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Combating Social Isolation and Loneliness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Good Morning Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey and members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

My name is Peter Reed. I am a public health gerontologist dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of older adults. Throughout my career, I have never seen a crisis with the potential to cause as much harm to older adults as the COVID-19 pandemic. To enable older adults to stay home and stay safe, while remaining connected to needed resources, the State of Nevada launched Nevada CAN, or the Nevada COVID-19 Aging Network Rapid Response.

In mid-March, a group of aging services leaders came together with grave concerns over the health and well-being of Nevada's older adults, who had all become 'homebound'. We expected a dramatic increase in demand for the services of the already-strained aging service providers. Therefore, we set out to mobilize the statewide network in a coordinated effort to identify and respond to elder needs by targeting three priority focus areas: 1) essentials of daily life such as food and medication; 2) telehealth services; and 3) social support.

Under the leadership of Dena Schmidt, Administrator of Nevada's Aging and Disability Services Division, each of Nevada CAN's priority focus areas is supported by its own action team: The Food and Medication Action Team, led by Jeff Klein of Nevada Senior Services in Las Vegas, the Telehealth Action Team, which I lead, and the Social Support Action Team, led by Dr.

Jennifer Carson of the Dementia, Engagement, Education and Research Program at the University of Nevada Reno, School of Community Health Sciences.

On April 1st, after a rapid planning process, Nevada CAN launched a new website, connected to Nevada 2-1-1, through which older adults can request help. Aging and Disability Resource Center case managers connect elders to the appropriate action teams for support. The Food and Medication Action Team engages a network of county and community-based agencies in delivering food, medications and other essential items to the doorsteps of older adults. The Telehealth Action Team brings together existing healthcare and social service providers into an integrated statewide telehealth network, offering geriatrics, social work, primary care and other services. This telehealth network includes training efforts to bolster capacity of primary care partners to deliver telemedicine, with support from the state's two HRSA-funded Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Programs.

Finally, the Social Support Action Team, led by Dr. Jennifer Carson, launched the truly innovative "NEST Collaborative". Standing for "Nevada Ensures Support Together", the NEST Collaborative recruits volunteers, including many college students, who are committed to delivering social support to reduce social isolation. After a background check and seven hours of mandatory training, volunteers offer one of four social support programs: 1) calling older adults twice weekly to have a friendly conversation and monitor their needs; 2) convening a virtual peer group of older adults for regular group discussions; 3) offering technical assistance to enable existing groups of friends to come together in virtual gatherings; or 4) providing technical assistance to enable older adults to effectively use technology to access telehealth services or to connect with family members across the country. Each of these volunteer services is designed to reduce social isolation and build reciprocal support, embracing the idea that elders are themselves a valuable resource to the community. The check-in calls and peer groups help fulfill one of the most basic needs in an elder's life: the need to be known by, and meaningfully connected to, other people. Clients of NEST have stated that they are grateful for the services, because without someone calling to check on them, no one may know if they are even still alive. Further, as the pandemic continues to evolve, the NEST collaborative, in partnership with the

state long-term care ombudsman program, is extending virtual social support opportunities to reduce isolation among skilled nursing home and assisted living residents.

In the first two months of Nevada CAN, there were 757 requests for help, resulting in 1,235 referrals to services. These included 448 referrals for food delivery, 148 for social support, 89 for telehealth services and 550 for other general services from the ADRC, including emergency financial assistance. In addition to the requests through Nevada CAN, Nevada has seen a 57% increase in requests for assistance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevada CAN reflects the true spirit of the 'no wrong door' philosophy of aging services.

This time of social distancing does not mean elders must be socially isolated. Nevada CAN and the NEST Collaborative are examples of how to help elders stay meaningfully engaged and connected to their communities.