

Health Buddies: A scalable solution to senior loneliness and nutrition needs

By: Danielle Neveles-McGrath, Heather Hyden, Robin Ingles and Aria Garling

Introduction

Social disconnection carries a **mortality risk similar to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day**. Research has consistently linked loneliness with higher rates of depression and anxiety.¹ In Florida, this public health challenge is particularly acute. **One in eight seniors is diagnosed with depression and nearly one in four Florida seniors live alone.**²

Research has also shown how financial insecurity such as rising housing costs and food insecurity are contributors to poor mental health for older adults.³ These pressures leave seniors choosing between essentials like medications, transportation, and healthy food increasing stress and elevating the risk of depression and anxiety. **Florida's food insecurity rate for older adults is higher than the national average (10% vs. 8.7%).**⁴

Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay has spent more than four decades building strategies to meet the needs of vulnerable people in its community. Founded in 1984, the organization engages volunteers across Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties to serve isolated older adults, at-risk children, veterans, and hungry families. They address both the causes and consequences of need- preventing crises through companionship, nutrition, and health education, and responding to acute needs when they emerge. **The Seniors in Service's Health Buddies program is a whole-person, community-driven initiative that has shown measurable improvements in social connection and food security.**

Case Details

Health Buddies grew out of a partnership between Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay and the University of South Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. Program managers noticed how **those who were loneliest were also the ones visiting the emergency room the most often**. Loneliness emerged as a measurable community health concern. **The response is a 12-week program pairing older adults with trained, background-checked volunteers who connect by phone two to three times per week**. Volunteers, who are called Health Buddies, are trained in medication adherence, fall and fraud prevention, and recognizing potential red flags that may negatively impact seniors.

Health Buddies are mostly college students preparing for health-related careers, recruited nationally through campus partnerships and online volunteer portals. Working professionals, retirees, and older adults also serve as Health Buddies. **Maintaining a deep, diverse volunteer roster is critical to the program's success**: it allows every match to be shaped by what the participant wants, with senior pairings offering peer-to-peer connection alongside the program's intergenerational reach.

In addition to companionship, **enrolled seniors are eligible for regular deliveries of high-quality produce and meals**. Nutrition support is not delivered as a stand-alone service; it is integrated into the companionship model. Volunteers receive evidence-based nutrition literacy training and use ongoing conversations to connect food choices to participants' chronic conditions. Because this information is shared by a trusted Health Buddy, it is often received with openness rather than resistance.

Health Buddies works as a referral model, allowing clinicians, first responders, non-profits, and neighbors to connect older adults to the program. **By addressing loneliness, mental health, and food insecurity simultaneously, the program responds to the interconnected realities older adults face rather than treating each issue in isolation.**

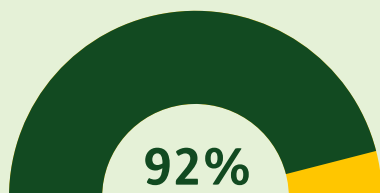
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When you get to be my age, you feel like people have forgotten about you. But not you guys. My Health Buddy checks in, they genuinely care, and they make a real difference in my life.
I'm grateful. -Russell, Health Buddies Participant

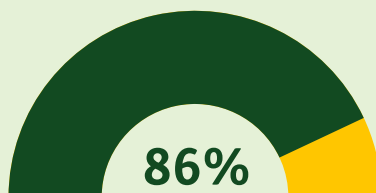
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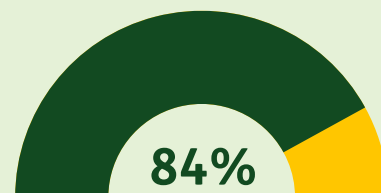
Health Buddy Emotional Health and Nutrition Outcomes in 2025



Participants improved in at least one measure of social connection*



Participants increased food security and nutrition literacy



Reported fewer emergency room visits during participation

75% of participants reported reduced psychological distress. Data above is from 264 seniors who completed the 12-week program. Since 2020, Health Buddies has served more than 900 adults across Tampa Bay.

Challenges

Despite its strengths, Health Buddies confronted a common barrier in aging and mental health services: reaching older adults who are least likely to seek traditional care. They addressed this challenge by implementing a human-centered design, which starts with listening to the people served to shape solutions around their lived experiences. **Listening to seniors clarified that dignity, relationship, and choice were the conditions under which engagement became possible.**

These insights shaped every aspect of program design, including nutrition. Carefully selected produce is organic, regeneratively grown, and locally sourced. Each dollar of funding activates multiple returns such as regenerative farming practices restore soil health, local sourcing strengthens the Tampa Bay economy, and nutrient-rich food supports health. **For older adults whose emotional health is at stake the produce provides nourishment that supports overall well-being.**

Additionally, receiving nutrition education from their Health Buddy reinforces emotional safety alongside physical nourishment. The word companion originates from the Latin term meaning “one who breaks bread with another.” **In Health Buddies, food is not an add-on to emotional support, it is its original expression.**

*Improvement in at least one measure of social connection, defined as a reduction of one or more points on the University of California Los Angeles-3 Loneliness Scale and/or a positive change in self-reported connection from baseline to program completion.

Recommended steps for replication and scale

Five key steps:

1

First: Begin with a human-centered design approach by engaging older adults directly and incorporating their lived experiences into program design; this ensures the model reflects what truly drives engagement, including dignity, relationship, and choice.

2

Second: Build and sustain a diverse volunteer workforce, supported by training in areas such as communication, nutrition literacy, and recognizing health risks, to enable consistent and meaningful connections.

3

Third: Integrate services rather than offering them in isolation by combining companionship, nutritional support, and health education into a single, coordinated model.

4

Fourth: Establish strong cross-sector partnerships with healthcare providers, community organizations, food access partners, and local government agencies to support referrals and service delivery.

5

Finally: Implement a simple referral pathway that allows clinicians, first responders, and community members to easily connect older adults to the program, helping reach those least likely to seek traditional care.

About the authors



Danielle Neveles-McGrath Chief Impact Officer, Humana Foundation

In her role, Danielle leads the Foundation's impact evaluation and learning for the Foundation's grant portfolio and publication strategy for advancing knowledge and insights from the Foundation's focus areas in mental health and nutrition. Danielle has more than a decade of healthcare experience and has worked across corporate communications, philanthropy, crisis management, international relations, employee engagement, and media relations in the healthcare and bio-pharmaceutical industries. Before joining the Humana Foundation, Danielle was the Vice President of Racial Equity Grantmaking for the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation, where she managed a \$25 million grant portfolio and invested in community projects focused on education and economic development. She is a board member of Ladies of Virtue, a Chicago-based mentoring, career and leadership development program for young women. Danielle holds a Master of Business Administration from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism from Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. She is a poet and an author of a poetry collection.



Heather Hyden Population Health Strategy Lead, Humana Foundation

In her role, Heather conducts impact and data analysis to inform the foundation's publication strategy with goals of sharing key learnings and insights from grantmaking to advance understanding and knowledge of best practices, scalability and effective interventions in mental health and nutrition. For over 15 years her career has been anchored in health equity spanning multiple sectors including local government, non-profit, public policy, academia, and philanthropy. Recently she served as a lead consultant for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and managed a \$15 million-dollar grantmaking portfolio at the Humana Foundation. Her writing on maternal health, food policy and equitable community development is published across diverse platforms including magazines, peer reviewed journals and institutional reports. She earned a B.S. in Geography and Urban Planning from the University of Memphis and M.S. in Community and Leadership Development from the University of Kentucky where she continues to teach community-engaged research methods and leadership fundamentals.

About the authors



Robin Ingles CEO, Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay

As CEO of Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay, Robin has overseen the launch of new services and significant expansion of impact throughout Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco Counties over her 11 years with the organizations. She manages multiple federal, state, county, city and private grant contracts and restricted/unrestricted contributions. A recognized leader in the field of aging, Robin is invited to speak in retirement communities and advocacy groups.

She has 25+ years of experience in finance, entrepreneurship, marketing, operations, team building and leadership, all directly applicable to the non-profit world. With a B.S. in Accounting from Wake Forest University, Robin applied her accounting expertise in the world of professional sports: from NASCAR to PGA Tour to Controller of the Tampa Bay Lightning. Later, as President of a 22-unit auto repair franchisor, her marketing skills led her to launch her own boutique advertising agency, advising small businesses in all industries across Tampa Bay.



Aria Garling Director Health and Companionship Programs, Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay

In her role, Aria leads Health Buddies, an award-winning intergenerational companionship program she developed to improve mental health among older adults by reducing social isolation and, in turn, decreasing emergency room visits and hospital readmissions. She oversees a \$1.35 million budget and directs the program's strategy, implementation, scaling, development, and evaluation. Before joining Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay in 2020, Aria served as Director of Sales and Marketing at a nationwide pharmacy, where she developed an interest in the intersection of health, access, and community wellbeing. She also serves with the USF Center for the Advancement of Food Security and Healthy Communities, is Co-Chair of the USF Future of Food Think Tank's Holistic Human Health Working Group and is a member of her local Commission on Aging and Falls Free Florida. Aria earned her Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology with a minor in Biology from the University of South Florida, where she is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Applied Medical Anthropology with a concurrent Master of Public Health focused on community nutrition. She is an avid community volunteer, dedicated to serving the community she calls home.



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