, hand sanitizer, masks, gloves, puzzles, books, note cards and stamps, coloring books, colored pencils, toys, and other thoughtful items mean a lot.

### Teach virtual connection skills

*Encourage use of social media.* Many, if not most, of our clients experiencing homelessness have smart phones, tablets, or laptops. We can help them set up (or encourage them to use) platforms such as FaceTime or Zoom. With technology, clients can “visit” new and unusual places, shop, read, and/or learn a new skill. Let people know they can watch movies together using apps like Netflix Party. Host virtual social hours and encourage people to bring a snack and tune in. Links to virtual connections follow.

COOL FREEBIES	
Take a Virtual Field Trip	Learn a New Skill
See Frank Lloyd Wright buildings across America <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.Smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/enjoy-short-video-tours-frank-lloyd-wright-buildings-180974719">https://www.Smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/enjoy-short-video-tours-frank-lloyd-wright-buildings-180974719</a>:</li></ul>	Speak a new language: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.duolingo.com/">https://www.duolingo.com/</a></li></ul>
San Diego Zoo live cameras: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="http://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams">http://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams</a></li></ul>	Crack coding basics in HTML and Javascript: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://dash.generalassemb.ly/">https://dash.generalassemb.ly/</a></li></ul>
Yellowstone National Park: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.nps.gov/yell/index.htm">https://www.nps.gov/yell/index.htm</a></li></ul> Monterey Bay Aquarium: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="http://montereybayaquarium.org">http://montereybayaquarium.org</a></li></ul>	Play the piano: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="http://PianoNanny.com">http://PianoNanny.com</a></li></ul> Or the guitar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/">https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/</a></li></ul>
Walk on Mars: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.nasa.gov/feature/jpl/take-a-walk-on-mars-in-your-own-living-room">https://www.nasa.gov/feature/jpl/take-a-walk-on-mars-in-your-own-living-room</a></li></ul>	Improve your spelling/grammar skills: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.grammarly.com/">https://www.grammarly.com/</a></li></ul>
See works of art at the Louvre: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="http://louvre.fr">http://louvre.fr</a></li></ul>	Become an artist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.artistsnetwork.com/free-art-instruction/">https://www.artistsnetwork.com/free-art-instruction/</a></li></ul>
Visit the world’s largest collection of images and videos: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="http://360cities.net">http://360cities.net</a></li></ul>	Take online yoga classes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><a href="https://www.capterra.com/sem-compare/yoga-studio-software?utm_source=bing&amp;utm_medium=cpc">https://www.capterra.com/sem-compare/yoga-studio-software?utm_source=bing&amp;utm_medium=cpc</a></li></ul>

### Encourage self-care

*Stay active.* Invite your client to go for a walk (stay 6–10 feet apart) or suggest online workout routines. Encourage your client to connect with his/her family or friends to exercise together using Facetime, Zoom, or other platforms. Exercise has the added benefit of improving sleep, mood, physical health, and mental acuity.

### Suggest activities that improve mood and health

*Create routines that support mindfulness and wellness.* Encourage your clients to prioritize activities that make them feel good. These activities could include things like cleaning and organizing their spaces, reading a book, enjoying nature by taking a walk or watching the birds, cooking something they enjoy, learning a new hobby, or watching a favorite television show.