



This year, I have been working as an Americorps VISTA volunteer in the Senior Services department of the Jewish Family & Children's Services of St. Louis, Missouri. We provide many valuable services for older adults in our community, including a subsidized homemaker program to help with basic needs around the house such as cooking or doing laundry, chaplaincy visits to provide spiritual support to people unable to travel to synagogue anymore, and Elderlink, our phone line that helps connect seniors to care providers in the community.

Unfortunately, many of the people who would most benefit from our help are the people it is most difficult to reach—older adults who are isolated and living in poverty. Based on recent demographic studies, we know that there are around three thousand Jewish seniors living alone in the St. Louis area, and about a third of those seniors have no adult children in the area to provide them with extra support¹. JFCS brought me in to research these issues and build innovative and sustainable programs to find and support these isolated seniors.

I have researched existing means of support, the unique problems facing isolated seniors, and different ways of quantifying those needs so as to most effectively identify (and therefore help) the people in need. For example, I found that the Federal Poverty Line, which is generally lacking as a tool for defining who is in poverty, is particularly inadequate at identifying impoverished seniors, as it does not take into account the costs of healthcare, housing, or transportation, major needs in senior households. Accordingly, I recommended that our Financial Assistance team use other systems for our guidelines deciding who qualifies for the program, such as the MIT Cost of Living Calculator, which looks at a variety of expenses and location-based costs.

I am currently working to build a new model of finding isolated seniors based on the risk factors for social isolation. Previous and ongoing methods of outreach have focused on ad campaigns or speaking with “gatekeepers,” community members such as police officers, supermarket employees, or hairdressers who are more likely to come into contact with isolated individuals. I hope that by coming at this problem from another direction, we will be able to find and help people who have otherwise been missed.

I also work closely with my colleagues in the Senior Services Department. I am continually impressed and inspired by the daily difference my coworkers make in the lives of our clients, whether it is by walking a client through the application for food stamps or setting up homecare for a senior who cannot climb the stairs with a big basket of laundry anymore. Their dedication and commitment to service is an inspiration to me as I begin my own career.

¹ 2014 St. Louis Jewish Community Study, Jewish Federation of St. Louis