

## **HISTORY OF CREATING CONNECTIONS**

Connections with others, our family, our friends, and our community, are vital to our health and wellbeing. Connections help us feel we are not alone in the world and that others will listen, understand and support us.

We now know that loneliness is more than just an uncomfortable feeling. It significantly increases the risk of chronic disease and early death. It is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being seriously overweight, and it is closely linked to depression and suicide.

Since 2001, a group of La Plata County residents and health care providers have been working to improve health and health care locally under the auspices of the Community Health Action Coalition ([chaclaplata.org](http://chaclaplata.org)). Accomplishments include increasing access to primary care, designing a roadmap for health that includes mental and oral health, and promoting Advance Care Planning. Within the past two years, they have turned their full attention to decreasing the incidence of loneliness by helping people increase meaningful social connections.

In January 2020 another group formed to intentionally offer an ear to listen to those needing personal connection and information on resources. The inspiration for this initiative came from an evidence-based practice in Zimbabwe where grandmothers sat on benches to provide comfort and resources for those experiencing overwhelming difficulties in their lives. The local group, originally called “Grandma Listens”, found receptivity for providing listening space from the library and the Durango recreation center.

Then a respected member of the community, Lon Erwin, passed away. Since he was known to have delighted in sitting down on a park bench and connecting with someone he had never met, a group of his friends decided to use memorial contributions to purchase benches to be placed along the river trail that would encourage others to “Talk with a stranger, make a new friend”.

When the Covid 19 pandemic restrictions were at their peak, people struggled with the isolation of staying home, masking and maintaining physical distancing. Those who were lonely before were often affected the most.