

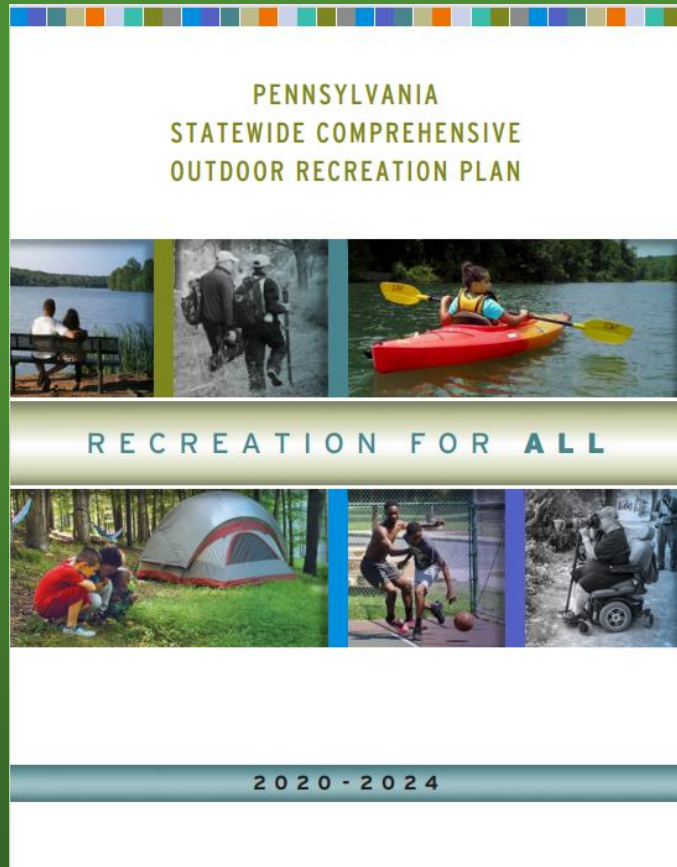
Re-Connecting Elderly Pennsylvanians with the Outdoors

The Power of Nature to Combat Social Isolation and Improve Health and Quality of Life

Nicole Faraguna
Director of Policy & Planning
Department of Conservation & Natural Resources



Recreation for All



DCNR's mission is to conserve and sustain Pennsylvania's natural resources for present and future generations' use and enjoyment.

- Through the 2020-24 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, entitled Recreation for All, DCNR is working to advance health and wellness and improve access to outdoor recreation for all Pennsylvanians.
- DCNR takes intentional action to ensure DCNR lands are accessible to all, providing inclusive and equitable programs and services, recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.
- How can DCNR partner with agencies and stakeholders to support outdoor recreation goals for the elderly, including residents in long-term care facilities?

Keystone for Empowered Aging



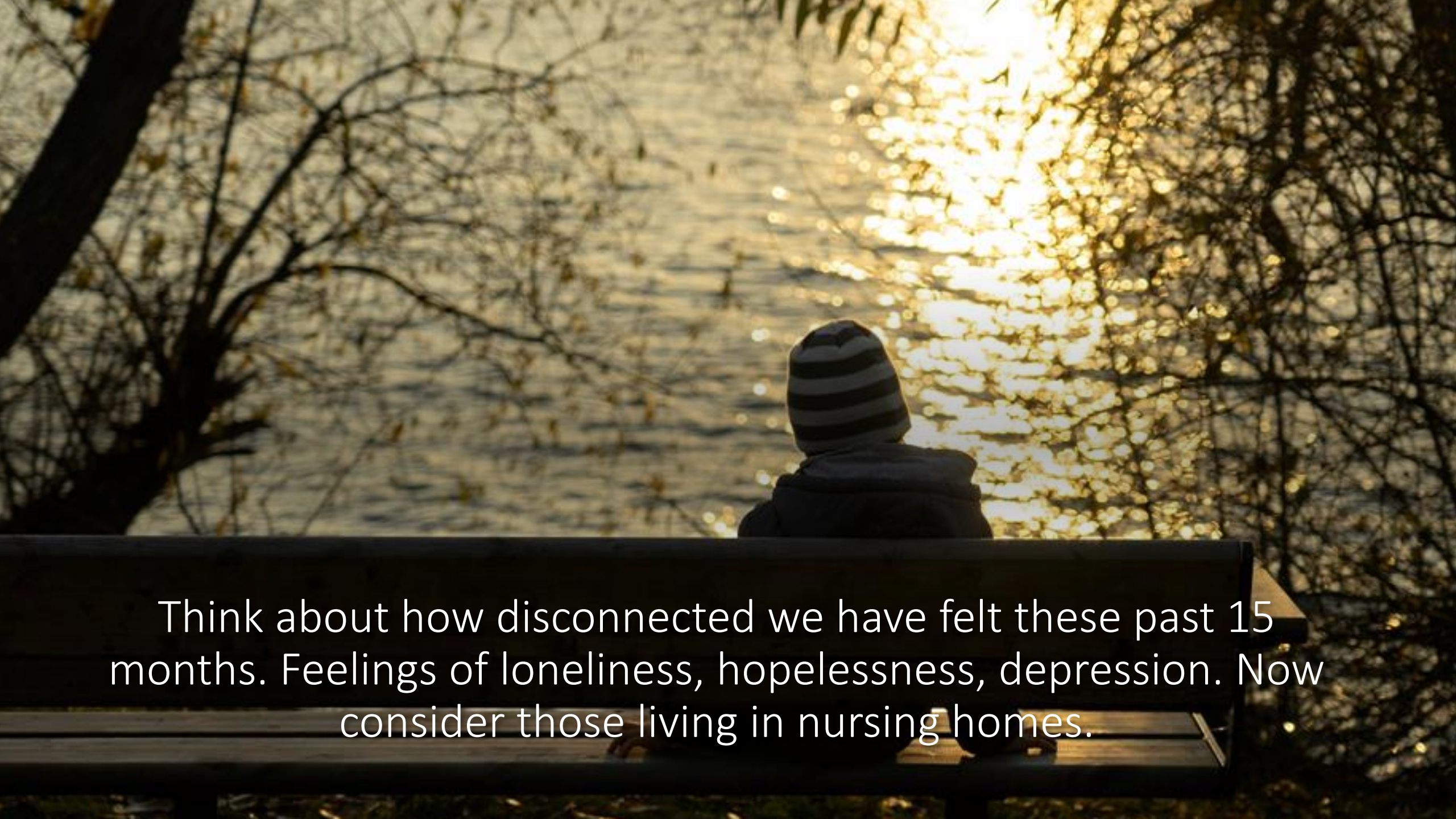
The mission of the Pennsylvania Department of Aging is to promote independence, purpose and well-being in the lives of older adults through advocacy, service and protection

- Explore and develop avenues to use virtual programming to serve more people, including those who are isolated
- Expand partnerships and enhance existing collaborations to grow the aging network's capacity to deliver services.
- Build and strengthen partnerships with organizations representing diverse or isolated older adults to conduct more effective outreach in these communities.
- Leverage experience of older adults to connect them to meaningful volunteer opportunities that maximize their talent.
- Expand participation in programs that help reduce social isolation

Social Isolation and COVID-19

- The most vulnerable populations required significant mitigation measures.
- Disconnection from the world, family, friends as in-person visits were halted.
- For some residents, technology is a barrier which makes virtual solutions challenging.
- COVID mitigation may require full quarantine of residents, restricting movements outside room.
- Many if not all group activities have been cancelled or modified to protect residents.
- Staffing challenges amidst a pandemic.
- Volunteers have been unable to provide support.
- How many residents do not regularly have visitors prior the pandemic?



A person wearing a dark jacket and a striped beanie is sitting on a dark wooden bench, viewed from behind. They are looking out over a body of water towards a bright sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a shimmering path of light across the water's surface. Bare tree branches are visible in the foreground and background, silhouetted against the golden light of the setting sun.

Think about how disconnected we have felt these past 15 months. Feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, depression. Now consider those living in nursing homes.

Social Isolation and Loneliness

According to the NIH, social isolation and loneliness are linked to:

- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Obesity
- Weakened immune system
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Cognitive decline
- Alzheimer's Disease
- Death





An unprecedented number of people have sought solace in the outdoors during the pandemic specifically to experience the mental and physical health benefits of spending time in nature.

Time Outdoors is Essential



- Exposure to the outdoors and direct sunlight can improve one's overall well-being.
- Absorption of Vitamin D can provide a more restful sleep as well as reduce falls and fractures.
- Even short exposures to nature can lead to reductions in stress levels, frustration, agitation, and aggression.
- Nature can increase sensory stimulation and decrease boredom and hopelessness.
- Regular exposure to nature can improve quality of life and equilibrium, especially for those with dementia.
- Being outdoors is essential for our physical and mental health.
- Dementia patients in particular can benefit from time spent outdoors.

The Historically Underserved

- The pandemic has exposed the fragile state of our healthcare system, specifically in underserved communities.
- The pandemic can impact the underserved communities more than others due to their financial and health disparities.
- Lack of health insurance, accessible community health facilities, and feelings of isolation may compound their existing inequalities.
- Workforce challenges in long-term care facilities include staff shortages, frequent turnovers, significant resident to staff ratio, not enough personal protective equipment (PPE), and, most importantly, lack of training and education for a large portion of the staff.





The elderly are significantly underserved when it comes to experiencing recreational access to the outdoors. Those living in LTCFs are dependent on visitors, volunteers and staff to get outdoors.



Capacity Issues

- Capacity limitations in facilities makes it difficult for staff to routinely connect residents to the outdoors.
- Staffing crisis exists due to pandemic.
- Volunteer capacity is also limited. Many facilities have fewer volunteers as a result of the pandemic.
- Facilities with full-time volunteer coordinators may have ability to increase volunteer capacity.
- Staff time is necessary to prep residents to go outdoors.
- Volunteers may require some level of training.

Barriers to the Outdoors



- Some facilities lack basic outdoor settings.
- For those that do have outdoor space, it may be limited in terms of seating, shaded areas, and natural features.
- Some facilities may be in close (walking) distance to local parks and trails but may lack staff/volunteer capacity to utilize these spaces.
- Some facilities may be in close (driving) distance to local, state parks but may lack transportation as well as staff/volunteer options to utilize these spaces.

Overarching Considerations

- Consider the risks associated with this vulnerable population:
 - Medical Conditions
 - Mobility Limitations
 - Mental and Cognitive Deficiencies
 - Weather Conditions (particularly extreme temperatures)
 - Basic safety precautions
 - Volunteer Training Needs
 - Volunteer Background Checks
 - Liability (signed waivers)
 - COVID-19 remains a constant threat





Life Is An Adventure..

Opportunities

- Celebrate nursing and personal care residents who have endured months of social isolation.
- Educate long-term care staff around the benefits of outdoor experiences for residents.
- Build public awareness around the harmful impacts of social isolation and loneliness for long-term care residents.
- Strengthen connections with existing volunteer networks and outdoor recreation resources within the community.
- Elevate need for volunteers.
- Outdoor elements could be a great marketing tool for facilities.



A Few Recommendations

- A Statewide Day of Awareness
 - Bring attention to issues of social isolation
 - Celebrate those (residents and staff) who have endured so much during the pandemic. (e.g., WWII Victory Day Event)
 - Encourage/empower facility staff to hold events outdoors (as COVID mitigation eases up)
 - Educate community on the need for volunteers
- Statewide Volunteer Recruitment
 - Work with existing volunteer pipelines to connect people to facilities
 - Develop regional pilot projects with existing organizations
- Bring Nature to LTCF Residents
 - Work with community partners to “Green” LTCF community spaces
 - Nature programs
 - Virtual experiences



WALK WITH A DOC

DCNR HOSTING EVENTS IN SEPTEMBER

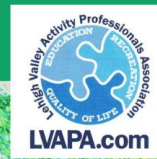
- DCNR, in partnership with Walk with a Doc and the PA Medical Society, is organizing this event with local, regional, state and national park organizations.
- Championing this well-known program throughout Pennsylvania meets our recommendation in the **State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan** of supporting programs that connect health and outdoor recreation.
- Walk with a Doc's mission *is inspiring communities through movement and conversation.*
- We are partnering with Walk with a Doc during the month of September to showcase our parks/trails/lands and give Pennsylvanians the opportunity to experience a one-time Walk with a Doc event.



RECONNECT WITH NATURE

Lehigh Valley Activity Professionals Association

- Organize a day of awareness
- Shine some positive light on LTCFs
- Demonstrate benefits of the outdoors
- Combat social isolation
- Encourage all facilities to host a 1-2 hour outdoor event – such as:
 - Birdwatching
 - Gardening
 - Picnic
- Demonstrate getting outdoors can be incorporated relatively easily into LTCF activity program



LEHIGH VALLEY ACTIVITY PROFESSIONALS ASSOCIATION

INVITES YOU TO

RECONNECT WITH NATURE

ON

JUNE 30, 2021

Is there anything better than soaking up the sun on a nice day outside?
Or visiting a local park? Or getting your hands dirty while planting flowers?

There are so many benefits to nature and so many ways to explore nature! AND THAT DOESN'T END WHEN RESIDENTS MOVE INTO FACILITIES.

Our goal as an association is to bring awareness to the benefits of the outdoors and reconnecting residents with nature. We hope that your facility will join LVAPA by participating in at least one nature activity preferably outside on June 30th.

To register go to: www.lvapa.com



Resources

- State and Local Accessible Trails
- Transportation
 - Wilderness Wheels Program (PPFF)
 - Aging Transportation
- Programming
 - DCNR State Parks and Educators
 - Get Outdoors PA Partners
 - Environmental Education Centers
- Volunteer Networks
 - AARP
 - Scouts
 - RSVP
 - Friends Groups/Rotary Clubs
 - Senior Centers
 - Schools/Universities
- Grant Funding
 - Department of Aging
 - AARP
 - Local foundations/businesses

START SMALL
THINK BIG



Nantucket Wheelers
Nantucketwheelers.org

Cycling Without Age
Cyclingwithoutage.org

Photo c/o: Mobility & Access, Inc.

Measuring Success

It may be difficult to demonstrate success immediately from a health or quality of life perspective.

- Increase the number of facilities offering outdoor activities to their residents?
- Increase the number of hours that LTCF residents are connected to the outdoors?
- Increase the number of volunteers that are supporting long-term care facilities?
- Reduce feelings of loneliness in long-term care residents? (e.g., UCLA Loneliness Scale)





Let's discuss how we can make a difference in the lives of those who have been impacted the hardest by this pandemic.

Nicole Faraguna
Director of Policy & Planning
nfaraguna@pa.gov