

14TH SESSION OF THE OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON AGEING

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Response by United States of America

1. How are the key human rights related to older persons' social inclusion defined in the national and local legislation in your country? If definitions are not available, how should such rights be defined considering relevant existing national, regional and international legal frameworks?

Having determined that social isolation and loneliness are urgent public health issues in the United States (U.S.), in 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General issued an Advisory entitled [Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#), regarding the important role that social inclusion plays in our overall health. The Advisory offers a definition of social connectedness and sets forth a proposed framework of a national strategy to fight loneliness and social isolation.

Scope of the right

2. Please provide references to existing national legal standards relating to older persons and social Inclusion.

The Administration for Community Living (ACL) serves as the focal point of older persons and aging within the U.S. Government. ACL's mission is to respect and maximize the independence, well-being, and health of older persons, persons with disabilities across the lifespan, and their families and caregivers. ACL's cornerstone legislation, the Older Americans Act (OAA), outlines the responsibility of government to assist all older persons to secure equal opportunity and inclusion into society. The OAA contemplates that services provided thereunder will be prioritized based on greatest economic need and greatest social need. In February 2024, ACL released a final rule to update the regulations for implementing OAA programs; the final rule expressly notes that cultural, social, and geographic isolation could result in greatest social need.

The OAA funds a variety of services and programs that address social determinants of health, with the aim of maximizing the ability of older persons to live independently, and actively participate, in the community. OAA funding is used to provide healthy meals, transportation, socialization, recreation, health promotion and elder justice activities, among others.

Legal assistance provided under the OAA is part of the essential core of ACL's legal assistance and elder rights programs. The legal services network can provide important assistance for older persons in accessing long-term care options and other community-based services. Legal services also protect older persons against direct challenges to their independence, choice, and financial security.

Other federal agencies provide guidance and direction related to social inclusion, as well. For example, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' Home and Community Based Services final rule ensures that persons who receive home and community-based services through the Medicaid program have full access to the benefits of community living and are able to receive services in the most integrated setting. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has also issued guidance related to social isolation and older persons.

State obligations

3. What are the measures that should be undertaken by the State to respect, protect and fulfil relevant human rights to ensure the social inclusion of older persons?

The national government is best positioned to offer leadership and guidance and to facilitate public-private collaborations to address the issue of social isolation in older persons. ACL established *Commit to Connect*, an initiative that aims to address social isolation and loneliness by connecting persons to programs and resources that will help them to build social connections. The aforementioned advisory by the U.S. Surgeon General entitled *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* is another example of proactive government leadership in this area.

Special considerations

4. What special measures and specific considerations should be considered to respect, protect and fulfil relevant human rights to ensure the social inclusion of older persons?

Addressing inequities experienced by older persons in underserved communities must be a priority. In addition, the development and expansion of health promotion and disease prevention, evidence-based interventions to improve functional independence, improve quality of life, increase choice, and maintain dignity for older persons is essential to their ability to maintain social connections. Financial security, as well as adequate housing and transportation also are prerequisites to ensuring the ability of all older persons to remain socially connected.

Implementation

5. What are the best practices and main challenges faced by your country in the adoption and implementation of relevant human rights to ensure the social inclusion of older persons?

As the world is experiencing the largest population of older persons in history with ongoing significant growth in the coming decades, the world is also achieving rapid growth in technological advancements. These advancements offer significant potential to address the needs of older persons to stay connected; it's crucial to ensure equitable access to technology, to bridge the digital divide, and to develop technologies that are user-friendly and accessible. By harnessing the potential of technology responsibly and providing older persons with access to training and support when needed, we can shape a future where older persons can live healthy, engaged, and fulfilling lives.

Behavioral health presents an additional challenge. Older persons are not immune from depression, mental illness and substance abuse disorders (SUDs). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance behavioral health in the United States. SAMHSA's [Strategic Plan 2023-2026](#), cites data indicating that suicide rates for persons age 75 and older are among the highest of any age group in the U.S., approximately 3 million persons 50 and older have reported having a serious mental illness, and more than 11 percent of individuals age 50 and older have reported having a SUD. SAMHSA has established the [Engage, Educate, Empower for Equity: E4 Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health Disparities in Aging](#), the mission of which is to engage, empower, and educate health care providers and community-based organizations for equity in behavioral health for older persons and their families.