

### ***How does PIH find socially isolated people and/or receive referrals?***

The truth is, isolated people are deliberately trying to fly under the radar, so finding and identifying them can be difficult.

For this reason, PIH relies almost exclusively on developing relationships and communicating our mission and model of ministry with our partners (churches, volunteers, civic agencies, and other nonprofits) to cultivate awareness and identification of socially isolated people to serve.

### ***Is social isolation really a problem?***

When life becomes overwhelming, some people will naturally tend to withdraw and pull away. Maybe they don't have family, friends, or neighbors to lift them up when times get hard. They can't (or won't) ask for help. Subconsciously or not, they begin to separate themselves—both physically and emotionally.

Add to this reality the fact that the recent pandemic forced us all to isolate to a degree not previously experienced. This natural tendency—and recent societal changes—have resulted in a true epidemic of isolation that research shows results in devastating results:

- Social isolation increases health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes per day or abusing alcohol. (Brigham Young University, 2015)
- Social isolation is twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity. (Brigham Young University, 2015)
- Socially isolated people have a 26% higher risk of dying prematurely—32% higher if they live alone. (Journal of the Association for Psychological Science, 2015)

### ***How do you know if someone is socially isolated and not just more “private?”***

First, realize it is difficult to identify people who are isolated. Isolation can't be tracked to a certain part of town or even a particular demographic group. It can happen anywhere. That means isolated people are often essentially hidden in plain sight, suffering all alone and in silence.

Second, their isolation is not the result of a singular crisis but a cumulative one. Their isolated condition likely stems from years of bad luck (or bad choices), with emotional trauma that may involve multiple layers. It is often not until these layers “spill out onto their yard” that others might even become aware there is a problem.

This requires others (family members, co-workers, neighbors, and friends) to be INTENTIONAL in reaching out and to build/rebuild relationships with the socially isolated because they may not show up at the food bank or the homeless shelter or the unemployment office—at least not until things hit rock bottom.

### ***What are some examples of people who are socially isolated?***

- Widows/widowers who have spent their entire lives with another person who is no longer there and have no idea how to navigate on their own.
- Spouses who serve as caretakers for a wife/husband suffering the ravages of Alzheimers/dementia desiring to shield themselves and their loved ones from awkward situations or the stigma of asking for help.
- Addicts who are so entangled with their drugs of choice that they block out all the people around them to “protect” their habit.
- Victims of domestic abuse who don’t want anyone to see their scars and bruises.
- Cancer patients who feel self-conscious after losing their hair and becoming painfully swollen from the chemotherapy treatments.
- Single moms who are sinking into depression because they can’t afford to feed their children.
- Survivors of assault who can’t risk being in the wrong place at the wrong time again.

### ***What can I do if I know or suspect someone is socially isolated?***

1. **RESPOND**—It is one thing to actually become aware of someone who is socially isolated, but it is something altogether different—and vital—to do something about it! This requires us to patiently explore the situation and ask God for guidance on the best way to respond. Don’t just jump into action to provide what you think someone needs. Instead, be present and observant, be deliberate in your actions, and respond with kindness, respect, and authenticity. This way you begin to build a relationship by communicating their value as more important than what you can do for them. Getting to know them is more important than finding out what they need.

Remember, socially isolated people don’t just need *something*, they need *someone*.

2. **CONNECT**—From the beginning of our journey with another person, we can start thinking about who else God might want to be in their life. Who could we connect this person with? Who has a resource that might be helpful? Who might be a good match to build a relationship with this person? Who could this person help with their gifts, experiences, and insights?

The point here? God isn’t just asking us to connect with people in need. He also wants us to connect them with a network of people and resources that can collectively demonstrate His love on a much bigger scale. It’s a team project. Which means we never have to feel like we’re carrying every burden by ourselves.

This is where *Partners in Hope* excels! We are uniquely positioned to serve as the “connector” with local churches, volunteers, services, and agencies. Ask permission for us to make contact with this person or, better yet, personally introduce us so they understand we are there to be of help for them as well.

3. **RETURN**—When we are facing dire circumstances, we certainly appreciate whatever help we can get. But our outlook is vastly different if we know that someone cares enough to come back, to see how we’re doing, to show up regularly, and to stick with us through whatever comes next. That’s a total game-changer.

For those who are serving, this requires a mental shift. Instead of feeling the pressure to make promises about providing certain resources or solving problems (which may not even be possible), you can promise to be there, listen, encourage them, pray with them, and discern your role in helping them take the next steps. Those are promises you can keep!

*Bottom line, God is asking us to be the people who return and walk with others to glorify Him.* If we can apply this lesson and bring a relational approach to our ministry, we can become the gift of hope for people who have spiraled into a deep pit of hopelessness. And our actions can point the way directly back to God.