



# NEWSLETTER

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## COVID-19's

# Vanishing Senior



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# A silent epidemic: The Vanishing Senior



There is another serious epidemic silently spreading in America: senior invisibility. Nearly everyone except for essential workers experienced “early retirement” from everyday activities, at least for a while, when stay-at-home orders went into effect across the country.

It certainly has not been a fun experience, though we have learned how to cope and restructure our daily activities, including work activities. Many states have re-opened “normal” activities, some too quickly, including my own state of Florida which spiked up in COVID-19 cases at an alarming rate. However, even as we reopen (and possibly close down again, pendulum style) we are facing a second risk, what we can call “The Vanishing Senior.”

As the statistics of coronavirus cases make clear, the older the person the greater the risk of dying (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-age-sex-demographics/>). If a 20-year-old contracts the disease, only about 2 out of a thousand will die. If someone my age (70s) contracts Covid-19, roughly 8 of 100 will succumb. If someone age 80 and above contracts the disease, about 1 of 5 will perish. What this means is that we will likely adopt policies that “protect” the most vulnerable in the population, who happen for the most part to be older adults.

A recent paper by economists that looked at how best to protect lives and economic well-being, measured as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), argued that severe lockdowns for seniors and looser ones for other age groups provide the best way to minimize both loss of life and loss of economic value associated with lockdowns: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27102>. However, such a policy may exacerbate an already bad situation for seniors. They will stay restricted until there is an effective treatment for, or vaccine to prevent, COVID-19, and will be left behind while the rest of the population emerges out of their homes to venture about in the new normal.

Particularly for those still in the labor force, an increasing number of older workers over the past decade or so, there will be undue pressure to retire. An example was pointed out to me by a former postdoctoral student whose university was planning for in-person teaching in the fall. He noted that two older faculty members in his department suddenly decided to retire. When faced with the risk posed by being in a classroom with students, whose risk-taking behavior is legendary (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/15/opinion/coronavirus-college-safe.html>) those seniors probably didn't like the odds for classroom Russian Roulette and chose to leave the academy.

That same situation is playing out in public and private schools where administrators may be seizing the opportunity to

## FROM THE DIRECTOR



**Neil Charness, Ph.D., is the William G. Chase Professor of Psychology at Florida State University and director of the Institute for Successful Longevity.**

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purge older, more expensive teachers from the rolls, forcing them to choose between retiring and risking their lives to return to the classroom in person. In response to a query about whether her decision to retire early was influenced by COVID-19, one older teacher in Virginia told the Institute for Successful Longevity: “That is exactly why. A few of our school board members stated at a July school board meeting that teachers could quit or retire if they didn’t feel safe going back to face to face teaching. They wanted to have teachers sign a waiver that would protect the school system should they become sick. They wanted to ask the governor for a waiver to put more students on buses and in classrooms.”

That silent epidemic of involuntary retirement is likely to be replicated throughout the country for older workers who already faced significant age discrimination in employment. The usual trend in economic hard times is for younger workers to lose jobs sooner and for older workers who are laid off to regain jobs much later and at much lower wages. That trend is apparently changing, as older workers seem to be experiencing higher percentage increases in unemployment than younger workers in this downturn, with women particularly strongly affected: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w27448.pdf>.

A recent review found 2.9 million older workers leaving the workforce since March 2020, compared to 1.9 million who left in the three months after the start of the Great Recession in 2007: <https://www.economicpolicyresearch.org/jobs-report/over-half-of-older-workers-unemployed-at-risk-of-involuntary-retirement>. It also appears that age discrimination increases in tandem with a rise in unemployment: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3661073](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3661073). So, there may be a vicious circle developing.



It is not only the paid older workforce that is at risk. We likely will see a significant decline in volunteering by senior citizens who are being told to stay at home. I doubt that hospitals will welcome them back any time soon, given the risk of infection. It seems unlikely that senior centers will be able to reopen in the near future, or that long-term care facilities will allow in-person visits by family imminently while rates are still high and climbing in some states. Seniors were already vanishing from the community landscape early on during the lockdown, in part by being encouraged to use special senior hours for shopping.

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Seniors play a huge role in the economic health of our country, an estimated \$8 trillion spent in 2018 by those age 50+, with their expenditures forecasted to rise to \$28 trillion by 2050 (<https://www.aarp.org/politics-society/advocacy/info-2019/older-americans-economic-impact-growth.html>.) They eat out at restaurants, take vacations, and have the most stable source of income in the economy (Social Security, pensions), propping up many communities during economic hard times such as the present. They have an equally outsized influence on our social economy, helping with childcare (grandparents raising their children’s children) and volunteering in the community.

So, unless we find mitigation measures, the silent epidemic of The Vanishing Senior can be expected to continue, spreading with increasing malignancy.

What can we do to combat this infection? We will need to redouble our efforts to enable seniors to participate, particularly through technology (mentioned in my prior column: <https://isl.fsu.edu/article/isl-launches-zoom-initiative-help-older-adults-fight-social-isolation>). We will need to ensure that workplaces adopt senior-friendly work rules and appropriate accommodations. We will need to increase efforts to bring more activities outdoors, where it is safer for older adults to volunteer and engage with others while masked and at a safe distance.

We are going to need to be creative in how we attack the coming silent epidemic. Let’s get to work! ■

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# FSU's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute helps older adults continue to learn and stay active



**Julia Zimmerman, retired dean of the Florida State University Libraries, guides a group from the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute through the FSU Master Craftsman Studio. The field trip is one of many learning opportunities and activities offered to older adults through OLLI.**



**Marie Clewis is an active member of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at FSU and OLLI's field-trip coordinator.**

On any given morning, Marie Clewis is lacing up her sneakers and heading out. She likes to walk — especially with fellow members of Florida State University's [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#). When Clewis returned to Tallahassee two years ago, the FSU alumna found OLLI was a way to make new friends, reestablish connections and keep moving.

"I was looking for somebody to walk with, and that's where it started," the real-estate agent and OLLI's field-trip coordinator said of her participation in OLLI. "It's like, 'I have got to get out of my rut, I have to meet new people.' I am not a bar goer or any of those kind of places that you would meet folks, whether it be male or female. So, I came across the walking club. And I have two college friends who still live in Tallahassee. So, I lassoed one of the college friends to come with me ... and we ended up meeting the walking group one early morning."

Now, Clewis walks almost every day, and she'll return to walks with the OLLI group once the COVID-19 pandemic eases up and social contact is allowed. The group continues to meet, via Zoom online, to keep their friendships strong. Like hundreds of other retirement-aged individuals, Clewis and her walking buddies find OLLI to be a resource for learning and active community engagement.



Founded three decades ago as a way to extend learning opportunities to older adults in Tallahassee and supported by FSU's [Pepper Institute for Aging and Public Policy](#), OLLI at FSU has more than 1,200 members and offers many classes, lectures and activities. If not something for everyone, OLLI comes close, and by design it provides key elements of successful longevity — continued learning, social connection and physical activity.

"Retirement has changed," said Debra Herman, OLLI's executive director. "People live longer, and OLLI is meant to bring people together in order to be healthy and well. People find value in friendships and in learning. So that's what we do."



**Debra Herman is the executive director of OLLI at FSU.**

OLLI offers learning without the stress of homework and exams. For six weeks in the spring and again in the fall, plus a shorter, three-week session in May, OLLI members can study current issues and trends, learn about art, history and many other fields and topics. Classes are taught by current and retired faculty of FSU, Florida A&M University and Tallahassee Community College, as well as by graduate students and community members with expertise.

“We’re highly academic,” Herman said, “and we have great strength in that with the universities and Tallahassee Community College, and then we provide a lot of socialization and camaraderie, so people find their niche. Not only do we have some large classes, but we also provide avenues for people to branch out.”

OLLI has a broad catalog of activities for “branching out,” such as the OLLI Walking Club, for folks who want to footslog with companions, the Writer’s Group (which has published a book of short stories) and Club Español and similar clubs for learning and practicing languages.

The clubs spring from the interests of OLLI members. “So, somebody likes to paddle on the waterways and kayaks,” Herman said, “then they go ahead and develop that club (now the OLLI Paddlers). And people will join, and then they have other friendships that they may have not had before.”

Travel is popular with OLLI’s members, so there’s the OLLI Travel Club. “Not only do we travel domestically and internationally when we can,” Herman said, “but we also do armchair travel,” with travel reports and information. In all, she said, “we try to meet the needs of the people in our community.”

Harriet Waas, president of OLLI at FSU, said OLLI helped fill some gaps for her and her husband once they retired. “We joined OLLI about seven years ago, and it has just made a world of difference,” she said. “It’s given us a purpose. It’s given us something to do. It’s given us volunteer work, and options. And friends — we have developed so many connections and friends and information and social events and, you know, classes.... It just, it just gives life a purpose. You just have something to do.”

For its Fall session, OLLI offers 41 classes, from “The Ottoman Empire,” “The Origin of Abrahamic Religions” and “Healing the Heart of Democracy” to “Beethoven String Quartets,” “Introduction to Intuitive Eating” and “French for Travel.” To take classes, you must become an OLLI member (\$95 a year, or \$60 per semester; \$30 for the short session in May). Classes are specifically geared toward adults 50 and older, and there are no education prerequisites (fees vary but most are \$30 or \$60, depending on the length of the class). Other activities have a nominal charge based on the specific activity.



**Harriet Waas is the president of OLLI at FSU.**

OLLI is known for its high-quality academics, but OLLI is about activities, too. “It’s more than just the classes,” said Waas, the OLLI president. “It’s field trips and hikes and walking club and all kinds of things, and Happy Hour on Wednesday nights, when we can get back to meeting again.” You can read about all of OLLI’s classes, activities and clubs in the latest course catalog at [OLLI Fall Catalog](#).

Waas noted that while the COVID-19 environment has changed social interaction, it has not stopped OLLI or its members. Fall classes will go on, via the Zoom online meeting platform, and so will many other things OLLI. “Right now,” she said, “we’re doing our Wednesday night Happy Hour via Zoom.” (If you want to learn to use Zoom, check out the Institute for

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Successful Longevity's free how-to-Zoom guides at [ISL Zoom Guides](#).)



**Susan Lampman, while working at FSU, in 1991 founded the Senior Connection: Academy for Resourceful Retirement, which later became the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.**

What is OLLI today springs from a big idea of Susan Lampman's, who worked at the FSU Center for Professional Development when, in 1991, she got OLLI's predecessor started.

"Aging was always my field," Lampman said, "and I worked for a while with what was called the Area Agency on Aging. We served more low-income people in 14 counties around the Tallahassee area.... And I noticed that people who are seniors seem to be isolated or alone." She decided the university could take action to help ease this isolation, a common problem among older adults.

"What I wanted was more education kinds of things and more opportunities to be socialized with other people," she said. After learning of elder-outreach programs in other communities, she drafted a proposal.

"So, I went to our dean and asked him if we could start a program like this," Lampman said. "One difference from many other programs around the country is that I wanted our program to be of the university. In other words, I didn't want it to be something that was too light. I wanted it to be from the faculty, and I wanted it to be highly educational. So, when we started we had professors agree to teach. And the whole focus of the program was to bring faculty in to teach the courses ... which is really quite exciting, because people really are continuing to learn. And through the years, we found that even our own faculty as they retire join the program and continue to learn. That's one of the fun things about it — everybody, no matter how well educated, have areas in your education that you've missed. So, it's an opportunity to continue to learn in an environment where you're meeting new people and doing lots of different activities."

With a budget of zero but with support from the dean, Lampman created The Senior Connection: Academy for Resourceful Retirement. An advertisement in the *Tallahassee Democrat* brought in a few interested individuals for the charter class of 1991. Things started small. "The first time I got seven members, and I got two professors from campus, one from geology, and I can't remember the other professor," she recalled. "But we started two classes. And then we kept on advertising, kept on building. Next semester we had 35 members, and they kept going up. Word-of-mouth advertising."

In a few years, the name was shortened to "The Senior Academy," but the really big name change came after Lampman sought support from the Bernard Osher Foundation. With a grant of \$50,000 and a commitment to grow, the Senior Academy morphed into the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at FSU.

With growth and other improvements, the FSU program qualified for greater support from the foundation — two more grants of \$50,000, then, in 2011, a \$1 million endowment. Five years later, FSU's OLLI hit another milestone, with a second \$1 million from the Osher mothership. Now, OLLI at FSU is one of the premier programs of the Osher Lifelong Learning network.

Throughout the years of growth and development, Lampman said, the core mission remained the same, to give older adults learning options and friendship opportunities. "If you stay active, both physically and mentally," she said, "you live so much longer." That's crucial to successful longevity.

George Waas, husband of OLLI President Harriet Waas, is a big believer in what OLLI means to older adults. "I just turned 77 the other day," Waas said. "When my parents and my grandparents were my age, they were very old and very slow and just putting in time, so to speak. Yes. And here I am at the same age, going to classes. Of course, now, with the pandemic, that's cut back a little bit, but through Zooming we're able to maintain social contact, attend classes virtually through the computer and do everything and remain engaged."

As editor of the [OLLI Times](#), the program's news magazine, Waas has tuned in to how people in the community have a keen interest in FSU and the university's research on



**George Waas is editor of the *OLLI Times*, the news magazine of OLLI at FSU.**

longevity. “The university is on the cutting edge of so much research, and that is of great interest to seniors,” he said. “I want to use the *OLLI Times* to publicize much of the research that Florida State University is doing for the benefit of the members. I’ve published many articles from the Institute for Successful Longevity, the Pepper Center, the Pepper Institute, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice.... That’s the kind of information that I’m really looking

for because I feel the members need this information. And anecdotally, they tell me that it’s very valuable for them.”

Waas sees OLLI’s role as helping people in the community with their successful longevity. “Absolutely, because it gives them the enrichment that seniors need.” Older adults have completed certain chapters in their lives and need something new, he said. “We’ve all finished experiences. We’ve raised our children they’ve gone on and raising or have raised their own and what’s left, what’s left is the opportunity to travel, which Ollie does, and the opportunity to engage in education.” He’s keen on the kind of education OLLI offers — free of the stress of his college days. “For me, I’m learning more about history and about the various subjects than I ever did when I was in school,” he said, “because I was spending so much time just focusing on getting the grade. Now, the fun of learning, the enrichment of learning, is at the forefront. And I find I retain information far better than I did when I was a student.”

That kind of talk makes Susan Lampman, who got OLLI started almost 30 years ago, proud and reminds her that OLLI continues to do good. “Every, every year, a lot of new people come to Tallahassee,” she said, “and as soon as they hear about this program, they know it’s a way to integrate into the community. That makes it great for everybody.” ■

## ISL researchers find resilience, not loneliness, in nationwide study of pandemic response

Social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic has not led to an overall increase in loneliness among Americans.

That’s the takeaway from a comprehensive, nationwide study by ISL Faculty Affiliates in the Florida State University College of Medicine who surveyed more than 2,000 people before and during the enactment of stay-at-home policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Their study is published in [American Psychologist](#).



**Martina Luchetti of the College of Medicine is lead author on the study.**

“There has been a lot of worry that loneliness would increase dramatically because of the social distancing guidelines and restrictions,” said lead author Martina Luchetti, an assistant professor at the College of Medicine and a Faculty Affiliate of the Institute for Successful Longevity. “Contrary to this fear, we found that overall

loneliness did not increase. Instead, people felt more supported by others than before the pandemic. Even while physically isolated, the feeling of increased social support and of being in this together may help limit increases in loneliness.”

Angelina Sutin is the senior author on the study; Antonio Terracciano also contributed. Both are faculty members of the College of Medicine and ISL Faculty Affiliates. ■

## ISL on WFSU-FM



**Neil Charness is director of the Institute for Successful Longevity and the William G. Chase Professor of Psychology at FSU; Dawn Carr is associate professor sociology in the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy.**

Neil Charness, director of the Institute for Successful Longevity, and ISL Faculty Affiliate Dawn Carr of the Department of Sociology recently spoke with Tom Flanagan, host of WFSU's "Perspectives" show, about how technology provides a means for older adults to stay connected with family and community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

You can watch their conversation here: <https://www.facebook.com/WFSUMedia/videos/703612810405148/>.

Part of their discussion focused on ISL's Zoom initiative, which offers free how-to-use guides for older adults (and others) who want to use the Zoom online platform to stay in touch with family and to engage others from home during the COVID-19 crisis.

To help older adults who are not familiar with the Zoom video platform, the institute offers illustrated how-to documents that take you through the steps of creating a Zoom account, joining a Zoom meeting and scheduling meetings of your own.

You can download ISL's Zoom guides at <https://isl.fsu.edu/article/isl-launches-zoom-initiative-help-older-adults-fight-social-isolation>.

## Michael Ormsbee, ISL Faculty Affiliate, wins national outstanding sports scientist award

Michael J. Ormsbee, an associate professor in the College of Human Sciences' Department of Nutrition, Food & Exercise Sciences and a Faculty Affiliate of the Institute for Successful Longevity, has won the top sport scientist award from the National Strength and Conditioning Association.

The organization honored Ormsbee with its 2020 William J. Kraemer Outstanding Sport Scientist Award.

"I am honored and humbled to receive this award from the NSCA considering the reputation of Dr. Kraemer and the prestigious names of past recipients," Ormsbee said. "The NSCA is an organization that values translating research to practice, which is a valuable skill in sports science and applied exercise physiology. Without a doubt, this recognition should be a team award as I have had an incredible group of researchers and collaborators to work with over the past decade at the Institute of Sports Sciences & Medicine that made this possible."



**Michael J. Ormsbee is associate professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food & Exercise Sciences in FSU's College of Human Sciences.**

Ormsbee is the 29th recipient of the honor, which has been awarded since 1991. Award winners are selected by a volunteer committee that determines the winner based on their contributions to the NSCA, their community, and breakthroughs in the field of applied exercise and sport science.

Ormsbee's research expertise involves the interaction of exercise training, nutrition and supplementation to improve metabolism and achieve optimal body composition, human performance and health in athletic and clinical populations. Earlier this year, Ormsbee received FSU's Distinguished Teacher Award, the university's highest honor for teaching. ■