



**THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF
REGULAR SOCIAL CONTACT AMONG
PEOPLE EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS**

November 2020



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the volunteers and unhoused friends that participated in the surveys. Thank you to all mentors, volunteers, and interns for administering the surveys and continuing to engage with the program. Thank you to the data analysis and surveys intern team for leading this impact evaluation effort.

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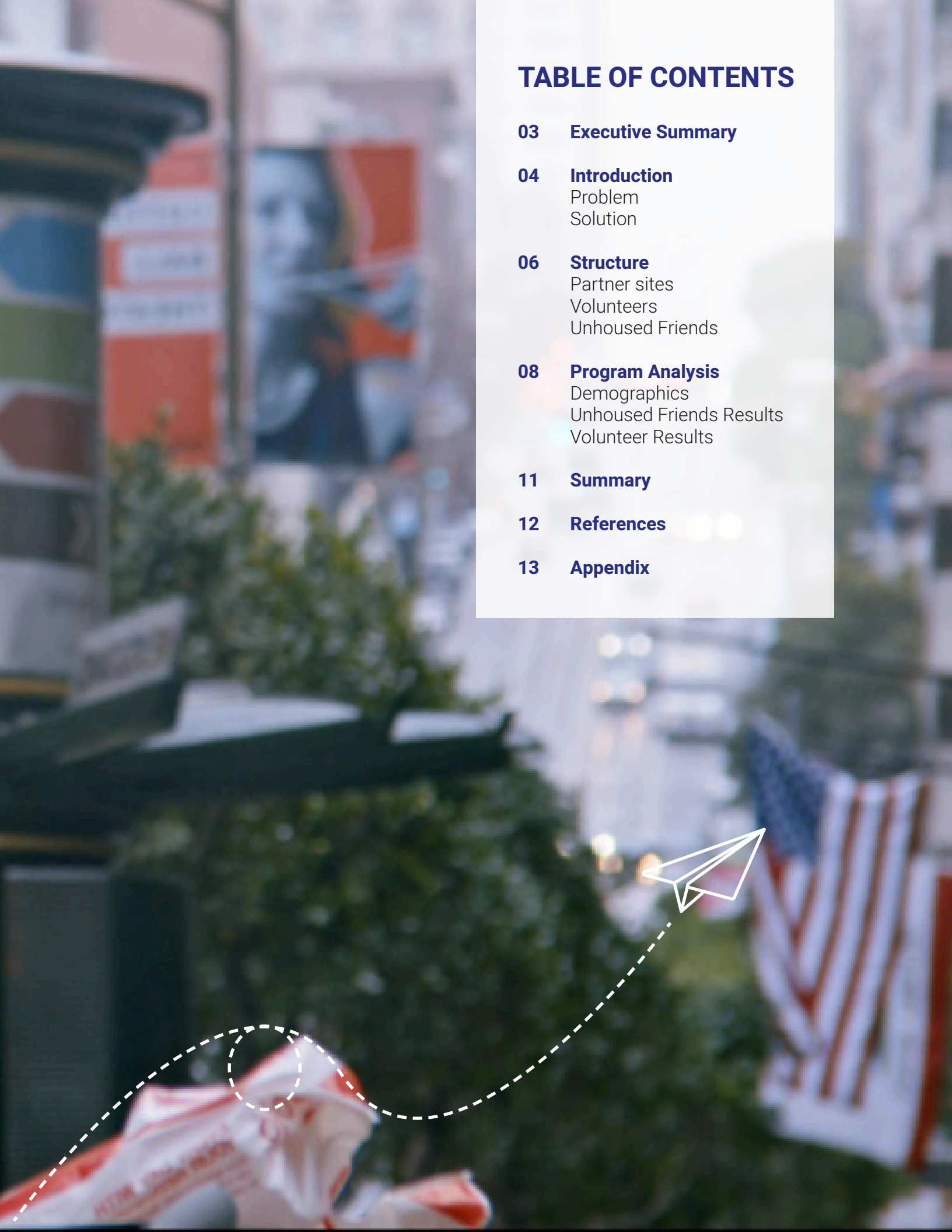
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 03 Executive Summary**
- 04 Introduction**
 - Problem
 - Solution
- 06 Structure**
 - Partner sites
 - Volunteers
 - Unhoused Friends
- 08 Program Analysis**
 - Demographics
 - Unhoused Friends Results
 - Volunteer Results
- 11 Summary**
- 12 References**
- 13 Appendix**





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somebody.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Now during COVID-19, social isolation is becoming more prevalent than ever. Early this summer, Miracle Messages decided to launch a new program, Miracle Friends (MF), with the aim to prevent social isolation in our most vulnerable population. This paper evaluates the impact of the Miracle Friend program on those experiencing homelessness that were moved into emergency housing by the city of San Francisco.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Miracle Friend's novel approach of matching volunteers with unhoused individuals provides a rare and unique insight into a population that often goes unheard. Multiple partner organizations and local governments have already joined Miracle Friends to sign up unhoused residents in their area: the City and County of San Francisco, San Mateo County, the County of Santa Cruz, Urban Alchemy (SF), Five Keys (SF), and Samaritan House (San Mateo). After a screening process with our mentors, unhoused individuals are paired with trained volunteers who take on the role of being a friend. The pairs connect at least once a week through phone calls and text messages. Unhoused friends join for different reasons, but most hope for companionship and a positive impact on their life. Volunteers tend to join to give back to their community.

"An important aspect of changing the fundamentals of our society is forming relationships with those who are at the bottom of what we in society deem valuable. I'm volunteering with Miracle Friends because this is my opportunity, despite this pandemic, to continue to engage in meaningful relationships with a person who's normally excluded."

- MF Volunteer



EVALUATIVE SURVEY

Although the Miracle Friends program is barely three months old, there are promising signs of early success. We developed and administered a pre-participation survey to half the participants before the match and the post-participation survey to the other half after 2 months, with the goal of evaluating the impact of MF on participants' perceived loneliness, stress, and companionship. A total of 50 unhoused friends and 30 volunteers participated in the surveys.

Unhoused Friends Results

Analysis of the pre-participation survey showed:

76% of unhoused friends experienced loneliness, and
44% got involved because they wanted companionship.

Through our post-participation survey, we found that **the MF program had a positive impact on mean and median loneliness and companionship scores, as well as a reduction in stress.** This change supports our hypothesis that regular contact results in improved mental health in unhoused friends.

Volunteer Results

Though the program showed no significant impact on volunteers' loneliness and stress, many expressed **positive experiences and a change in perspective on homelessness.**

Looking Forward

If we see this effect in just two months, long-term results will likely be much stronger, suggesting that continued use of our program will benefit unhoused individuals even beyond COVID-19. With more funding, our goal is to expand the program to more sites, cities, and friends, as well as to delve into future analysis. We are eager to share the program and its success with everyone, from unhoused people seeking connection, to volunteers wanting to make a difference in their communities.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness can occur for a variety of different reasons, including mental illness, losing one's job, inadequate resources and social barriers after discharge from prison, or falling behind on payments in an increasingly expensive city. Before the pandemic, of all Americans in the U.S.:

552,830

experienced homelessness on any given night
(OCPD, 2018)

~40%

didn't have enough savings to cover a \$400 emergency expense
(Federal Reserve, 2019)

With COVID-19 causing many lay-offs and increasing the likelihood of unexpected medical expenses, this percentage has likely increased since January 2020. In these cases, a person may typically borrow from friends, family, or charge their credit card. Someone without these resources may find themselves unable to meet payments for bills and be evicted. Once without a home, it becomes increasingly difficult to pay these expenses, and the cycle continues. Consequences of becoming homeless often include losing health care and connection with family and friends (Wright, Rubin, & Devine, 1998, as cited in Fosburg & Dennis, 1999). It is not surprising then, that people without homes are increasingly likely to suffer from loneliness and social isolation (Bower, Conroy, & Perz, 2018).

Loss of access to resources like healthcare, employment, housing, and social capital quickly takes its toll and pushes people further into this vicious cycle. Studies show that loneliness is linked to increased risk of depression, suicide, alcohol abuse, and cardiovascular disease (Xia & Li, 2018). Just the perception of social isolation alone can induce these feelings and have negative results such as a lack of motivation and a reduced sense of agency. In addition to a poorer mental state, living on the streets with constant exposure to sickness and little or no access to health care makes survival the first priority.

PROBLEM

Now, with the reality of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), people experiencing homelessness are more at risk than ever. This highly contagious virus has caused almost 400,000 deaths worldwide and nearly 2 million cases, spreading through person-to-person contact (CDC, 2020). The virus is especially dangerous to those with compromised immune systems, those who are older, and those with underlying health conditions. People living without homes are highly susceptible to contracting the virus due to lack of adequate access to hygiene necessities, having underlying health conditions or compromised immune systems, and being continually exposed without a consistent place of shelter.

SOLUTION

To attempt to stop the spread of infection in homeless populations, programs like Project Roomkey and the San Francisco government began housing homeless individuals in hotels. Organizations like Miracle Messages, which works to combat relational poverty, have been at the forefront of facilitating an easier transition for many of these people.

Our newly implemented Miracle Friends (MF) program brings volunteers and emergency-housed people together through phone conversations in an attempt to counteract the detrimental effects of social isolation. Intending to decrease loneliness and improve the well-being of volunteers and friends alike, the program involves weekly conversations to check-in, chat, and bring up any concerns, which are logged. Mentors scan the logs for anything that might require emergency attention before passing the information on to the partner sites. Research shows that the presence of social support acts as a buffer or mediator to stressors that accompany homelessness, and even the perception of social support can directly decrease suicidal thoughts (Lin, Simeone, Ensel, & Kuo, 1979; Schutt, Meschede, & Rierdan, 1994). Based on these premises, the program intends to improve general well-being and reduce stress by providing companionship for the emergency-housed individuals.



SEEKING
HUMAN
KINDNESS

One projection, from Culhane et al. (2020), estimates that at any given time with a peak infection rate,

21,295

people living without homes could require hospitalization, with about

7,145

requiring critical care

In addition, economist Brendan O'Flaherty estimates that **COVID-19 will increase homelessness by 40-45 percent** in the next couple of months, heightening the demand for adequate resources to counteract social isolation (Community Solutions, 2020).

STRUCTURE

The Miracle Friends (MF) initiative involves four main stakeholders: shelter partners, volunteers, unhoused friends, and mentors. Each of their involvement is detailed below.

SHELTER PARTNERS



Miracle Friends connects with a partner site (e.g. Urban Alchemy) and discusses how the program could be feasibly implemented.



MF then sends an onboarding email that details logistics of implementation, sign up sheets, advertising resources, and next steps to getting started.



An initial virtual training session is held with the staff working at the partner site.



From then on, MF holds bi-monthly virtual meetings for all partners to address any common concerns, questions, and share experiences.



MF sends in-depth weekly reports that include all contact attempts for each unhoused friend and a high-level summary of current needs and concerns to partners.

“I think that most people have some form of a stereotype or a stigma around homelessness, and I think that speaking with someone who was once formerly homeless or homeless right now has a big impact on us and our perspective.”

- MF Volunteer

VOLUNTEERS



Miracle Friends cannot operate without the generous help of its volunteers. To get involved, volunteers fill out an online application and a pre-participation survey (explained in “Program Analysis” section).



Once the volunteer is matched with an unhoused friend, they contact their friend and set up a regular time to talk.



Volunteers record all contact attempts on an online check-in log, which mentors can monitor and pass along to the partner sites.



Virtual weekly volunteer calls are held to address concerns or questions, and to share experiences.

UNHOUSED FRIENDS



Unhoused friends usually hear about the MF program through their emergency shelter placement (partner sites). *To participate, they need a phone. MF can provide a limited number of phones to those who need one through sponsorship from AT&T and Verizon.



After signing up, they receive a pre-screening call from a MF mentor to ensure that they have a stable phone connection and confirm their interest in the program.



After the pre-participation survey is administered, the unhoused friend is assigned a volunteer. Then, they regularly receive check-in phone calls from their volunteer.

MENTORS



Miracle Friends assigns mentor roles to experienced volunteers.



When an unhoused friend enrolls in the program, a mentor will complete a pre-screening call to confirm their interest and phone connection.



Mentors have a particular number of matches they are assigned to watch over. They are there to provide support and address any match issues. Every week, mentors will look over the call logs and send any red flags to case workers at our partner sites.



Virtual mentor calls are held to discuss any issues and questions from the matches.

“It is even more important now than it was before we started self quarantine to find ways to connect with each other. Maybe this moment of everyone slowing down their lives has given us a little extra time to make the effort to be the person who refuses to let anyone else feel alone”

- MF Volunteer

“I go on walks everyday, and before I didn't look around. Now the person I've been talking to told me to stop, look, and listen, and now I'm doing that, and it's making a lot of difference. Gives me someone else other than people in the motel to talk to once a week and learn things/relearn things that I knew when I was younger.”

- Unhoused Friend

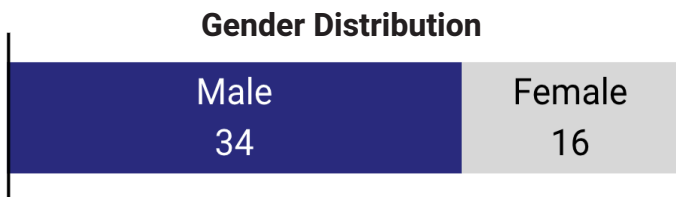


PROGRAM ANALYSIS

In order to assess the Miracle Friends program’s efficacy, we developed a brief survey for both friends and volunteers to examine the relationship between friendship, stress, and loneliness, as well as the program’s positive impact. We called some participants before they were matched (pre-participation) and other participants two months after they were matched (post-participation). We were able to administer the pre-participation survey to 25 friends and 15 volunteers, and the post-participation survey to 25 friends and 15 volunteers. We used questions from the UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3, the Perceived Stress Scale, and the Friendship Scale (Appendix A). We then asked participants why they chose to participate in the Miracle Friends program, and for the post-participation survey we asked about how they thought the program was impacting their lives.

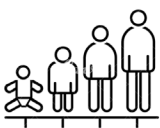
DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the 50 unhoused friends that were surveyed:



Time Without a Home

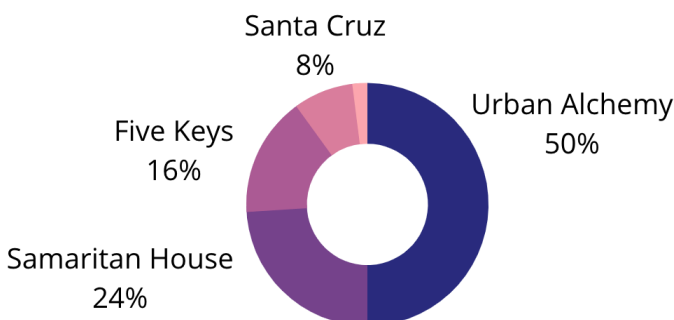
Mean: 57 Months
Min.: 1 Month, **Max.:** 480 Months



Age

Mean: 59.85 Years
Min.: 30 Years, **Max.:** 81 Years

Distribution Across Shelter Partners



UNHOUSED FRIENDS RESULTS

Survey scores show a negative correlation between time in the program and mean loneliness and stress, suggesting that unhoused friends’ perceived stress and loneliness levels decreased after participating in the Miracle Friends program. As hypothesized, there was a positive correlation between mean pre-participation and post-participation companionship scores.

Among both populations of friends that participated in the survey, the standard deviation averaged below 0.3 for the friends who participated in the pre-program surveys and the below 0.2 for the friends who participated in the post-program surveys. This exemplifies a low variance of scores, meaning that there weren’t many outliers and the mean/median calculations are reasonably representative of the overall scores.

Overall Resulting Change in Mean Scores

	Mean Loneliness (6-24)	Mean Stress (1-4)	Mean Companionship (2-8)
Pre-Participation Unhoused Friends	16.31	2.96	5.76
Post-Participation Unhoused Friends	15.73	2.84	6.6
Change	-3.5%	-4.1%	+14.58%

Overall Resulting Change in Median Scores

	Median Loneliness (6-24)	Median Stress (1-4)	Median Companionship (2-8)
Pre-Participation Unhoused Friends	17	3	6
Post-Participation Unhoused Friends	16	3	7
Change	-5.88%	+0%	+16.67%

“[The program] gives me hope because I know there’s light at the end of the tunnel, [it] builds me up mentally”

- Unhoused Friend

Friends experienced a decrease in loneliness and stress, while reporting an increase in perceived companionship.

They also experienced changes in their reported feelings of isolation, that they had a lot in common with others, and that they had people they could talk to. All 50 friends surveyed reported enjoying speaking with their match.

Change in Specific Responses

	Felt Isolated	Had A Lot In Common w/People	Had People They Could Talk To	Enjoyed Talking w/ Volunteer Match
Pre-Participation Unhoused Friends	66.67%	54.17%	68%	n/a
Post-Participation Unhoused Friends	65.22%	65.22%	84%	100%
Change	-2.2%	+20.4%	+25.53%	n/a

When we asked friends why they chose to participate in Miracle Friends, popular responses included forming social connections (44% of respondents) and seeking a positive experience (23% of respondents).

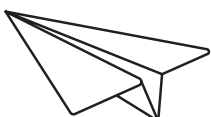
When asked how the program had impacted them two months in, unhoused Friends noted that the program uplifts their spirits (43% of respondents) and gives them a feeling of connection and belonging (33% of respondents).

“I usually don’t do the “talk to people” thing. I rely on the community I am in. But once I talked to [my match], I wanted to.”

“Because I just felt open and I feel like miracles can happen.”

“Wow, the phone rang and someone wanted to talk to me, and that’s exciting”

- Unhoused Friends



VOLUNTEER RESULTS

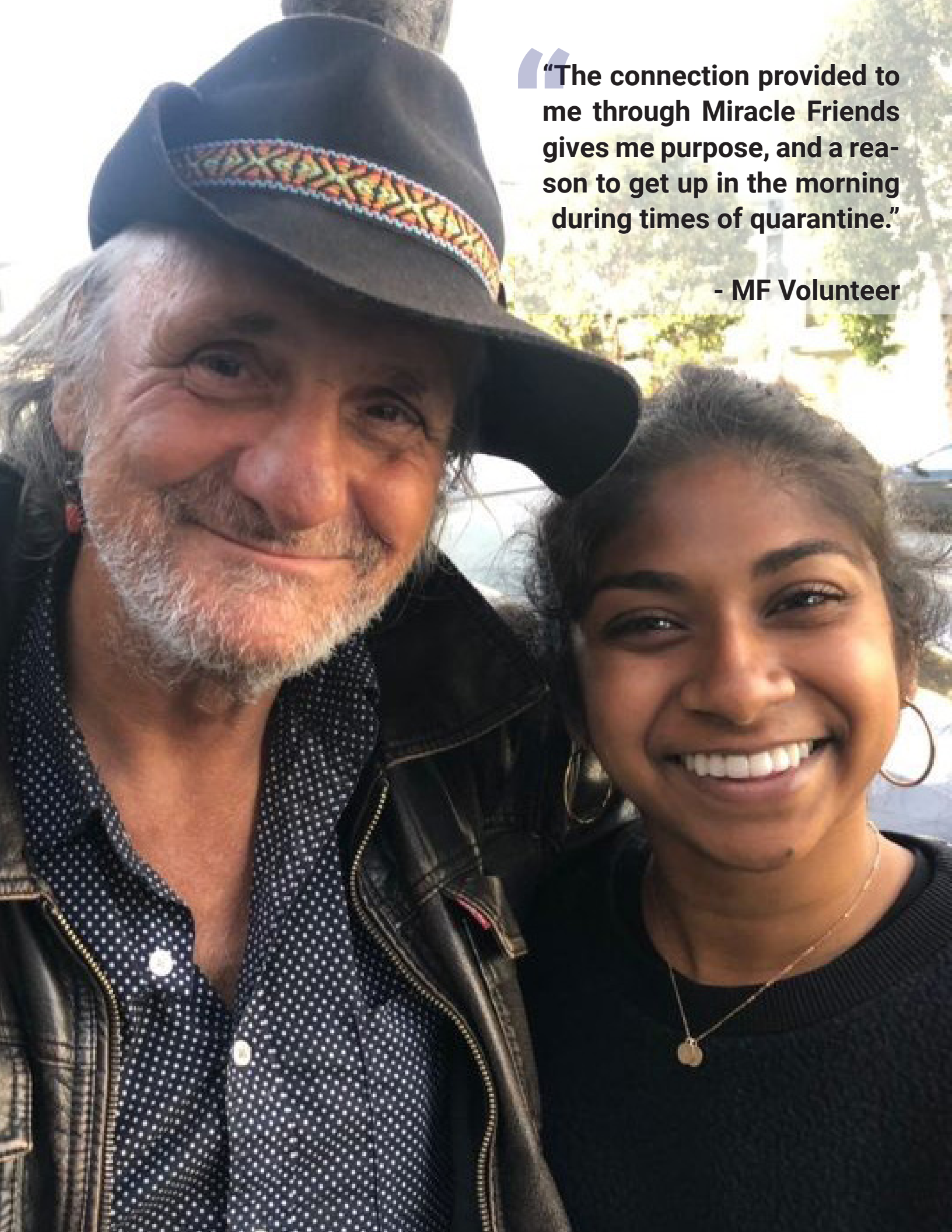
Though the volunteer scores did not differ significantly from pre to post, volunteers generally felt less lonely with more companionship. When volunteers were asked why they chose to participate in Miracle Friends, the most popular responses included wanting to help during COVID-19, form social connections, give back to their community, and engage with and learn more about homelessness.

Reasons Why Volunteers Participate

- 34%** stated “to form connections”
- 34%** stated “to help during COVID”
- 34%** stated “to give back to community”
- 31%** stated “to learn more about homelessness”

When asked about the impact of MF on their lives, most popular responses from volunteers included that it makes them feel like they are making a difference (38% of respondents) and that it has changed their perspective on homelessness (75% of respondents).





“The connection provided to me through Miracle Friends gives me purpose, and a reason to get up in the morning during times of quarantine.”

- MF Volunteer

SUMMARY

Although we surveyed only 50 unhoused friends within the span of 2 months, the results suggest that this program has a positive impact on both unhoused participants and the volunteers. Since the effect is visible in such a short period of time, the program has the potential to thrive outside of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Miracle Friends will most likely continue to show positive results for all participants in the long-term.

The program had a positive effect on volunteers and friends alike. Volunteers wanted to make a difference:

“I wanted a route to offer my time and energy to a community in need during COVID-19 and was thrilled to hear that this program exists. I feel incredibly useful and as if I am changing someone’s life by being a friend during this otherwise difficult and isolating time.”

- MF Volunteer

They succeeded. Friends wanted to feel a connection, and they did. All unhoused participants reported enjoying speaking with the volunteers, and they will continue participating in the program for the foreseeable future. All in all, our preliminary analysis of the program shows that it was a definite success.

We are expanding to other shelters, and we hope to continue providing our services to unhoused people in need, as well as spreading awareness of the living conditions homeless individuals face. For this to happen, we will reach out to cities, community leaders, and potential partner-organizations, but we welcome any volunteers, friends, and helpers who want to take part in our revolutionary program or contribute to its success.

To get involved or to learn more, email kevin@miraclemessages.org.

Thank You to Our Partners and Sponsors!



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DEPARTMENT OF
HOMELESSNESS AND
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APPENDIX

MF SURVEY QUESTIONS

[Link to Miracle Friends Volunteer Survey](#)

[Link to Miracle Friends Unhoused Friend Survey](#)

Background Questions

For Volunteers:

1. Volunteer full name
2. Volunteer email address (to link responses to the application they already submitted)

For Unhoused Friends:

1. Full name of Unhoused Friend
2. Before moving into your current housing situation, how long were you without housing?

UCLA Loneliness Scale Version 3 (Russel, 1996)

(1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often)

*reverse scored

1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship/friendship?
2. How often do you feel left out?
3. How often do you feel isolated from others?
4. How often do you feel alone?
5. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?*
6. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?*

Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamark, & Mermelstein, 1983) *slightly modified

(1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often)

1. During the past four weeks, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?

Friendship Scale (Hawthorne, Griffith, & Griffith, 2000) *slightly modified

(1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often)

1. During the past four weeks, how often have you felt that it's been easy to relate to others?
2. During the past four weeks, how often have you felt that it's been easy to get in touch with others when you need to?

Miracle Friends Program-Specific Questions

1. Why did you choose to participate in the Miracle Friends program?

Multiple Choice

(1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neither disagree nor disagree, 4= disagree, 5=strongly disagree)

1. I feel connected with my Miracle Friend.
2. I enjoy talking with my Miracle Friend.
3. I would recommend Miracle Friends to others.

Free Response

1. How is the Miracle Friends program making a difference in your life?
2. Has your Miracle Friends match impacted your life? If so, how?
3. *Volunteers only* Has your opinion of people experiencing homelessness changed? If so, how?
4. How would you change or improve the Miracle Friends program?
5. Anything else you'd like to add?



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