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Addressing Isolation in Seniors Living in Monterey County

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### **Abstract**

Isolation amongst seniors is a serious issue that affects more than a quarter of the United State's population. This figure will rise as the Baby Boomer population continues to age. Risk factors leading to isolation in seniors include but are not limited to personal choice, fear of injury, and social connectedness. If left unaddressed, the consequences of isolation in seniors are grave and include a lack of access to essential resources, feelings of loneliness, and death. Seniors with medical conditions or other disabilities are more vulnerable to isolation and are more likely to suffer a decline in health as a result of being unable to care for themselves. A possible solution to addressing isolation while providing seniors in need with care is to connect them with caregivers who can provide care and supportive services at home. The Monterey County Public Authority for In-Home Supportive Services helps to address this issue by connecting seniors and individuals with disabilities who are vulnerable to isolation with qualified caregivers. This paper discusses the results from a customer satisfaction survey that was mailed to Monterey County IHSS providers and offers solutions to improve customer service delivery to IHSS providers and recipients in hopes of increasing the number of seniors that are connected with caregivers.

*Keywords:* Isolation, Caregivers, Monterey County, IHSS, Public Authority

### **Agency & Communities Served**

Aging and Adult Services is a branch of the Monterey County Department of Social Services that provides health and social services to seniors and individuals with disabilities. The mission of Aging and Adult Services is to, “Empower and serve the aging population and persons living with disabilities to live safely in their homes and with dignity. The goal of Aging and Adult Services is to delay or prevent inappropriate institutionalization of seniors and people with disabilities. This goal is achieved through the delivery and coordination of home and community-based services,” (Monterey County Department of Social Services, n.d.).

In order to fulfill its mission, Aging and Adult Services offers a variety of supportive programs to address issues that seniors and individuals with disabilities face. One of the programs offered is In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS), which provides low-income seniors, adults, and children living with disabilities with in-home care. IHSS pays caregivers who assist recipients with essential activities of daily living such as cooking, bathing, grooming, laundry, transportation, and other tasks. For many recipients, their caregivers are relatives or friends who agree to care for the individual. If an individual needs a caregiver but does not have any family members or friends who can provide care for them, then the Public Authority (PA) provides the individual with a list of available caregivers from the registry that they maintain.

Other major programs managed by Aging and Adult Services are Adult Protective Services (APS), and the Senior Information, Referral & Assistance Line. These programs ensure the well being of individuals by investigating reports of suspected elder or dependent adult abuse and by providing seniors with information to community resources.

**Problem Description**

As the Baby Boomer generation continues to grow, so does isolation amongst elders. Take into consideration that “about 28 percent of older adults in the United States, or 13.8 million people, live alone,” (NIH, 2019, para. 3). Furthermore, data from the Administration for Community Living indicates that the senior population size is expected to increase to 94.7 million by 2060 (ACL, 2018, p.1). Moreover, in comparison to socially involved seniors, older adults who live alone may be at a higher risk of developing depression or experiencing behavioral health problems like neglect, abuse, and injury. These findings confirm that seniors constitute a significant portion of our population which raises a concern over the accessibility to supportive in-home care services that are available to seniors.

**Contributing Factors**

There are many different factors that contribute to isolation in seniors and there is no one explanation that applies to all seniors because the population is so diverse. Yet, research shows that the most common contributing factors of isolation among seniors are personal choice, fear of injury in age-inappropriate environments, and milestone events.

Contrary to popular belief, some elders live alone and seclude themselves from others because of personal preference. Jessica M. Finlay and Lindsay C. Kobayashi conducted interviews in the metropolitan area of Minneapolis to study the relationship between isolation and the environment in older adults (2018). Finlay and Kobayashi found that some elders prefer to engage in solitary activities and feel content with maintaining a small social circle as this gives them the opportunity to focus on their interests or hobbies. For participants who experienced domestic abuse and divorces like Rhonda, having a solitary lifestyle allowed her to redefine her

life and pursue book writing, travel, and visits to museums (Finlay and Kobayashi, 2018). For other participants like Ellen, living in solitude does not mean having to sacrifice your social life. In fact, Ellen was able to establish new social networks after moving to the city and formed two book clubs and a social committee (Finlay and Kobayashi, 2018). This is not to say that seniors who chose to live alone are not at risk of injury or behavioral health problems. They too can experience periodic depression and isolation.

Another factor that contributes to isolation in seniors is the fear of injury due to medical conditions. In their study, Finlay and Kobayashi found that seniors feel that going outside, especially in unpredictable weather, will increase their risk of injury. For 77-year-old Rebecca, having surgeries led to her isolation in the winter months as she states that she was too afraid to go outside in icy conditions (Finlay and Kobayashi, 2018). Moreover, for elders who have a disability going outside on their own can be a challenge as many communities are not accommodating to their needs. As Lauren Snedeker points out, “individuals with physical disabilities may have trouble crossing wide streets to reach bus stops or may have difficulty climbing the high stairs of a bus or train,” (2017).

As older adults age, they experience many significant events of which include loss of loved ones and retirement; both can have a severe impact on social relationships. Losing loved ones can lead to isolation especially if the person who passed away was their companion at home or their only source of social interaction. Take into consideration that many seniors have estranged relationships with their children and family or are separated from loved ones by distance. As a result, seniors form close bonds with one or very few individuals which is why the loss of a loved one can be so devastating. Another significant event that can lead to isolation in

seniors is retirement. The period of transition from work to retirement can be difficult for seniors as they may experience a loss of identity and friendships with colleagues come to an end, thus, forcing individuals to create new social networks and find new interests or activities to participate in during their spare time (Snedeker, 2017). Unfortunately, seniors who do not develop new social networks or engage in hobbies may experience isolation and a sharper decline in health.

### **Consequences**

A grave consequence of isolation in seniors is the feeling of loneliness. The difference between isolation and loneliness is that isolation is the objective separation from others. Simply put, this means that individuals chose to live alone. Whereas loneliness is the feeling of being alone or separated even while you are among other people (NIH, 2019, para. 19). One of the implications of loneliness is that it increases the risk of developing other health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, and Alzheimer's disease due to inflammation that is triggered by a biological defense mechanism in the body (NIH, 2019, para. 5). Moreover, chronic loneliness leads to a sense of disconnection from the community and leads to a sense of mistrust of others (NIH, 2019, para. 13).

The second and most serious consequence of isolation is death. As Finlay and Kobayashi (2018) found, one of the biggest fears that seniors share is the fear of dying alone. Participants in their study stated feeling concerned that one day they would be found dead after several weeks had gone by or were concerned about medical emergencies because they had no one to help them. Oftentimes death results from "limited contact, feeling uncared for or forgotten, or having little to no available resources," (Snedeker, 2017). In fact, a research study found that

experiencing isolation and loneliness increases the risk of death for individuals who are 52 and older (Snedeker, 2017).

The last consequence of isolation is the lack of access to resources. Many isolated seniors live in areas that are far from grocery stores, libraries, senior centers, parks, and other essential resources that help promote the well being of seniors (Finlay and Kobayashi, 2018). For seniors with disabilities or with other medical conditions finding transportation to these places is difficult. As a result, their needs are often neglected which as previously stated, could lead to starvation, loneliness, health problems, and death.

### **Problem Model**

<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Problem</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
Personal choice	Isolation among elders will increase as the Baby Boomer generation continues to grow.	Feeling of loneliness
Fear of injury in environments that are not age-friendly		Lack of access to essential resources
Milestone events and their impact on social connectedness		Death

### **Capstone Project Description and Justification**

#### **Capstone Project**

This capstone project consists of conducting a customer satisfaction survey and analysis report of the survey results. Questions on the survey ask for feedback pertaining to the quality of customer service delivery that the Monterey County Public Authority offers to IHSS caregivers. The feedback received from the caregivers will be influential in calculating the percentage of



caregivers who participate in services offered by the agency, evaluating current customer service procedures, and determining what changes staff can implement to provide better customer service to IHSS caregivers. Although this capstone project is an analysis of customer service, the services that are offered by the Public Authority address the issue of isolation in seniors. Take into consideration that the Public Authority of Monterey County provides eligible seniors with a list of available caregivers from the registry who can assist seniors with daily tasks, provide in-home care, and provide companionship; thus, addressing isolation amongst seniors who may have otherwise been neglected. Having a caregiver helps to diminish isolation in seniors as social contact is practiced during daily interactions and access to essential resources like groceries or transportation to medical appointments is provided by caregivers. In return, this helps to prevent medical and self-neglect that may otherwise occur in isolated seniors and may lead to institutionalization.

### **Project Purpose**

As previously stated, one of the most common fears among elderly adults is the fear of experiencing falls and injuries. This fear is validated by the CDC who reports that each year 2.8 million seniors are treated in hospitals for injuries resulting from falls (Altshuler, 2016). Other important issues that isolated seniors experience is lack of access to resources and death from limited contact. The Monterey County IHSS program addresses these issues by providing eligible seniors with in-home care and supportive services which could reduce the risk of falls and injuries in homebound seniors and keep them in their own homes rather than an institution. IHSS caregivers may also help eligible seniors with health management which could reduce the

risk of death from a medical emergency. Lastly, having an IHSS caregiver addresses the issue of limited social contact as most IHSS caregivers provide services for recipients on a weekly basis.

Results from the capstone project highlight the areas where the Monterey County Public Authority can make changes in order to improve service delivery to IHSS caregivers and recipients. It is important to consider that a portion of IHSS program recipients do not have family or friends to provide care for them nor can they afford to pay for care from a private organization. The Monterey County Public Authority helps meet these needs by providing IHSS recipients with a list of authorized caregivers from the Public Authority Registry. Caregivers from the Public Authority Registry are paid by the state, so the recipients do not have to worry about an out-of-pocket payment. It is important to use surveys to measure the quality of service being provided by the agency to IHSS recipients and providers because IHSS is a public program that serves thousands of vulnerable individuals in Monterey County.

### **Project Justification**

According to the March 2020 IHSS Program Data published by the California State Department of Social Services (CDSS), 55.4% of recipients are seniors who are 65 years of age and older. Moreover, seniors receiving IHSS services require between 91.3-117 hours of care per month (CDSS, 2020). These figures illustrate that a large portion of seniors statewide rely on the services and companionship of IHSS caregivers on a daily basis.

According to the U.S Census Bureau, 13.6% of the population in Monterey County consists of adults that are 65 years of age and older (2019). Furthermore, statistics obtained from Monterey County Aging and Adult Services illustrate that in September 2020, there were 283 caregivers on the Public Authority Registry and there were 168 new recipient requests for

providers (N.Ledo, 2020). These statistics illustrate that the Public Authority registry is frequently solicited by recipients who are searching for caregivers to provide in-home care and assistance with daily living tasks. Given the fact that recipients look to hire caregivers from the Public Authority registry, it is important to ensure that the available caregivers from the Public Authority registry are appropriately trained to address issues that come with caring for seniors and those with disabilities. In order to accomplish this goal and as is required by law, the Monterey County Public Authority offers free training to caregivers on topics such as managing diabetes, Alzheimer's, and other relevant topics.

The IHSS provider customer satisfaction survey will help to determine the percentage of caregivers that participate in training classes offered by the Public Authority and to discover what areas of customer service need improvement. Seeing that there are a limited number of available caregivers on the Public Authority registry, it is important the agency provides current IHSS caregivers and recipients with quality customer service to ensure that any discrepancies are resolved and to continue to attract new caregivers.

### **Project Implementation**

The Monterey County IHSS Public Authority Provider Satisfaction Survey was developed in the early months of 2020, following the IHSS Recipient Satisfaction Survey that was conducted in the Fall of 2019. Many of the questions relating to customer service are similar to those on the Fall 2019 IHSS recipient survey. The main difference between the two surveys is that the caregiver survey consists of seven questions of which two are questions that pertain to IHSS provider training courses and are aimed at obtaining feedback to increase IHSS Provider's participation in training courses offered by the Monterey County Public Authority.

Alongside the survey, a letter was developed explaining the purpose of the survey to IHSS caregivers. The letter instructed the participants to complete the survey and to mail it back to the Salinas district office utilizing the postage paid return envelope provided by the agency. Once a majority of the surveys were received, data entry of the responses was performed. Data from the surveys was entered onto an electronic version of the survey that was created on Google Forms to transcribe the information from the paper surveys into a digital format for analysis. Furthermore, the analysis entailed calculating the survey response rate and creating graphs to illustrate the statistics. Once the data analysis was complete, an analysis report was drafted explaining and summarizing the major trends of the survey responses and outlining recommendations of how the Monterey County Public Authority could improve their customer service delivery to IHSS caregivers. The main participants in this project were the IHSS caregivers who completed the survey, the Management Analyst II, and the Program Manager who reviewed the report. A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

### **Assessment Plan**

To measure the effectiveness of the provider survey, the response rate will be calculated and the feedback from the participants will be used when writing the summary report. Feedback from the participants is crucial as this will be used to identify what areas of customer service Monterey County IHSS Public Authority is excelling in and the areas of customer service delivery that the agency could improve.

### **Expected Outcomes**

It is expected that the survey results will be similar to the results from the 2019 IHSS recipient campaign which showed that a majority of clients feel that the agency provides satisfactory customer service. Based on the IHSS recipient campaign results, it is predicted that some participants may express feedback on the length of call wait times and the rate of the return of calls. Moreover, it is anticipated that caregivers may share commentary requesting specific training courses, commentary related to IHSS caregiver pay rates, the current transition to electronic timesheets, and access to medical supplies. Additionally, it is expected that the agency's response during the COVID-19 pandemic might have an influence on the commentary provided by the participants.

It is foreseen that the results from the analysis report will be used by the Program Manager when evaluating the IHSS/PA program and when determining new customer service procedures. Furthermore, the results may be shared with the Monterey County PA staff during collaborative meetings. Lastly, the results will serve as a baseline for future IHSS Public Authority caregiver surveys.

### **Project Results**

Approximately 300 surveys were mailed to all Monterey County IHSS active providers on the Public Authority registry. Of the 300 mailed surveys, only nineteen surveys were returned. Thus, making the response rate for this survey 6%. The 2020 provider survey responses indicate that IHSS providers feel that the Monterey County IHSS Public Authority staff listens to their concerns and treats them with courtesy and respect; in fact, the results show that 94% of the participants indicated that they felt this way. Additionally, the 2020 provider survey shows that 89.5% of the IHSS caregivers feel that the Monterey County staff returned

their calls in a timely manner. Perhaps the most significant response from the 2020 provider survey pertains to the IHSS providers' participation in training classes offered by Monterey County. When asked if they have attended any of the free, county sponsored training, only 36.8% of the participants indicated that they have attended the county sponsored training. This finding is significant because the training classes offered by Monterey County discuss topics relating to providing adequate care for recipients and are offered to providers at no cost. If not enough providers are participating in these trainings, then the quality of care that seniors receive may be impacted. Having skilled providers is of importance because as previously stated, one of the most prominent fears and consequences of isolation in seniors is having a medical emergency and dying from lack of medical care.

When looking at the 2020 provider survey response rate it is important to keep in mind that the responses received may not reflect an accurate representation of the opinions of all of the Monterey County PA IHSS caregivers because so few responses were received. It should also be noted that low response rate may be a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the wildfires that occurred over the summer which may have affected the caregivers' ability to respond to the survey.

As highlighted by the survey results, some areas of improvement include returning calls in a timely manner and conducting provider outreach to promote training classes offered by Monterey County. Additionally, the written responses to the open ended questions provide insight to the aspects of customer service that are functioning. When asked, "what is the Monterey County IHSS doing well?," one of the providers responded, "Providing care for the elderly at home. Helps persons to have supplemental income," and another responded, "During

the pandemic the information provided, the concern about our welfare, and the resources provided for our safety.” The answers provided by these participants reinforce the idea that providing quality customer service to IHSS recipients and providers is important as it impacts the program’s ability to provide services to isolated seniors in Monterey County.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

The data obtained from the survey indicates that providers are satisfied with the level of professionalism exemplified by Monterey County IHSS Public Authority staff. More specifically, providers stated that the staff is attentive, excellent, patient, and professional when interacting with them. The results also reveal that providers feel like their safety and welfare is accounted for by the efforts made by the Monterey County IHSS Public Authority in providing them with information and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The constructive feedback received in this survey implies that providers appreciate being well informed and having open communication with staff. Providers specifically expressed a desire for increased communication and improvement in the timeliness of returned phone calls. Sharing this report as part of an inclusive discussion with PA staff on how to address this concern would be the most successful approach. This way management and PA staff can work together to reconcile customer concerns regarding timely return calls with staff’s day-to-day workload management that may be preventing timely responses. The current expectation is that staff return phone calls within 24 hours.

Finally, the survey responses show that there is a mix in opinions when it comes to provider participation in the training classes sponsored by Monterey County IHSS. Several providers shared that their participation in these training classes is impacted by their personal

schedule and availability on the days when the classes are offered. Providers shared that they would feel more encouraged to attend the trainings if the classes were offered online and were of topics of interest. Providers expressed an interest in receiving training related to viral diseases and how to provide better care for their recipients.

Overall, the data suggests that providers are content with the quality of customer service received. One of the most prominent findings is the providers' desire to be well informed and to have more communication with PA staff. To improve communication with providers, staff can make telephone calls, send out mass emails, or flyers to IHSS providers a few days in advance to inform them of upcoming training classes, events, or changes to the program.

### **Personal Reflection**

Working on this project taught me the importance of customer service delivery and customer satisfaction as it relates to programs that promote the welfare of seniors. The PA is an agency that helps seniors connect with providers who are available to assist them with daily activities. As research has shown, many seniors want to live independent lives, but sometimes need assistance with small tasks such as cleaning or going to the grocery store. Being unable to carry out these daily tasks leads to isolation, neglect, injury, and sometimes death. This is why for isolated seniors, the assistance and care that IHSS providers give to seniors has an enormous impact in their well being. Perhaps one of the most significant impacts is that seniors are able to continue living in the comfort of their home rather than being institutionalized.

Clearly, the services that the PA and that IHSS caregivers provide for seniors are of significant importance in maintaining their wellbeing. Moreover, because the services that the agency provides are of high value to members of our society, it is important that the agency



frequently receives feedback from IHSS recipients and providers. One way of obtaining feedback from program recipients is to have surveys such as the one conducted in this project. The feedback received allows the agency to measure what areas of customer service need improvement. When done periodically, the results of each survey campaign can be compared to measure whether the agency is improving or not. The surveys also allow the agency to become aware of what services the program recipients are requesting or are in need of. Lastly, these surveys are a form of engagement with the customer which is important in running successful programs.

Having said that, one thing that I learned about customer engagement is that getting customers to respond to a survey can be a challenge. In this project we had a 6% response rate which is low considering the number of providers in the agency. However, there were many external factors that could have contributed to the low response rate. In order to improve customer engagement in these surveys, it would be a good idea to send out alerts informing the customer of the upcoming survey rather than just mailing the survey to them. Another option would be to create an incentive so that the customers feel more compelled to participate in the survey. An example of the incentive would be entering the participant in a raffle. Obtaining a higher response rate is important as the feedback received will more accurately represent the opinions of the customers being served.

I enjoyed working on this project because I had the opportunity to practice research methods, learn about the issues that many seniors in our community face, and to learn about what the agency is doing to help address those issues. Creating this survey allowed me to practice data collection, data analysis, and to interpret the results. Writing the results report allowed me to

practice professional writing and strengthened my skills as a writer. As a result, the report that I wrote summarizing the survey results was shared with the management team of the program and the findings from this survey will serve as a baseline for future surveys.

I am glad to have worked on this project because it expanded my knowledge of a population group of our society that I was unfamiliar with. Through my research for this project I learned a great deal about the issues that senior citizens are facing on a daily basis and I hope to use this knowledge to advocate for clients that I serve in my future career.

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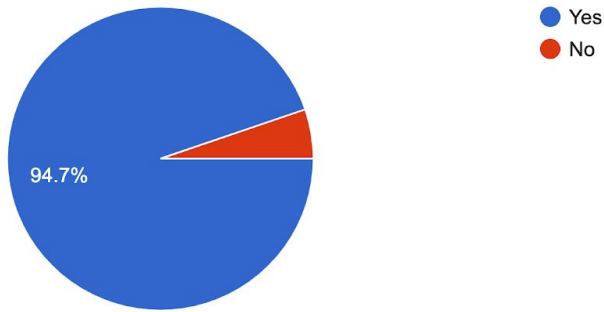
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montereycountycalifornia>

**Appendix A**

**Monterey County IHSS PA Provider Survey Responses**

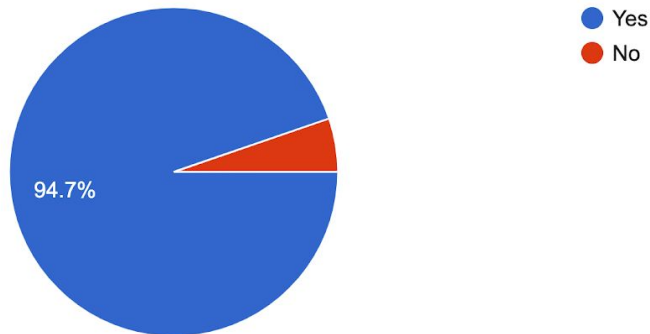
**Question 1**

Does Monterey County's IHSS Public Authority staff treat you with courtesy and respect?  
19 responses



**Question 2**

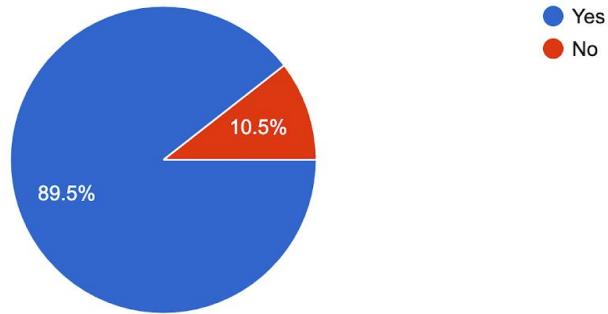
Do you feel IHSS Public Authority staff listen to your concerns?  
19 responses



**Question 3**

Does IHSS Public Authority staff return your call(s) in a timely manner?

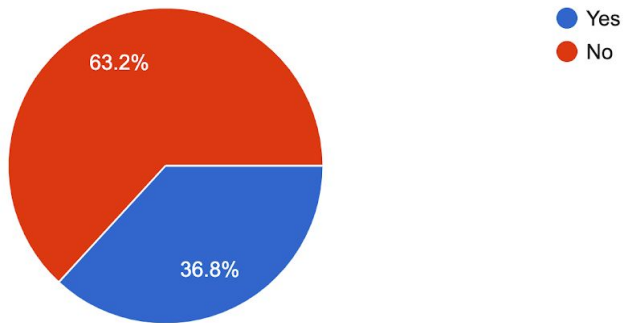
19 responses



**Question 4**

Monterey County offers free, periodic IHSS provider training classes on topics relevant to IHSS care. Have you attended any county sponsored IHSS provider training classes?

19 responses



**Scope of Work**

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
<p>Create a survey and letter explaining survey to clients</p> <p>Gather a list of IHSS caregivers</p> <p>Mail merge</p> <p>Create a spreadsheet or Google Forms to capture written results</p> <p>Write analysis report</p>	<p>Surveys and return envelopes</p>	<p>The survey will need to be drafted by 3/01/20</p> <p>The survey will be mailed out July 2020</p> <p>Data will be collected beginning Fall 2020</p> <p>The Google Forms will be created by September 30, 2020</p> <p>The analysis report template will need to be created by October 30, 2020</p>	<p>Nick Ledo, MA II/mentor</p> <p>Emily Nicholl, Program Manager</p> <p>Office Assistants, receive the mail</p>