



Community Enrichment Brief

Strategic Recommendations to
Foster Connection

June 2026

County of San Mateo



**COUNTY OF
SAN MATEO**



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This brief was developed by RDA Consulting under contract with Aging and Disability Services Division, County of San Mateo

RDA Consulting, SPC, 2025-26



Project Background

In 2024, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution declaring loneliness as a public health crisis. Loneliness affects approximately forty-five percent of all San Mateo County residents¹. Considering the impacts of loneliness, the County established its focus on older adults and adults with disabilities, in alignment with the findings from the 2023 Surgeon Report that addressed the nationwide epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The report raised concerns around trends of reduced social connection and identified a relationship between loneliness and poor health outcomes. It also emphasized the potential for increased negative impacts to older populations and those with significant health concerns. The San Mateo County (SMC) Board of Supervisors designated Measure K funding for initiatives and strategies to address isolation and loneliness for older adults and adults with disabilities in the county.

In the summer of 2025, San Mateo County Aging and Disability Services (ADS) engaged RDA Consulting to facilitate a needs assessment, engage community, and develop strategic recommendations to improve social engagement.

The Advisory Committee

To guide the assessment and development of recommendations, RDA and ADS convened an Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from key agencies and partners across the county. Represented entities included:

- San Mateo County Libraries
- Center for Age-Friendly Excellence (CAFE)
- San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans)
- San Mateo County Health Commission on Aging
- San Mateo County Health Commission on Disabilities
- San Mateo County Health
- San Mateo County Parks and Recreation
- Foster City Villages
- San Mateo County Economic Development Association (SAMCEDA)
- Senior Coastsiders
- Center for Independence of Individuals with Disabilities

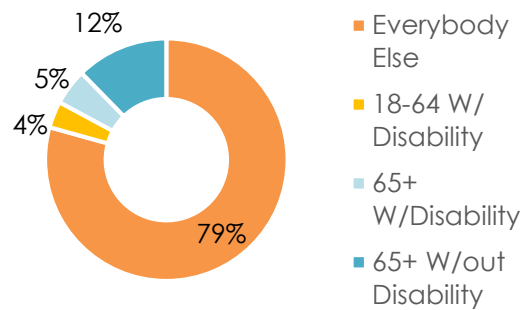
The Advisory Committee convened virtually across seven occasions between June 2025 and May 2026. Committee members served an integral role in providing feedback on the needs assessment plan, community engagement activities, and needs assessment findings. They also actively participated in the development and refinement of the strategic recommendations, presented in this brief.

¹ <https://www.smcgov.org/district-5/loneliness>

San Mateo County Profile

SMC is a diverse, high income county where approximately one-third of the community members identify as Hispanic, White, and Asian or Pacific Islander. However, it is important to note that over 30% of all seniors fall below the 300% Federal Poverty Level meaning that they regularly struggle to make ends meet². Nearly half of all non-white two-person households in SMC fall below the living wage, with equity implications for access to services. Of SMC's 741,370 residents, approximately 153,337 (21%) are 65 or older, have a disability, or both; the majority of which are older adults without a disability. An estimated 26,238 (4%) adults ages 18–64 live with a disability.

Representation of Older Adults and People with a Disability in SMC



Project Framework

The AARP's Domains of Livability³ provided a guiding framework for the project along with three primary research questions:

- 1 What **strengths and access limitations** exist in current county resources that contribute to older adults and adults with disabilities experiencing loneliness and lack of social engagement and does this experience vary across the county?
- 2 What **challenges and barriers** to social engagement do older adults and adults with disabilities experience?
- 3 What are **opportunities** for the County and partner agencies to align systems and services to meet the needs of older adults and adults with disabilities to decrease loneliness and increase social engagement?

Needs Assessment Overview & Findings

RDA conducted a comprehensive needs assessment by a) examining an inventory of 115 existing resources across SMC, b) quantitative analysis including comparative Bay Area data and loneliness risk evaluations, and c) qualitative insights gathered through interviews and focus groups with key informants, service providers, caregivers, and seniors. Together, these data sources informed an understanding of community needs

² <https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/newsroom/blog/california-elder-index-fact-sheets-2025-update>

³ <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/network-age-friendly-communities/info-2016/8-domains-of-livability-introduction.html>

across the AARP Domains of Livability, highlighting areas where San Mateo County excels and opportunities for improvement.

Service Strengths

- **Civic Participation & Employment:** SMC outperforms or matches Bay Area peer counties in volunteer and employment rates, supported by a strong network of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and employers.
- **Communication & Information:** 70 or more providers support information access; residents use diverse channels (word-of-mouth, social media, flyers, outreach campaigns). SMC ranked 5th statewide in Friendship Line usage, reflecting strong communication infrastructure.
- **Respect & Social Inclusion:** Programs are widely viewed as welcoming, culturally responsive, and effective in fostering connection. Warm handoffs, especially personal invitations, are key to initial engagement.
- **Housing:** Fewer older adults live alone in SMC compared to Bay Area peers, representing a lower baseline isolation risk from this domain.

“I definitely think that it gives people a purpose, and this becomes, like...a happy place. It gives them something to look forward to, something to focus on. They know that it's safe and supportive, and they get to see their friends, and...we have an activities calendar we pass out for the month, so they get to check out the activities and the lunches and see... what their day will hold, and I think that's really beautiful.”
- Service Provider

Service Access Limitations

- **Transportation:** 35% of California Department of Aging Community Assessment Survey for Older Adults respondents rated transportation (e.g. public transit, city-run transit, private options) as Poor or Fair. Bus/train frequency (2.4/hour) is far below the California average (6.2/hour). SMC's walkability score (10.25) is below average and well below neighboring San Francisco (16.05) and Alameda County (14.10).
- **Health Services & Affordability:** Poor self-rated health is the single strongest predictor of loneliness—86% of those rating their health as poor reported isolation concerns. Middle-income residents often fall between Medi-Cal eligibility and the ability to pay for care, creating a "coverage cliff."

“Because of the financial eligibility for Medi-Cal, a lot of our middle-income folks who are really kind of still in the lower middle. Given what the costs of care are, they're not able to afford it. And so that means that that older adult needing care may be more isolated, because then they're relying solely on maybe one family member.”
- Key Informant

- **Social Participation for Adults with Disabilities:** Adults 18–64 with disabilities report their inability to foster connections than their peers, yet most county programs focus on older adults, leaving working-age adults with disabilities underserved.
- **Outdoor Spaces & Built Environment:** 35% of residents rate community layout as Poor or Fair. Wheelchair accessibility, elevator availability, and ADA-compliant transit options remain insufficient.
- **Regional Equity:** North County has fewer service locations relative to its target population than other regions. Coastside communities face additional geographic and transportation barriers.

Barriers to Social Connection

- **Stigma & First Access.** Many older adults hesitate to use services they qualify for. Personal invitations and warm handoffs are often the critical bridge to engagement.
- **Health & Affordability:** The highest-ranking risk factors for loneliness. High costs of adult day programs (~\$100/day), healthcare, and housing disproportionately affect middle and low-income residents, particularly BIPOC and historically marginalized communities.
- **Caregiver Exhaustion:** Caregivers uniformly report feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unable to maintain their own social lives due to the relentless demands of caregiving. Many have reduced employment hours or left altogether.

“I can see it in his eyes...when he was here [at home], he would say, I want to go to my room. Yeah, so that's how I noticed that he felt lonely. Or he just wanted to sleep. Or his eyes were just focused in one direction, just thinking mode.”
- Caregiver

Strategic Recommendations

Following completion of the needs assessment, between January to May 2026, the SMC ADS and the Advisory Committee developed focused and actionable recommendations. Recommendations across each of the nine domains of the Livable Communities Action Plans⁴ were reviewed. Discussions were held to identify which recommendations would have the highest impact for county residents, while remaining in spheres of influence and resources in the County and its partners. This led to the identification of three focused categories for recommendation development based on the following questions.

⁴ <https://cfafe.org/actionplans/>

- What **policy actions** would support connection? (considering policy at the county, municipal, state level)
- What existing programs or partnerships would benefit from additional **collaboration**?
- Where would a **one-time infusion of funds** improve engagement and connection?

Below are the shortlisted recommendations based on the consensus of the Advisory Committee as well as the review of the literature. Please refer to Appendix A for the additional recommendations per category and some considerations for system partners.

I. **Policy actions** that would support social connection (county, municipal, state level)

- ❖ **Community Models:** Adopt and promote community models that promote healthy aging like Age Friendly, Villages and Buddy Program, Aging in Community, and Blue Zones.
- ❖ **Intergenerational community building:** Promote inclusive and intergenerational community building, county-wide and within sites such as senior centers, community centers, libraries, etc.
- ❖ **Social Prescription Models:** Advocate for “social prescription”⁵ models in behavioral and physical healthcare settings that build deeper relationships for warm hand-offs to community-based services and programs. An example would be to incorporate routine social isolation and loneliness screenings into medical and social services to identify those in need of connection supports.

II. **Increase collaboration and partnership** with existing programs, initiatives, or collaborative efforts

- ❖ **Workforce Development:** Expand partnership with organizations such as NovaWorks and SAMCEDA and explore opportunity pathways for older adults and adults with disabilities (volunteer, internship, and job placements).
- ❖ **Transportation Planning and Coordination:** Continue work through collaborations that bring together cities, non-profits and transportation providers.
- ❖ **Public Libraries & Community Centers:** Assess resource needs for public libraries and community centers to provide drop-in support spaces and connections.
- ❖ **Friendly Caller & Social Check-Ins:** Work with home and community-based services partners to support “friendly-caller” and social check-in initiatives.

⁵ AMA Journal of Ethics on Social Prescribing. <https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/what-are-social-prescriptions-and-how-should-they-be-integrated-care-plans/2023-11>

III. **Investment of one-time funding** that would support meaningful improvement in social connection

- ❖ **Community Communications Campaign:** Develop a community communications campaign that unifies county messaging, language, and resources to reduce stigma, anti-ageism and anti-disability messaging especially in the workforce and increase awareness to established resources. Expenditures could include:
 - Align transportation and service guides, such as SamTrans Senior Mobility Guide, SamTrans Ride Plus, Ride with Disability, and the Commission on Aging's Help at Home guide to consistent formats, availability in threshold languages, and print distribution at frequented community locations in addition to online availability
 - Funding support for CBOs to support targeted outreach efforts, to increase awareness for their programs.
- ❖ **Mobility & Accessibility Audits:** Conduct mobility and accessibility audits across County facilities and incorporate findings into future master development plans and initiatives.

Acknowledgement

On behalf of RDA Consulting, we appreciate the commitment of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors towards addressing social isolation among older adults and adults with disabilities. We would also like to thank the Advisory Committee for their invaluable input throughout this process and our primary data participants, for sharing their lived expertise. Lastly, this partnership and work would not have been made possible without the partnership and collaboration of San Mateo ADS.

Community Enrichment Project Infographic

Goal

A coordinated, equity-centered system that reduces isolation and enables older adults and people with disabilities, to remain socially connected and thrive in San Mateo County.

Needs Assessment Findings

1

Service strengths: Civic Participation, Communication network, Welcoming programs, Fewer seniors living alone, Strong volunteer base

2

Service limitations: Unreliable Transportation, Unaffordable Healthcare, Adults w/ disabilities unmet needs, Built environment barriers, North County underserved

3

Barriers: Health & affordability, Caregiver exhaustion, Stigma & first access, Technology barriers, Geographic isolation



Strategic Recommendations

Policy

- Community Models
- Inclusive & Intergenerational Community Building
- Social Prescription Models

Collaborations

- Workforce Development & Pathways
- Transportation Partners
- Public Libraries & Community Centers
- Friendly Caller & Social Check-Ins

One-time investment

- Community communications campaign
- Mobility & accessibility audits

Appendix A

Additional Recommendations

- I. **Policy actions that would support social connection (county, municipal, state level)**
 - Adopt a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach and training to County Government decision-making and actions.
 - Integrate ADA compliant home design in any new housing developments as well as BOS approved housing projects.
- II. **Increase collaboration and partnership with existing programs, initiatives, or collaborative efforts**
 - Promote partnerships to expand information & assistance to foster greater awareness of and connection to resource, referral, and volunteer opportunities.
 - Explore partnerships with Via Assist as well private, autonomous vehicle companies such as Waymo, to provide subsidized ride share options for older adults and people with disabilities.
 - In partnership with parks and recreation and library services, provide digital literacy workshops by pairing youth advisory groups with seniors to improve access and comfort with technology.
 - Develop partnership and establish referral pathways with organizations such as Project Sentinel to increase housing awareness and access

Advisory Committee Considerations for System Partnerships

San Mateo County Health (Behavioral Health & Recovery Services, Public Health, Policy & Planning, Office of Diversity & Equity, Aging & Disability Services, Commission on Aging), San Mateo County Parks & Recreation, San Mateo County Executive's Office, San Mateo County Office of Education, San Mateo County Economic Development Association (SAMCEDA), San Mateo County Transit District (SamTrans), San Mateo County Office of Sustainability, San Mateo County Libraries, San Mateo County Healthcare Providers, San Mateo County Public Works, Center for Age-Friendly Excellence, AARP, Intergenerational Community Centers, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Disability Advocacy Organizations, Faith-Based Communities, 2-1-1 Bay Area, San Mateo County Youth Commission, Independent Living Resource Center, Foster City Village, Meals on Wheels, In Home Supportive Services (IHSS), Rideshare, Elected Officials, Chamber of Commerce, Public Works, Business Improvement Districts, Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and The Family Caregiver Alliance.