

# Virtual Bridges – An Innovative Program to Engage Isolated Older Adults in the Time of COVID-19



Makenzie Olson & Madelyn Molohon  
Winona State University, Bachelor of Social Work Program

## Introduction

- Bridges Health is a student-led faculty-guided interdisciplinary clinical education setting that serves underinsured or uninsured people in a rural portion of the state; the primary age group we work with is middle to older adults with the occasional family member and/or college student
- Virtual Bridges is a virtual outreach program that was developed in response to the pandemic in March 2020
- Virtual bridges is broken down into 2 outreach efforts: Caring Calls and Empower Hour

## Literature

- The shift towards social distancing presents changes and challenges to the health and well-being of older adults
- There has been a major shift in the use of telehealth services following the pandemic
- Isolation is seen commonly in older adults who live alone or who are disabled
- Isolation can lead to cognitive and functional declines

## Resources

<https://www.bridgeshealthwinona.org>

Bridges Health: 507-457-2891

Email: [bridgescommunityhealth@winona.edu](mailto:bridgescommunityhealth@winona.edu)

## Caring Calls

- Evidence-based model of telehealth outreach targeted to older adults who may be isolated and remaining in their homes
- 7 regular clients are scheduled to call in every week; there are around 60 calls total for the semester
- Clients have an hour time frame to check in, talk about their weeks, and/or ask for resources
- Resource center available for any medical or therapeutic needs that may be requested
- Some clients do not have any other support system
- This program has given adults companionship as well as a link to resources that they did not have before. This program also gives students a change to practice their communication skills with real clients.

## Empower Hour

- Evidence-based model of group outreach, where interprofessional students – nursing, social work, public health – have partnered with several area nursing homes to facilitate psychoeducational groups for residents
- present to 3 different facilities each week; there are around 36 presentations total for the semester
- Some topics of empower hour include Diabetes, music and reminiscing, physical activity and nutrition, and virtual museum tours
- Participants meet for an hour to discuss and learn about that week's topic
- This program has increased communication amongst participants as well as their involvement with the community. This program also allows students to enhance their creativity and communication skills.



## Conclusions

- This experience has really opened our eyes to a whole new meaning of outreach. Bridges Health, and more specifically Virtual Bridges, has successfully implemented a program to maintain community in the midst of an isolating pandemic. On top of this, Bridges Health has also created a space where students and professionals of various specialties can come together and work towards the same client/community goals. This interprofessional atmosphere has allowed us to grow our understanding of other professions as well as our networks.
- Virtual outreach has been shown to be a beneficial intervention for those who are socially isolated and experiencing loneliness.

## References

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## Contact info

Makenzie Olson: [MVOlson16@winona.edu](mailto:MVOlson16@winona.edu)

Madelyn Molohon: [madelyn.molohon@go.winona.edu](mailto:madelyn.molohon@go.winona.edu)

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