

The below article offers one perspective on why I support the Student Rental Ordinance, and oppose a Grand Avenue private dorm, designed to exclusively house 80 undergraduate residents. We need a balanced mix of neighbors in this area south of Grand. Without it, I am convinced we lose social connectedness and that undermines why I live here and chose to raise my family here. How do I know that an increase in student rental units threatens social connectedness? Direct experience. Each year in August, for the past 12 years, my family has organized National Night Out for our block. We flyer each and every house on and around our block weeks in advance, announcing the gathering and inviting everyone to come, but once and only once has a student rental resident attended. My daughter still speaks of the time that "Tyler brought cupcakes" and we lament that students never choose to attend.

Please help us keep the neighborhoods around UST strong. Vote in favor of the Student Rental Ordinance and against the private dorm on Grand Avenue.

Thank you.

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Begin forwarded message:

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Increasing social connectedness: Let's make a difference

By Melanie Ferris | 05:00 am



wilder.org

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In Robert Putnam's book, "Bowling Alone," he demonstrated that since the 1960s, Americans have become less involved in their communities, less trusting in their neighbors, and less likely to give of their time and resources. In short, he concluded that the fabric holding together neighborhoods is slowly unraveling. And he warns that our stock of social capital has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities.

We're also learning that lack of social capital – also called social connectedness – in our communities is bad for our health.

When we are socially connected, good deeds are reciprocated and people help, trust, and rely on each other. These relationships not only help us feel emotionally supported, but also play a role in supporting our overall health and well-being. Research has shown that higher levels of perceived social connectedness are associated with lower blood pressure rates, better immune responses, and lower levels of stress hormones, all of which contribute to the prevention of chronic disease.



Social relationships can also affect our health indirectly. For example, the values and behaviors of friends and family members may influence our own health choices, such as the type of foods we eat or how often we are physically active, and can be sources of emotional support. We may learn new information about how to improve our health while having lunch with coworkers or while talking with our neighbors.

Alternatively, groups can form around specific interest areas to take action to influence health policy, such as when parents of students advocate for changes in a school's lunch menu or cycling enthusiasts advocate for improved bike lanes.

Connect for Health initiative

So – how do we increase social connectedness in our neighborhoods? At an individual level, it all sounds easy enough. Call your friend. Meet your neighbors. Join a walking group. Yet, as Putnam pointed out, changes in technology, urban sprawl and other factors make it more difficult to build social connections within neighborhoods.

What can communities do to increase social connectedness? That's one of the key questions the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation is trying to answer through its new Connect for Health initiative.

Through the [Connect for Health Challenge](#), up to 20 organizations will receive grants of up to \$20,000 to implement strategies to increase social connectedness in low-income communities, and one additional grantee will be awarded up to \$100,000 for work focused in this area. By following these projects, we have the potential to learn what works, and what doesn't work, to increase social capital in communities and to learn more about how social capital can be leveraged to improve neighborhood conditions and the health of residents.

A place to start

While at first glance, it may seem too simplistic to think that we can lower the rates of chronic disease or reduce health care costs simply by finding ways to get residents to connect with one another, it's an easy place to start. So – if you are part of an organization or business that brings people together, consider ways to make your building space and program activities more welcoming.

Or – as an individual – simply get involved by saying hi to the neighbor down the block who never seems to have any visitors, attending a neighborhood meeting, or inviting an old friend along to meet up with you and your new buddies.

Let's see if we make a difference.

Melanie Ferris is a research scientist at [Wilder Research](#), and an evaluator of the Connect for Health Challenge. The Connect for Health challenge is open for submissions until May 15.