

Combating cabin fever in the cold winter months

As anyone who works with older adults knows, two top fears among that population are loneliness and falls. Here in the Northeast, these fears are compounded during the long winter months, prompting many older adults to stay indoors rather than risk falling and causing an injury. This in turn leads to increased isolation and a corresponding spike in depression, both of which have been linked to a [higher risk for hospital re-admissions, cardiovascular disease, dementia and even death](#).

In fact, a study by the AARP Foundation found that the [health risks of prolonged isolation equate to smoking 15 cigarettes a day](#). Another study found that chronically lonely older people also report less exercise, more tobacco use, more chronic illnesses and a higher average number of stays in nursing homes than those who do not describe themselves as lonely.

In response, throughout the state SASH teams organize regular indoor walking groups, tai chi and other group exercise classes, cooking classes, social outings, and other evidence-based programs to keep people moving and socially engaged. This issue provides a sampling.



Creative approaches to indoor walking groups add fun, variety



Indoor walking groups abound at regional malls, community centers and arenas. In Berlin, from mid-January to late April, people can experience [an indoor version of the Long Trail at the Berlin Mall](#) while helping raise funds for the [Green Mountain Club](#). Walkers log their miles, and the mall donates to the GMC based on the total number of miles recorded. In addition to special offers and promotions, walkers receive a poster and stickers to track their walking milestones as they walk all or part of the trail.

In Essex, SASH hosts a morning walking group that draws residents from four affordable-housing communities, as well as community members from as far away as Underhill, to the [Champlain Valley Expo](#) two days a week from 11 to noon. Participants track their laps around the indoor soccer field (seven laps = one mile) and report them to SASH participant and volunteer Marion Writington, who in addition to monitoring the walking program two days a week, leads two weekly Bone Builders classes for SASH at Town Meadow Senior Housing. The program runs from November to April, culminating with a celebration and presentation of certificates at Town Meadow.

On a recent frosty Monday, two dozen people circled the indoor field, some using walkers and canes, others speed-walking as if training for a race. (See photo composition of the walkers, above.) “I’ve been doing this since it started in 2011,” said Underhill community resident Douglas Keith. “It’s a good thing all around, not just for my health, but for meeting people.”



Afterward, many socialized and enjoyed a \$5 meal at Ray’s Seafood, one of the participating restaurants in the lunch program sponsored by [AgeWell](#). “It’s good to get out and meet other people,” reported one walker who attends regularly. “It’s improved my health immensely. And when you don’t show up, people wonder where you are, so you know folks are looking out for you.”



Senior centers support active aging during gray winter days

When it comes to promoting socialization, preventing isolation and keeping Vermonters active as they age, [Vermont’s senior centers](#) are vital hubs that provide nearly 16,000 older adults with wellness activities, social opportunities and nutritious meals at little or no cost to participants. Here are some of the offerings from two of Vermont’s 49 centers:



- At the Barre Area Senior Center, [the roster of activities](#) includes a variety of exercise and movement classes, the “Young at Heart Singers,” weekly square and line-dancing classes, writing groups, technology-help sessions, and especially popular woodworking classes and “Moth-style” storytelling sessions.
- Ongoing programs at the [Heineberg Community Senior Center](#) in Burlington are similarly rich and varied. Supplementing numerous more traditional exercise classes, arts sessions and health clinics are regularly scheduled bridge, mahjong, cribbage, Scrabble and other games; a 50+ tae kwon do/self-defense class; line dancing and Jazzercise classes; book clubs; regular discussion groups based on [TED Talks](#); a singing group that meets twice a week; and congregate meals and special holiday luncheons. *(photo: HCSC director Beth Hammond [right] and board member Gail Moreau)*



'Music & Movement' program lifts spirits in Williston

After recognizing that “something that seems to be lacking in a lot of my participants’ lives is joy,” wellness nurse Jennie Baker was inspired to start a “Music & Movement” program for her Williston SASH group in December. “I wanted to create a fun, positive space for them to be able to laugh, smile, sing and play in the joyful way that children experience the world,” she says. “It gives them time to connect with each other, sing along to music of their choosing, and get some exercise too. It has become a favorite activity at [the Williston Woods] housing community and is one of the more widely attended events,” she adds.



Baker tailors each session to what the participants feel up to. Some days it has been more dancing and movement, other times it has been about coming up with games using the playful materials she provides -- balloons, a parachute, rhythm sticks, beach balls, hula hoops, scarfs, bubbles, etc. As Baker notes, **even just listening to music has been found to help people deal with stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain and even memory impairment.**



Loneliness kills: a powerful call for a community response

“Recognizing loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for poor health raises the stakes on a number of community development challenges and goals. It both strengthens the argument that community development work is a path toward better health, and points toward some parts of that work that should perhaps get more or different attention.” So begins [an article in *Shelterforce*](#), which challenges affordable-housing and community-development organizations to consider social isolation and loneliness a public health issue and offers practical steps SASH partners and other organizations can take to address it.



Partners represented on SASH teams throughout Vermont include members and affiliates of these organizations:



A comprehensive list of all SASH partners can be found in the [SASH Partnership](#).



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