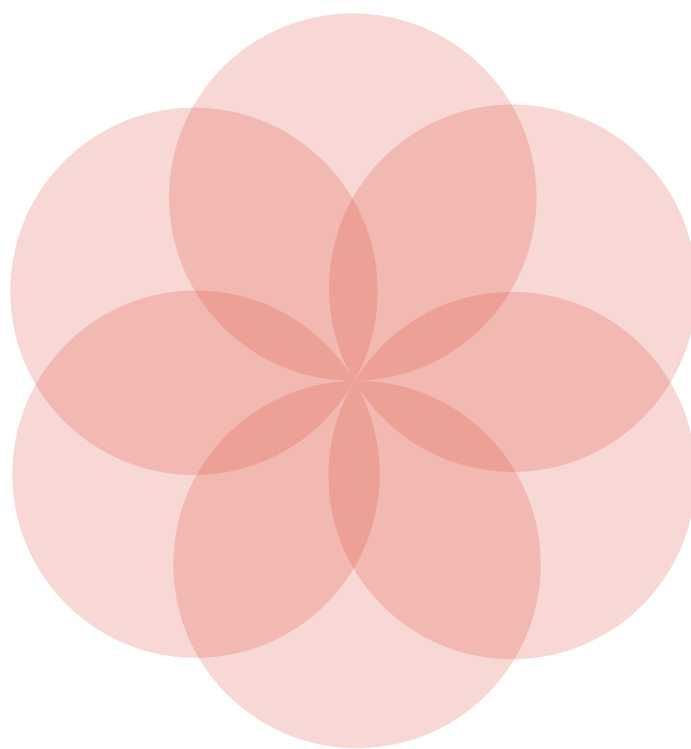


# FACING THE FUTURE WITH OPTIMISM REPORT



HEALTHY AGING THROUGH DESIGN CONNECTIONS™  
MAT-SU PILOT PROGRAM  
WRITTEN BY KATHRYN SWARTZ AND AYSE BIRSEL  
2025





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# 1 Preface

This report *Facing the Future with Optimism: Healthy Aging through Design Connections™* about a pilot program to increase resilience and improve well-being, while decreasing loneliness and isolation provides an important contribution to reimagining how we support aging Americans. Today, and every day for the foreseeable future, more than ten thousand adults in the United States turned 65. And the reality is the average person has about 8,000 days ahead of them—roughly a third of their lives! Reimagining how we think about aging service and how programs are created that put older adults in the driver's seat helping design and implement programs that meet local needs and cultural norms is the key to a more resilient future, yet few proven models exist. The Mat-Su Health Foundation's effort with their local partner, the Mat-Su Council on Aging and the human-centered design firm Birsell + Seck represents a significant, successful step forward in addressing this challenge.

In a recent advisory, the U.S. Surgeon General identified loneliness and isolation as significant independent negative risk factors for overall health status and longevity, akin to smoking, obesity and diabetes. While the Surgeon General's white paper outlines a conceptual menu of opportunities to ameliorate these risks and improve outcomes, there is little in the way of concrete examples of proven, scalable interventions. The Mat-Su Health Foundation's trial of Design Connections™ represents an important, early down-payment in answering this challenge.

It is important to recognize that current health and aging programs won't on the natural, respond to this critical problem; they were built at a different time and place when aging looked very different. When the Social Security Act was signed into law in 1935, the average life expectancy was 62 years, so most adults used the program for a very short period if at all. When the Medicare and Medicaid programs were established in 1965, the average life expectancy was 69 years, and most people passed away from illnesses of short duration.

Today the average life expectancy is approximately 78 and most will have chronic conditions and/or functional limitations that will require help. Unfortunately, these programs that were purpose-built for policy problems 75 years ago haven't yet addressed the important challenges of aging in the 21st century, exacerbating isolation and loneliness for many older adults.

In this small, but important trial, the Mat-Su Council on Aging and the Mat-Su Health Foundation were able to demonstrate that using an approach similar to the well-proven Chronic Disease Self-Management Program (CDSMP) model, but incorporating tools and techniques from the world of product and services design into a structured intervention developed by the human-centered design team at Birsell + Seck, did produce significant improvements in loneliness and isolation. These results were sustained after the intervention ended; furthermore, the program self-sustained through the actions of the participants themselves. These findings are an important contribution to the creation of a new generation of aging programs, one that sees older adults through an entirely different and more positive lens that includes them in the solution-making against the epidemic of loneliness and isolation.

## **BRUCE ALLEN CHERNOF MD**

NON-RESIDENT SENIOR FELLOW, LEONARD D. SCHAEFFER CENTER  
FOR HEALTH POLICY AND ECONOMICS, USC

RETIRED CEO, THE SCAN FOUNDATION

CHAIR, FEDERAL LONG TERM CARE COMMISSION, 2012

RETIRED ADJUNCT PROFESSOR OF MEDICINE, DAVID GEFFEN  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, UCLA

# 2 Executive Summary





This report shares the origin, implementation, and outcomes of Design Connections,™ a pilot health intervention to address loneliness and social isolation among older adults carried out in April 2024 in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su) of Alaska. A local collaboration of nonprofits introduced the Design Connections™ - Mat-Su pilot program to encourage social connections as a public health intervention to learn lessons, adapt to the local context, and build a grassroots network for community resilience in aging. The Design Connections™ pilot program was developed by Ayse (pronounced Eye-shay) Birsell based on her design thinking principles, the Mat-Su Council on Aging (MCOA) and the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF).

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su) is in southcentral Alaska just north of Anchorage and is one of the largest municipalities in terms of land size in Alaska. The Mat-Su also has one of the fastest growing older adult populations in the nation. From 2010 to 2020, the 60+ population increased by a stunning 86 percent and over the next few decades, the percentage of adults age 65+ is projected to increase by 73 percent. In 2022, there were about 20,224 adults aged 50-64 (18 percent) and 15,975 adults aged 65+ in the Mat-Su (14 percent). Some of the main reasons for social isolation among older Mat-Su residents are having family out of state, having been a young, independent person who is now aging in an isolated place, not having transportation, having family and friends who have died, preferring to be isolated, and being "snowed in" (Mat-Su Behavioral Health Needs Assessment, 2023).

**SOCIAL CONNECTION.** Social isolation and loneliness are different experiences, but both lack social connection. Social connection is an important social driver of health and community well-being. The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in 2023 presents research that shows that the lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity. There is evidence that social isolation is increasing, and with an increasing aging population, the effects on health and wellness are anticipated to increase. Loneliness is associated with a great risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death.

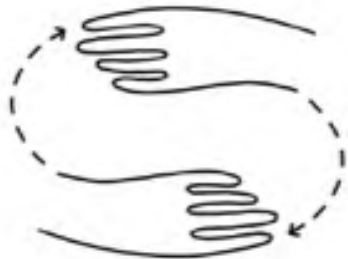


**OLDER ADULTS.** The highest rates of social isolation are found among older adults. In addition to physical health impacts, both social isolation and loneliness have been shown to independently increase the likelihood of depression or anxiety. The Surgeon General's Advisory served as a call to action for aging leaders and community members in the Mat-Su to help older adults age not into isolation, but into social connection as a public health strategy for community resilience.

**DESIGN CONNECTIONS™ WORKSHOPS.** This call to action inspired the pilot Design Connections™ program. The program was created to encourage older adults in the Mat-Su in Alaska to age into meaningful social connections rather than isolation through the use of design thinking practices (optimism, empathy, holistic, what if questions, collaboration). The pilot program consisted of four workshop sessions led by Ayse Birsal and her team over a four-week period with two cohorts of 20 older adults ages 58-86, for a total of 40 participants. Watch the video about the program Design Connections™: Healthy Aging Through Community Connections.



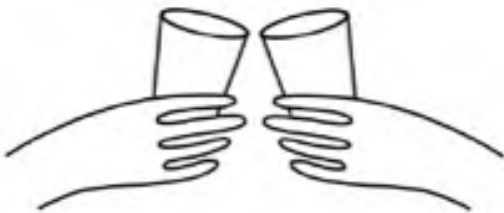
CONNECT



COMMUNICATE



COLLABORATE



CELEBRATE

In these workshops, participants were introduced to different topics in each session focusing on:

- (1) Connect:** how to design meaningful connections that you love,
- (2) Communicate:** make an action plan to bring the connections to life,
- (3) Collaborate:** map favorite connections places collaboratively, and finally
- (4) Celebrate:** these new connections in a potluck. Participants were encouraged to connect with self as a pathway to connect with others.

Anecdotal evidence shows that when participants were asked how the program may have helped them, people stated that I am braver, I am happier, I am more curious, I am



calmer about my future, and I am more optimistic. Participants mentioned positive social connections, stating, it's developed a delightful community, just that quick. Other people are pretty much as hungry for connections as I am.

Dr. Kathryn Kietzman, a researcher from UCLA, was engaged to assess the effectiveness of the Design Connections™ pilot program. The evaluation focused on the primary aims of the program: to reduce social isolation and loneliness and improve social engagement and connection among older adults in the local community. (see Appendix B). Surveys administered before, after and after three months included five primary outcome measures to assess the individual's Social Network, Sense of Purpose, Sense of Community, Loneliness, and Subjective Happiness using validated scales that are widely used in research.

The evaluation results show that participation in the Design Connections™ workshops led to statistically significant changes in an increased sense of purpose, an increased sense of happiness, and a decreased sense of loneliness. Interestingly and seemingly paradoxically, the average size of participants reported social networks decreased over the time. Possible reasons for this are explained in Appendix B, but could be due to social desirability bias or reflection on one's connections and the experience over time. Overall, these results in combination with the open-ended interviews indicate a benefit to participants in the program, but future evaluations should include measures of relationship quality to further understand the potential impact of the Design Connections™ program.

**NEXT STEPS.** The Mat-Su Council on Aging continued monthly social gatherings of those who participated in the workshops. Each month, there were anywhere from 10 to 20 people. These gatherings have some social connections activities and have also included some type of healthy aging focus. A sub-set of this group of older adults is now preparing a similar workshop program by and for older adults. These preliminary results show that the program is self-perpetuating and beginning to show signs of self-sustainability.



# 3 Introduction

It really helped me transform my life...I'm a happier person and when I'm out and about, I just smile at people more. So, it's just sort of given me a new outlook on life, a happier one.

— PARTICIPANT

This report shares the origin, implementation, and outcomes of Design Connections™, a pilot health intervention to address loneliness and social isolation among older adults carried out in April 2024 in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su) of Alaska. Local community organizations introduced the Design Connections™ - Mat-Su pilot program to encourage social connections as a public health intervention to learn lessons, adapt to the local context, and build a grassroots network for community resilience in aging. The W pilot program was developed by Ayse (pronounced Eye-shay) Birsel based on her design thinking principles, the Mat-Su Council on Aging (MCOA) and the Mat-Su Health Foundation (MSHF).

**SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS.** There is a growing body of research on how social isolation and loneliness<sup>1</sup> affect people, and particularly older adults. Social isolation and loneliness are different experiences, but both lack social connection.<sup>2</sup> Social connection is an important social driver of health and community well-being. Social connections are the relationships you have with the people around you, and a person's perception of their social connectedness may not necessarily mirror their actual social network. An individual can be surrounded by others yet feel lonely, or they can be isolated from others but still feel social connectedness.

**HEALTH IMPACTS.** The *U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation in 2023* presents research findings that show that the lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity. There is evidence that social isolation and loneliness in the United States are increasing, and the highest rates are found among

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<sup>1</sup> **Social Isolation:** objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction. **Loneliness:** A subjective distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections. *U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.*

<sup>2</sup> **Social connection:** A continuum of the size and diversity of one's social network and roles, the functions these relationships serve, and their positive or negative qualities. Social connection is a critical and underappreciated contributor to individual and population health, community safety, resilience, and prosperity. *U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.*

older adults. Loneliness is associated with a great risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, and premature death and lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Older adults experiencing social isolation face a 29 percent increased risk of early mortality—an increase comparable to mortality rates associated with smoking, obesity and air pollution (Hold-Lundstad, 2017). In addition to physical health impacts, both social isolation and loneliness have been shown to independently increase the likelihood of behavioral health impacts such as depression or anxiety. Social isolation and loneliness are associated with sleep disturbance, fatigue, depression and decreased levels of well-being in older adults (Suragarn, et al, 2021). Studies show the highest prevalence for loneliness and isolation is among people with poor physical or mental health, disabilities, financial insecurity, or those living alone. Given the significant consequences of loneliness and social isolation, the Surgeon General's Advisory issues a call for action from individuals, families, and organizations to work together to de-stigmatize loneliness and address this urgent public health issue.

*We are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation. It will take all of us—individuals and families, schools and workplaces, health care and public health systems, technology companies, governments, faith organizations, and communities—working together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it.*

— DR. VIVEK H. MURTHY





# 4 Aging in the Mat-Su

We have a unique demographic, which is Alaskan seniors. A lot of them have lived here for a while. They've been intimately associated with the landscape. That's important.

— PARTICIPANT

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su) is in southcentral Alaska just north of Anchorage and is one of the largest municipalities in terms of land size in Alaska. The Mat-Su has experienced one of the fastest population growth rates in Alaska over the past few decades, and in 2022, had a population of 111,752. The Mat-Su includes the cities of Palmer, Wasilla, and Houston, many rural communities and remote areas, and two Alaska Native tribes, Chickaloon Native Village and Knik Tribe. The Mat-Su has suburban, rural, and remote areas.

The Mat-Su is bound by mountains and glacier-fed rivers and the lifestyle is defined by the outdoors and the weather. It has stunning natural beauty and a subarctic climate with long, cold and snowy winters, on average over 70 inches of snowfall annually and some extreme cold spells, and short, mild summers. Winter solstice has about 5.5 hours of daylight and the opposite in the summer with up to 22 hours of daylight. This region has attracted independent, self-sufficient people, who come together when times are tough.

Alaska is experiencing an increase in the number of older adults, mainly because the large working age population, which moved to the state in the 1970s and 80s due to the Trans Alaska pipeline and subsequent economic boom, is aging in place. The Mat-Su Borough has one of the fastest growing older adult populations in the state due to a variety of reasons, mainly its aging population, and a steady inflow of Elders and retirees from other parts of Alaska and other states.

From 2010 to 2020, the 60+ population in the Mat-Su increased by a stunning 86 percent and over the next few decades, the percentage of adults age 65+ is projected to increase by 73 percent. In 2022, there were about 20,224 adults ages 50-64 (18 percent) and 15,975 adults age 65+ in the Mat-Su (14 percent). About 90% of older adults in the Mat-Su are white with about 6% Alaska Native/American Indian and smaller percentages of Black/African American, Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic origin people. There are Alaska Native Elders aging in community and an increasing number who have relocated to the Mat-Su from a

village in a more remote region because they need access to services or family members are living here. Just over 28 percent of residents in the Mat-Su age 55+ are living alone (ACOA survey, Mat-Su residents, 2022).

Adults aging in the Mat-Su face many of the same challenges as other parts of the country including rising costs, mobility issues, physical and mental health changes, loss of family and friends, and the lack of services to keep up with demand. These challenges are exacerbated in Alaska by a very high cost of living, aging alone without family, winter weather and darkness, and the lack of services available in other places to help older adults age well at home or with needed care and services. A participant in the Design Connections™ workshop noted, *As a person who is older, as you get older your circle of friends becomes smaller and smaller. And that's for multiple reasons, some die, some move away, people that you are friends with can no longer see or drive or hear.*

The *Mat-Su Older Adult Behavioral Health Needs Assessment (2023)* produced a picture of older adults living in the Mat-Su. Many of the older adults and Elders living in the Mat-Su experience social isolation and some of the main reasons are listed in Box 1. Some older adults are experiencing pre-existing behavioral health challenges, along with depression, anxiety, and grief due to their current life circumstances. This assessment also shared feedback from providers who described the impact of social isolation on Mat-Su older adults causing anxiety and depression, difficulty surviving without help with daily living tasks, transportation, and home

**Box 1: Main reasons for social isolation among older Mat-Su residents**

- having family out of state,
- having been a young, independent person who is now aging in an isolated place,
- not having transportation,
- having family and friends who have died,
- preferring to be isolated, and
- being "snowed in."

**-MAT-SU BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT, 2023**

maintenance, degrading mental and physical health, worsening dementia, and suicidal ideation. Another report from the Mat-Su Emergency Systems shows that sometimes older adults call for EMS with a physical health problem when the underlying issue is loneliness.

The Behavioral Health Needs Assessment (2023) identified recommendations related to social connections for older adults, as the key to good mental health, as follows:

- Ensure all seniors/Elders have a friend by promoting peer-to-peer networks.
- Increase senior recreational activity opportunities with funding to senior centers and other organizations for activities.
- Provide more places in all communities for seniors/Elders and veterans to gather.
- Develop more formal social networks, including peer-to-peer networks and volunteer networks for older adults.

In a survey of older adults in 2022 by the State Commission on Aging, about 18 percent of Mat-Su respondents indicated loneliness and isolation as the main worry, and 35 percent identified loneliness and isolation as a secondary worry (ACOA senior survey, Mat-Su residents only, 2022). When asked if they participated in fewer activities than before COVID, nearly 60 percent responded that they were involved in fewer activities.

COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Every three years, the Mat-Su Health Foundation and Mat-Su Regional Medical Center carry out a Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA). The 2019 CHNA established Strong Social Connections as one of eight goals for collaborative work. The 2022 CHNA Together for Health includes a chapter on Belonging and Civic Muscle as part of the Wellbeing Portfolio (Box 2). Focus groups of older adults shared that COVID increased social isolation and there is interest among community members in creating opportunities for social





connections. The CHNA identified social isolation/belonging in the top 10 priority list and the desire for community connection continues to be one of the most important themes. Recognizing the growing older adult population and the impact of lack of social connection on overall health, the Mat-Su Health Foundation has invested in social connections in several different ways and its Healthy Aging Focus Area includes an objective to support “Social Engagement as a health intervention for isolated older adults/seniors/Elders.”

**Box 2: Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment**

Belonging and civic muscle is about having fulfilling relationships and social support that people need to thrive. It’s about being part of a community and contributing to its vibrancy. Social support through friends, family, and other networks contributes to our practical and emotional needs, enhances mental well-being, help us navigate the challenges of life, and reinforces healthy behaviors.

– TOGETHER FOR HEALTH, COMMUNITY HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT, MSHF 2023

# 5 Design Connections™ Mat-Su Pilot Program

This program is a response to the loneliness and isolation epidemic. It is a health intervention. It's a solution to help people be less lonely and less isolated by helping them create connections using a design thinking process.

— AYSE BIRSEL

The Surgeon General's Advisory on Loneliness and Isolation in 2023 served as a call to action for aging leaders and community members in the Mat-Su. Several Mat-Su stakeholders from the Mat-Su Health Foundation and the Mat-Su Council on Aging attended the USAging conference in 2023. Ayse Birsal was the keynote speaker, and she presented the insights from a project in 2019 sponsored by The SCAN Foundation. Birsal is an award-winning industrial designer, author, and coach. In The SCAN Foundation work, Birsal carried out design workshops with older adults all over the country and through this process, wrote a book about *How to Design Your Own Long Life* based on those experiences and lessons learned. As Birsal recounts, through this work, we learned that older adults are like "long life astronauts" because they are going where no one has gone before. Humans are living much longer than before, but the challenge is that this period of aging has not really been planned or designed.

Ayse Birsal's philosophy is that aging adults can "take matters into their own hands" to help each other solve challenges and find new opportunities. Her work with The SCAN Foundation showed that older adults want what everyone wants: love, purpose, wellbeing, and friendship. But how people get those things changes over time. Birsal also noticed that one of the main impacts that came out of The SCAN Foundation workshops was unanticipated—the workshops became "friendship factories." These design workshops had the potential to create communities and connect people to each other. Older adults are looking for inviting and welcoming experiences that give them joy and make them feel visible, understood, and valued.

After this initial connection at the conference, Birsal and her team worked with the local stakeholders to develop Design Connections™ - Mat-Su, as a pilot community health intervention. The purpose of the pilot Design Connections™ workshops was to introduce creative design tools and techniques to older adults as a pathway to build meaningful social connections to reduce loneliness and isolation. The pilot was launched with a very expansionist view: older adults are not living by and cannot be reduced to worries and problems, they are capable and interested in being actors in designing their own lives. The organizations and individuals involved in this program are detailed in Appendix A.

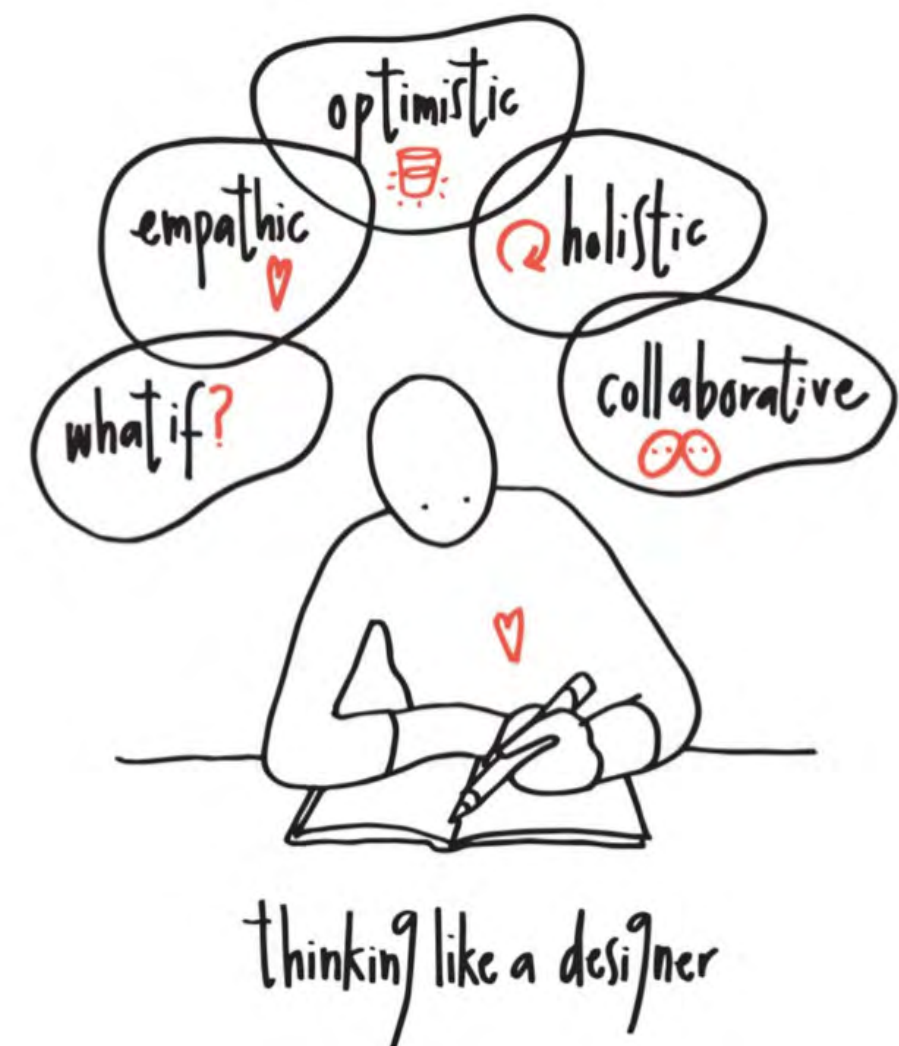


# 6 Thinking Like A Designer

It was something I really needed. As I get older and dealing with loss, I'm not quite sure how to interact with the world around me.

— PARTICIPANT

Birsel and her team with the local community organizations developed the Mat-Su program for older adults for several factors. As Birsel describes it, when people are younger, there are many other social constructs that help them make social connections naturally such as through work or school or having a family. As adults grow older, those social constructs start to fade away, there is retirement, children leaving home, and with many other challenges and changes so adults tend to lose the “friendship muscle.” Birsel and her team sought to give older adults a reminder—you know how to do this, but now you need to do it intentionally.



“Thinking like a designer” is at the core of the Design Connections™ pilot program (Box 3). Birsal is an industrial designer, and she uses a proprietary design process called Deconstruction: Reconstruction.™<sup>3</sup> This design process includes taking the whole apart, forming a new point of view, putting it back together, and then giving it expression and form. She has used this process in industrial and consumer design for worldwide brands. As she describes her work, she explains that she realized that our life is our biggest project--“If our life is a design project, we can design our life using a design process.” Design is all about problem solving and her work is to teach people how to solve life's problems and challenges creatively by thinking like a designer.

Box 3: Thinking like a Designer

Ayse describes the principles of thinking like a designer as follows. So, I teach people how to think like a designer and these are skills that they already have.

- Which is thinking with **optimism**-- no matter how difficult the problem, you will find a better solution.
- To have **empathy** for yourself and for others-- to be able to put yourself in their shoes.
- It is about thinking **holistically** -- seeing the big picture so that you can connect the dots in new and different ways.
- It's asking "**what if questions**" which is all about having an open mind and being inquisitive.
- It is **collaborative**, working together to share and build on each other's ideas, and helping each other.

<sup>3</sup> Ayse Birsal explains the Deconstruction: Reconstruction™ process as follows. It is a design process with four steps: deconstructing the whole so you can see the parts that something is made of, then looking at the parts from different angles and thinking about the same things differently. Reconstruction is putting the pieces back together knowing you can't have everything so we need to make choices, and we do that based on our values, and the last step is giving it form.





# 7 Workshop Logistics

This program kind of focuses on ways to get around your obstacles, like going around potholes. I wasn't focusing on the potholes anymore, I was focusing on the path through the potholes.

— PARTICIPANT

**PREPARATIONS.** Birsel + Seck launched work in January of 2024 and prepared logistics and participant recruitment materials, a curriculum for each session, a Playbook for participants, and a comprehensive Guide for Leaders. The workshops were tailored so that every prompt was about “connections” and all the examples provided were also about meaningful connections to frame the participant's thinking.

The pilot program included expert advice from Dr. Bruce Chernof, the former CEO of the SCAN Foundation who had previously worked with Birsel, and Dr. Kathryn Kietzman, a UCLA Researcher who designed and carried out a formal evaluation<sup>4</sup> of the pilot program.

The Design Connections™ pilot was a one-month program, with one session/week, for two cohorts of approximately 20 participants. By February, the recruitment guidelines and advertising materials were prepared. The original design anticipated a training of trainers component, but this proved difficult to plan and recruit since participants had not yet attended the training, so it was postponed. Workshop participation was voluntary and the series was completely free. Transportation and carpooling were offered if people needed assistance with a ride.

**RECRUITMENT.** Recruitment for the program started in earnest in early March, including a widely shared brochure. Posters displayed in many locations around Palmer and Wasilla, and an article in Make-A-Scene a local free paper and the Senior Voice publication. The Mat-Su Health Foundation hosted a community event before the workshop. Most of the participants were recruited through word of mouth.

The team developed a “Participant Profile” to seek out individuals who may eventually

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<sup>4</sup> An informed consent was used as part of the evaluation and surveys were de-identified, but it was not an Institutional Review Board (IRB) study.



SAMPLE BROCHURE

become ambassadors for the project. The promotional materials identified older adults age 60+, but there was flexibility to accept a participant 55+. The recruitment materials made it clear that participants should plan to attend every session. Because of the networked approach to recruiting, the organizers were aware that the participants were not necessarily the most isolated individuals, and in some cases, they were well connected and socially active older adults. Given self-selection and networked recruitment, the program organizers were aware that some of the participants had pre-existing social connections at the start.

**WORKSHOP DETAILS.** Birtsel + Seck worked with the local team to identify a suitable setting for the workshops with some of the following criteria:

- large enough to accommodate upwards of 20 people,
- a separate space for refreshments and informal seating,
- classroom area,
- empty wall space for hanging session notes, and
- welcoming with natural light and no stairs.

Birtsel + Seck provided detailed guidance on the set up needed for the workshop space including a U-shaped classroom with AV/projector and screen set up. A welcome/check in table with nametags was set up near the entrance. In the first week, a communal lunch was provided and in the other weeks box lunches were available, and the space was available to allow socialization afterwards. The first session lasted six hours with lunch included and the subsequent sessions were for three to four hours.

**PROGRAM LAUNCH.** In April 2024, the workshop program launched. A total of 42 individuals enrolled and 40 individuals completed all four workshops (95% completion rate). The enrolled individuals selected either a Tuesday or a Thursday session and two groups of 20 older adults joined as a cohort for one day a week for four weeks. The Mat-Su residents varied in ages from 58 to 86 with 81% female and 19% male. In total, the workshops represented 2800 years of wisdom! Most were retired (74%), 17% were working part-time, and 10% were working full-time. Some were long-time residents and others were more recent arrivals.

**PRE-EVENT SURVEY.** Due to the planned evaluation, participants completed a pre-event confidential survey (online or they could call for assistance to complete the survey over the phone) even before the workshops started. In addition to collecting some basic demographic information and inquiring if participants needed any special accommodation, see a sample



of questions below:

- Social disposition: outgoing/extroverted; shy/introverted/ or Other (explain choice).
- Rate one's agreement or disagreement with seeking out new information or experiences.
- Describe the last time you engaged in group activity.
- Rate quality of friendships and social connections

**PROGRAM EVALUATION.** With the guidance of Dr. Kathryn Kietzman, on the first day, an Informed Consent form and the T1 survey instrument were shared with participants. Participants were able to opt out of the survey forms if desired. During the third week, a videographer was present, and participants were asked to consent to be filmed or interviewed as part of the documentation of the program [Design Connections™: Healthy Aging Through Community Connections on Vimeo](#). At the conclusion of the four weeks, the T2 survey was completed. The final T3 survey instrument was mailed to participants' home address at the 3-month mark, and responses provided to the evaluator. Overall, 33/40 participants completed all three surveys (83% response). See Appendix B for evaluation results.



# 8 Content of Design Connections Mat-Su Workshops

You find camaraderie and it's probably a good place to go if you are feeling a little lost, you know to find a supportive crowd and to face the future with optimism.

— PARTICIPANT

The workshop series was 1 day/week for four weeks during April 9-May 2, 2024, for each cohort of 20, on either a Tuesday or Thursday. Birsal and two colleagues were in residence in the Mat-Su for the entire month. The start of each session had a creative warm up activity, and after each exercise, participants shared reactions and thoughts with one another and with the group and worked on specific themes related to supporting social connections. Birsal and her team worked to instill trust in the session, among the facilitators and the participants. The workshop series consisted of a step-by-step creative process with five main actions led by facilitators:

- prompt (curated exercises),
- inspire (videos or examples or quotes),
- reflect (connecting with self or by writing or drawing),
- share (pairs and with group), and
- collaborate (with peers).

In every session, participants were reminded of the principles of Thinking Like a Designer – optimism, empathy, thinking holistically, asking what-if questions, and to collaborate. The common themes in each session alternated between Introspection, Sharing, and Collaboration, based on practicing and building a habit. There was reflection time and participants were encouraged to go with their instinct (with your gut), to think in terms of “yes, and” to be playful and to not worry about making mistakes. Participants were also randomly assigned to meet with one other participant in between the workshops. These sections below provide a summary of some of the activities and interactions from each of the workshop sessions.



It's developed a delightful community, just that quick. Other people are pretty much as hungry for connections as I am.

— PARTICIPANT

## WEEK 1 DESIGN THE MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS YOU LOVE

In the first session, Birsal introduced the program and emphasized the following to the group: The idea is that we're going to connect first with ourselves and remember what is important to us and then connect with each other and share. We're going to collaborate with each other and generate some ideas together, and we're going to celebrate. We have the 4 Cs: Connect, Communicate, Collaborate and Celebrate.

In each session, participants moved through the exercises, as design tools, to deconstruct the meaning of connections, and reconstruct them in different ways. Participants were reminded often that they shouldn't be afraid of making mistakes, and the work of design is a form of play. She encouraged everyone to use their intuition, think in terms of "yes, and" and to go with a gut feeling to avoid self-judgement.



**CREATIVE BRAIN WARM UP.** The first session started with a creative warm-up pairing participants to draw each other, with the reminder that “We are all creative people.” After the group finished, each participant was encouraged to add the person’s name on the drawing, sign it as the artist, and give it as a gift to each other. This activity helped to connect everyone with his/her creative self and then through giving a gift, they connected to each other. Then, through a “lightening round” everyone shared the portrait and shared his/her name, something they are good at, and how they are feeling today. Birsel pointed out that sharing this information helps us to “Take an elevator from our brain to our heart,” – a way to connect with our emotions — a refrain the group would hear many times through the series.

**SUPERPOWERS AND KRYPTONITE.** Birsel introduced another exercise that encouraged participants to draw in their playbook and think about their superpowers, regarding connections, and one’s kryptonite or Achilles heel—what slows us down— related to connections. Then people shared with one other person and there was a lightening round with everyone sharing. People shared many different things, for example a superpower of being friendly and a kryptonite is being afraid to speak in public. Another superpower was to care, but with a kryptonite of not being social.

**ROLE MODELS AND SUPERHEROES.** Birsel introduced inspiration by looking at public figures who demonstrate an ability to make social connections. Participants were then asked to think about those qualities of someone who is a connection role model or hero: what are those characteristics of that person? Birsel was able to “turn the heroes characteristics back” to that person as a reflection. Birsel explained that this is a sort of a “trick” exercise – in that, if she had just asked what are your values about connections, that is a harder question. But what we see and admire in others, are actually those things that are important to us, our values. Participants were then asked what they would do to be more like their heroes, and to remember that our choices are most often based on our values. Some examples shared by participants were: smile at a neighbor, calling people, and listening and trying to be present.

She also encouraged everyone to watch those people we view as role models, to observe them and take notes.

**CONNECTION CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES.** Another exercise related to turning a challenge into an opportunity. Participants wrote down connection challenges and opportunities. Some examples were the challenge of being too busy and the opportunity identified was to add making connections to a busy to-do list or staying in communication with phone calls or texts.

**COOKIE JAR.** Birsel encouraged participants to document in their playbook what expertise they may have or something they could either teach or that they enjoy doing. Each person shared this “cookie” or expertise in a lightening round and wrote it on a sticky note that made up the cookie jar (Box 4 and photo). Participants were encouraged to seek out those that they may share an interest with or that they would like help from. When you help someone else, the person that you’re helping the most is yourself!

**Box 4: Examples of  
“Cookies” in the Cookie Jar**

- Teaching reading
- Hospitality
- Solving problems
- Technology
- Music
- Making sourdough
- Gardening

**LETTER TO SELF.** Participants then created a letter to self or a loved one about designing meaningful connections. This exercise moved into the reconstruction phase using the deconstructed ingredients like the superpower, the kryptonite, the value/superhero qualities, connection challenges and opportunities, and the connection “cookie”. The playbook provided a template, but everyone was encouraged to write their own letter however they wanted. Birsel encouraged everyone to keep the letter and refer to it every now and then, so it becomes something they can practice. Birsel shared that when people are together, sharing time, space, and interests, the workshop becomes a friendship factory, and sometimes as we age, we forget that we know how to do this (Box 5). Finally, the session ended with everyone



sharing one connection insight from the day. They were also paired up randomly with a partner and encouraged to get together in some way over the next week with the topic of sharing your life story.

### Box 5: Connection Insights from Ayse Birsal

### Friendship Formula:

- Show up!
- Have a conversation starter
- Keep in touch





One thing that we learned after codesigning life and experiences with hundreds of people is that we are all the same yet different no matter our age we all want the same things: love, purpose, well-being, and friendship. But how we get to these things is different.

— AYSE BIRSEL

## WEEK 2 MAKE AN ACTION PLAN TO BRING YOUR CONNECTIONS TO LIFE

The second week focused on helping participants to make an action plan to bring connections to life. Participants were reminded about the principles of design thinking, and the session began with a different creative activity involving the individual they met up with in between the session, which was also gifted to that person. Participants then shared something they remembered about that person they met up with.

Participants were asked to identify an item or intention from their letter to self and given the challenge of mingling with others to ask for advice or help. Participants mingled in a 10 minute “Help Me Help You” exercise with a goal to gather as many ideas from as they could from others in the group to address one’s connection challenges, and to just say thank you to the ideas. This activity was like a speed dating activity for asking others for advice. It was a powerful activity because most people don’t like asking for help, but this activity turned it into a game with a prize at the end for whoever got the most ideas— this helps participants get over the stigma of asking for help and it became a reciprocal action.

*As Birsal said ...that's the beauty of collaboration, it's easier for somebody else to give us suggestions, it's so much harder when we're in our heads saying I don't know how to do this and this can be applied to anything. If you're stuck on something, call a friend or talk about it at the dinner table. Again, you're opening the door to someone else to say I also need help, it may not be in the same moment, but you could say thank you so much for helping me and please let me know if I can help you.*

Like the first week, participants were randomly paired up to meet with another participant in between the session with a different question this time. They were also asked to bring a memento from that time together, whether something from nature or that was available at that time for an activity for the next week.

There's a transition point in life, where all of a sudden you realize, 'Oh my God, I'm old.' And it comes associated with some physical disabilities, maybe a little bit of mental challenge, and you have to find your way through that.

— PARTICIPANT

### WEEK 3 MAP YOUR FAVORITE PLACES TO CONNECT IN MAT-SU

This week started with the creative activity to draw one's neighbor in the class in profile, which then each person gifted to the other. Participants shared what had been discussed with a partner in between the sessions. Participants worked in the playbook on discussion prompts, see Box 6.

The group then worked collaboratively on identifying the best places to meet people and

connect with others in the Mat-Su. Birsal shared the simple formula of "Shared Interest/ activity + place + time = friendship factory." A giant map of the Mat-Su Borough emerged on the wall, and everyone used color-coded sticky notes: blue for place; green for shared interest; and pink for time. Everyone shared their favorite places in a round robin style after placing them on the map.

Birsal reminded everyone about a tip for making connections, which is first to connect with self. And part of that is remembering what gives you joy, something you can do alone that gives you joy could be the beginning of a connection. Say I love doing this, where else can I go where I can do this with people, and that becomes a shared interest. Participants were again paired up to meet in between the session and given the conversation starter of what is the one key piece of advice you would give a younger person to make connections and why.

#### Box 6: Discussion Prompts

- One reason people want to connect with me.
- One reason I want to connect with others
- One thing that makes my connections meaningful
- One piece of advice I would give a younger person about making connections.

# This is a celebration of us being “long life astronauts.”

— AYSE BIRSEL

## WEEK 4 HAVE A POTLUCK TO CELEBRATE YOUR NEW CONNECTIONS

The session started with a refresher of the design thinking process and how this final day is all about collaboration and ended with a celebratory communal potluck. The creative warm-up was a different type of portrait: the paper was folded in half and a participant drew half of his/her neighbor, then the papers were switched, and the participant finished the other half as a connected portrait. This session focused on a co-design process with participants to plan the next steps of the program. Participants were asked, “How have the past weeks transformed you?” There were many answers: *I am braver, I am more present, more confident, more connected, more optimistic, more energized, more open to others, calmer, humbled, inspired, grateful, more curious, more positive.*

### TRANSFORMATIONS

- I am braver. I am more courageous. I am happier.
- I am more curious. I am more optimistic
- I am more open to change. I am more open to others.
- I am more open to other's ideas. I am more open to new friendships.
- I am more appreciative of old friends.
- I am more present. I am calmer about my future.
- I am more community-oriented. I am friendlier. I am more outgoing.
- I am more aware of people's uniqueness.
- I am more humbled and inspired.
- I am more grateful.

Birsel also shared this wonderful illustration of some of the W steps that everyone can use to collaborate. Everyone was encouraged to add their own 13th step to this list! Examples were: *you are your own roadblock, embrace ambiguity, be vulnerable, take risk, don't delay, be fearless and don't assume.*

Participants were also asked to “Help Us Help You” and provide suggestions to the local organizers for what the Design Connections™ program should do next. There were many different suggestions and observations (Table 1).





TABLE 1: CO-DESIGN SUGGESTIONS	
WHAT SHOULD THIS PROGRAM LOOK LIKE?	HOW TO DESCRIBE IT?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Train others to do similar workshops</li><li>• Reach others that are more isolated</li><li>• Work on concrete problems</li><li>• Make a list of organizations people can be involved in.</li><li>• Capture more activities in a map or mapping activity.</li><li>• Teach what we know</li><li>• Seasonal gatherings</li><li>• Geographic sessions in other areas</li><li>• Bring both cohorts together.</li><li>• Continue meeting after these workshops.</li><li>• Do things outside</li><li>• Emphasize people's origin stories.</li><li>• Create communications like an email list/FB page to share events/ gatherings.</li><li>• Make it clear what it is – it may not be for everyone.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• It's about aging, sort of!</li><li>• It's an experiential class about how to analyze create, and expand connections with others to improve our friendships.</li><li>• It provides a sense of community.</li><li>• This group reminds me of a "friendship bench."</li><li>• Find a playful way to get a positive outcome.</li><li>• Learning to reach beyond your comfort zone</li><li>• Improve connections to improve our lives</li><li>• A course to combat loneliness, even when you don't know you are lonely</li><li>• A new way to find friends and activities in our community</li><li>• It's a communication forum, welcoming, uplifting experience that makes you feel good.</li><li>• Build relationships and learn about other people and yourself.</li><li>• It's enforced socialization, but you volunteer to do it, and we like it!</li></ul>

Participants were informed about the evaluation survey at the end of the session and also about the T3 evaluation survey that will be mailed to them in three months. Everyone also received a certificate of achievement for completing the workshop. The workshop ended with the celebratory potluck and participants were encouraged to give a toast to what inspired them.

# 9 Evaluation Results

To see the evolution in  
confidence of people  
and kind of doing things  
maybe they thought they  
couldn't do.

— PARTICIPANT

Birsel engaged Dr. Kathryn Kietzman, a researcher from UCLA, to assess the effectiveness of the Design Connections™ pilot program as it was implemented in the Mat-Su Borough in Alaska during April – May of 2024. The evaluation focused on the primary aims of the program: to reduce social isolation and loneliness and improve social engagement and connection among older adults in the local community.

The evaluator worked collaboratively with the Design Connections™ program team and local partners to develop a protocol to conduct culturally informed outreach, recruitment, and data collection with prospective study participants.

The Design Connections™ program team and local partners were engaged in developing, reviewing, and finalizing recruitment and data collection tools and protocol, leading recruitment activities, facilitating the collection of survey data, assisting with interpretation of the findings, and sharing reports of the findings with program participants and other interested stakeholders. Regular partner meetings were convened to review project goals, provide training and technical assistance as needed throughout the data collection cycles, and to assess progress made.

The evaluation design included a series of program participant surveys and key informant interviews conducted with Design Connections™ program staff, local community partners, program participants, and other interested stakeholders. Those who agreed to participate in the program then went through an “informed consent” process.

The three surveys administered included five primary outcome measures that were repeated across all three surveys. They provide an assessment of the individual's *Social Network*, *Sense of Purpose*, *Sense of Community*, *Loneliness*, and *Subjective Happiness* at each of these time points, using validated scales that are widely used in research.



A total of **33** of the **40 participants** who completed the entire workshop series also completed the three evaluation surveys. The following results are drawn from this final sample of **33 participants, representing 83% of all workshop participants.**

Participation in the Design Connections™ workshops led to statistically significant changes in the measures administered at T1 (i.e., before the start of the program) and repeated at T3 (i.e., 3 months following the end of the program), including **an increased sense of purpose (from a mean score of 35.2 to 37.8), an increased sense of happiness (from a mean score of 5.2 to 5.3), and a decreased sense of loneliness (from a mean score of 4.9 to 4.6).**

Given the very small sample of 33 individuals, these significant changes are especially promising, and suggest that the Design Connections™ program made a measurable and positive impact on participant well-being, particularly with respect to their sense of purpose, happiness, and loneliness.

TABLE 2: SENSE OF PURPOSE IN LIFE (T1 & T3)		
Paired Two Sample for Means t-Test		
	T1	T3
Mean	35.16666667	37.76666667
Variance	60.07471264	64.04712644
Observations	30	30
Pearson Correlation	0.771699001	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	29	
t Stat	-2.672885121	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.006107601	
t Critical one-tail	1.699127027	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.012215202	
t Critical two-tail	2.045229642	

TABLE 3: SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS (T1 & T3)		
Paired Two Sample for Means t-Test		
	T1	T3
Mean	4.916666667	5.267676768
Variance	1.456163194	0.951717698
Observations	33	33
Pearson Correlation	0.677831991	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	32	
t Stat	-2.237737116	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.016163732	
t Critical one-tail	1.693888748	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.032327465	
t Critical two-tail	2.036933343	

TABLE 4: THREE-ITEM LONELINESS SCALE (T1 & T3)		
Paired Two Sample for Means t-Test		
	T1	T3
Mean	4.935483871	4.564516129
Variance	2.995698925	2.612365591
Observations	31	31
Pearson Correlation	0.764130214	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	30	
t Stat	1.789102416	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.041850155	
t Critical one-tail	1.697260887	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.083700311	
t Critical two-tail	2.042272456	



Interestingly and seemingly paradoxically, the average size of participants reported social networks decreased over this time (from a mean score of 18.3 to 16.9). This could be explained by a few factors, including social desirability bias in participants' initial reports at T1 (i.e., over-stating the size and substance of their social relationships) which may have been tempered over the course of the program as participants shared their experiences and vulnerabilities related to social connections. It is possible that participants emerged from the program with a more reflective and honest assessment of the size and quality of their existing social networks because of these discussions. These results, combined with participants' open-ended responses, suggest that the quality of relationships is more important to participant well-being than the quantity of relationships reported. Future evaluations of this program would benefit by including validated measures of relationship quality to expand assessment of the potential impact of the Design Connections™ program.

Finally, measures of a sense of community were steady across the three data collection points. As noted previously, many participants started the program with pre-existing and relatively robust social connections in the community. Therefore, their reports of a high sense of community, maintained over time (i.e., mean scores of 5.5 at T1, T2 and T3) are not surprising.

Each survey included a few open-ended questions to allow participants to provide more detailed and personalized information about their experiences with the Design Connection program. At the end of the T3 survey, participants were asked the following set of open-ended questions. Several examples of the range of answers given are provided below each question.

Since completing the Design Connection workshops, to what extent have you increased the number of your social connections?

- "I am saying yes more often and searching out for new experiences and connections."
- "Meet two members of Design Connections™ on a regular basis."

- "My number of social connections hasn't really changed. But the workshop certainly showed me how lucky I am!"
- "Not sure, still to be determined."

Since completing the Design Connection workshops, to what extent do you feel you have improved the quality of your social connections?

- "I am a better listener." "Feel more self-confident."
- "Consciously making time to be with friends."
- "I have added trying new experiences to the mix. I remember to tell folks what I appreciate about them. It makes us both smile."
- "Not much has changed for me but I see how there is a great need in the Valley for people who are isolated and lonely. It makes me very aware of how much needs to be done here."

In the few months that have passed since you completed the Design Connections™ workshop series, to what extent do you feel you have improved the way you make social connections?

- "I am more aware the connections I make, and I value more highly making diverse connections which will help me prioritize time to do so."
- "I joined a book club." "I have made an effort to ask people to join me for tea. I have strengthened 2 relationships and gained a new one."
- "More comfortable initiating conversation."
- "More open - Observe others who may feel alone or uncomfortable and make connections."
- "Step outside of my comfort zone to reach out to others."

Interestingly, many participants noted that while they had not increased the quantity of social connections made in the 12-week period since they completed the series of

Design Connections™ workshops, many had improved the depth and quality of the social connections they already had, and/or were now in the process of reaching out to make new connections and nurture existing ones. Some of these answers may help to explain the significant decrease in the number of social connections participants reported between T1 and T3.

The evaluator conducted 12 key informant interviews (program staff or aging leaders) by zoom or phone between 7.29.2024 and 9.3.2024. The objective of these semi-structured qualitative interviews was to gather general observations about the program. These findings are summarized here:

- Most stakeholders recognized a strong need for programs to engage older adults, especially those who are most isolated.
- There was some variation in thinking about the goals/focus of the program, with some advocating for a program that addresses more dire needs in the older adult community in the Mat-Su region (e.g., basic needs for food, health care, mental health care, financial support), while others placed great value on the importance of social support and connections.
- Stakeholders acknowledged that the pilot program reached many who were already outgoing/engaged in community activities. They observed a need to take extra steps/ use different strategies to reach more isolated individuals and communities.
- Several participants, while enjoying and benefiting from the workshops, expressed that they were already regularly socially engaged with family or friends and/or community events. While some welcomed the opportunity to make new connections, others did not see a need to increase the number of social connections; rather, they appreciated the opportunity to deepen and expand the quality of existing relationships, and in some cases, to increase the frequency of these connections.
- Many noted that advance communications/marketing about the nature/substance of

the program needed to be improved, while also recognizing that the program is a bit difficult to describe. Personal testimonials from participants were put forth as a promising way to communicate about the program in the future.

- Several noted that while the Design Connections™ team was highly effective and professional; however, for the program to be sustainable, the program would need to be led by local community members, for practical reasons, but also to better reflect the local culture/norms.

# 10 Next Steps



You have planted the  
seeds. We have to find  
our own ways to water our  
flowers.

— PARTICIPANT

After the workshops concluded, due to interest from many of the participants, Mat-Su Council on Aging launched monthly gatherings combining both cohorts. The gatherings consist of a social activity and healthy aging education. These gatherings have continued every month through the time of writing this report, and with the support of the Mat-Su Council on Aging, a sub-group started working on a localized version of the workshops. It is hoped this program begins a "ripple" effect that can continue and be practiced in other areas/locations. So far, the program shows signs of being self-perpetuating and self-sustaining. Other iterations of the program and other social connection activities for older adults will continue to be evaluated for impact, and to refine the program activities.

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APPENDIX A: ORGANIZATIONS AND PLANNING GROUP MEMBERS

The Design Connections™ pilot program was developed and implemented by Ayse Birsel, Leah Caplan, and Meltem Parlak of Birsel + Seck. The program was led by a local team that included Kathryn Swartz, Program Officer for Healthy Aging, Mat-Su Health Foundation, and Brenda Shelden, the Executive Director, Mt-Su Council on Aging. Mat-Su Health Foundation Board members Lisa Smayda and Dr. Barb Doty, and Lorraine Cordova of the board of the Mat-Su Council on Aging.

The [Mat-Su Health Foundation](#) is the official business name of Valley Hospital Association, Inc., which shares ownership in Mat-Su Regional Medical Center. The MSHF invests its resources on select populations and defined issues and/or systems that will have the greatest impact on our goal to create the healthiest borough. The foundation has invested in research to learn about the health status of the borough and identify strategies to create a healthier community. These five Focus Areas are: Healthy Aging, Healthy Minds, Healthy Families, Healthy Futures and Healthy Foundations. The Healthy Aging Focus Area seeks to develop a sustainable system of culturally-appropriate services and supports for the rapidly growing population of older adults adapted to how and where they live.

The [Mat-Su Council on Aging](#) (MCOA) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that promotes the best independence and quality of life for older Alaskans in the Mat-Su by identifying and advocating for their needs through informing and empowering individuals and organizations that serve them. It serves older adults age 55+.

[Ayse Birsel](#) (pronounced Eye-Shay) is an award-winning industrial designer, author, and coach. She co-founded Birsel + Seck LLC, an award-winning innovation and design studio in New York. Ayse was born in Turkey. She earned her undergraduate degree in industrial design from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara and graduated as a Class Valedictorian.

She earned her Master of Design at Pratt Institute with a Fulbright scholarship. According to Fast Company, she is one of the most creative people in business and is recognized as the #1 coach for life design. She co-founded Birsell + Seck LLC, an award-winning innovation and design studio in New York. She is the author of Design the Life You Love (2015) and Design the LONG Life You Love (2022).

This project also included support and guidance from Dr. Bruce Chernof, MD, FACP. Dr. Chernof is an expert in public policy and health systems practice related to adults with complex needs. From 2008-2021, Dr. Chernof served as president and chief executive officer (CEO) of The SCAN Foundation.

The evaluation was carried out by Kathryn Kietzman, PhD, MSW, the director of the Health Equity Program and senior research scientist at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.



Brenda Shelden, Leah Caplan, Ayse Birsell, Kathryn Swartz, and Meltem Parlak



This report was designed by Birsell + Seck.

Supported by the Mat-Su Health Foundation's Healthy Aging initiative, Facing the Future with Optimism: Healthy Aging Through Design Connections™ documents a pilot initiative that applied human-centered design to reduce social isolation and strengthen community connections among older adults.

We are deeply grateful to the older adults who shared their time, stories, and wisdom with us. Their openness and curiosity were the heart of this work.

To learn more about the Mat-Su Health Foundation, visit [www.healthymatsu.org](http://www.healthymatsu.org)

To learn more about the Mat-Su Council on Aging (MCOA), visit [www.mcoaging.com](http://www.mcoaging.com)

To learn more about Birsell + Seck, visit [www.birsellplusseck.com](http://www.birsellplusseck.com)