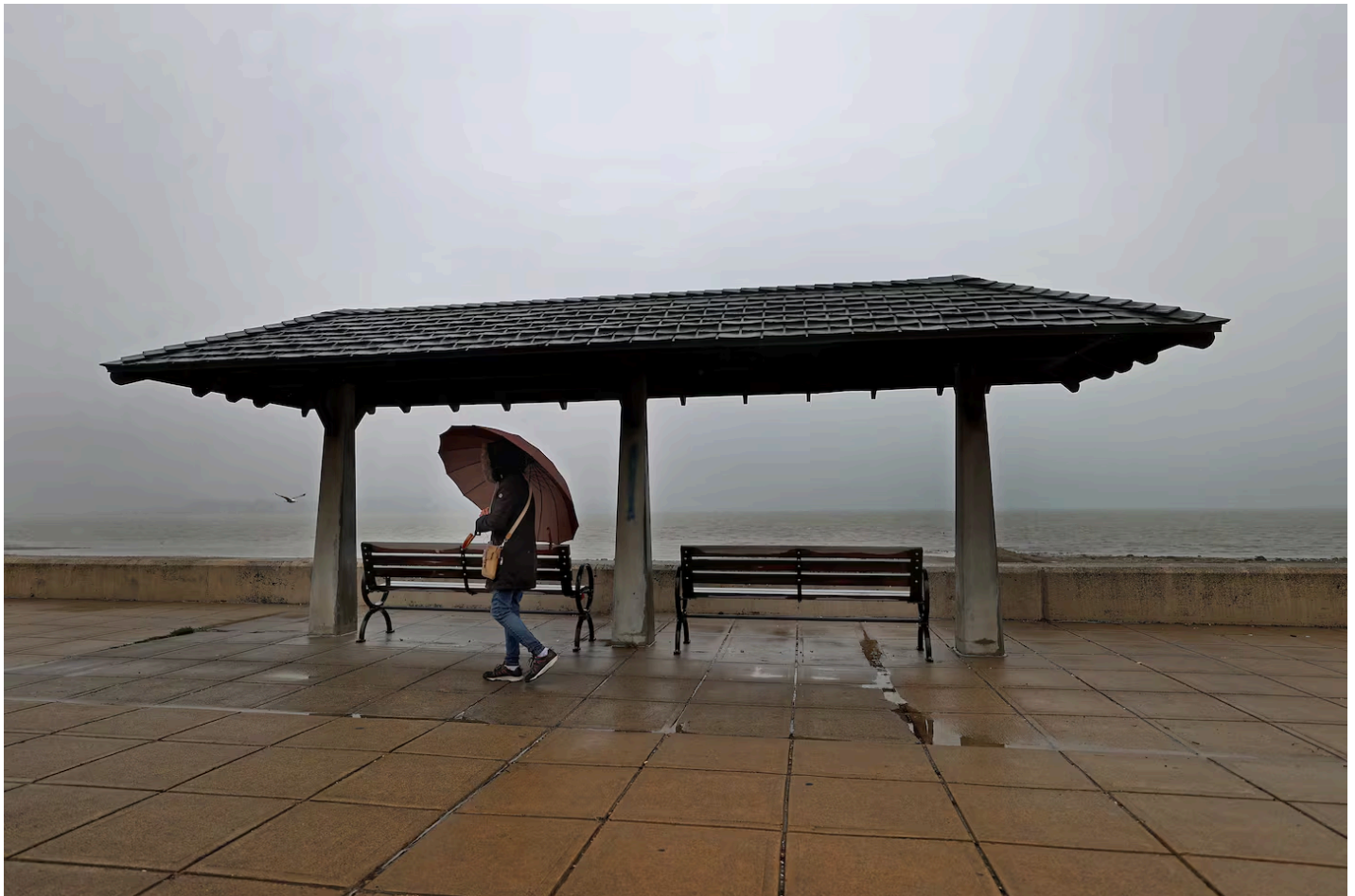


# Feeling alone? Go to the Y. YMCA launches campaign to fight loneliness.

The YMCA of Greater Boston aims to tackle an emerging public health crisis

By **Janelle Nanos** Globe Staff, Updated May 7, 2025, 7:36 a.m.



A new campaign by the YMCA of Greater Boston aims to combat a growing tide of loneliness and social isolation. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For decades, the YMCA of Greater Boston has been synonymous with healthy living, offering programs like strength training, swim lessons, and summer camps from Roxbury to Reading. But this Wednesday, the organization is launching a new citywide initiative

targeting a public health issue that's far more subtle and pernicious: social isolation and the loneliness epidemic.

Its new campaign, "See You at the Y," is the first of its kind in the national YMCA network, said Greater Boston YMCA chief executive David Shapiro, and is as much an event series — with programming, partnerships, and installations planned throughout the city — as it is a state of mind. Shapiro said it was designed in direct response to the warnings issued by former surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy about the mental and physical health risks associated with [increased isolation in the United States](#). According to his findings, [one in two American adults has reported being lonely](#).

"It's the first time the Y is putting its weight behind a marketing and storytelling effort that is not about membership or signing up for swimming or any of those things," Shapiro said. "The tagline is 'See You At the Y,' but it's really about being seen and belonging and what it means to be seen."

The program is backed by a \$100,000 grant from the Newton-based Highland Street Foundation, which will support YMCA programming for 2,050 families, sponsor 1,755 free summer memberships for teens, and provide 510 new senior memberships. The funds will also go toward new programs that focus less on physical fitness and more on creating healthy relationships. Think sightseeing tours for seniors, programs to get teens off screens, and more movie and date night events to bring families together (or give parents an occasional break).

To promote the launch, the Y plans to set up oversize Connect Four boards strategically throughout Greater Boston. Each game piece will have a conversation prompt to encourage engagement.

Shapiro said the idea for this new focus stems from a shift he saw in public life as we've emerged from the COVID pandemic.

“You can see it in the data: We’re going to libraries less, to the office less, and we’re less invested in public schools and public places,” he said. “We’re not seeing each other as much, and at [a higher level, we’re not seeing people different from us](#). The Y felt like a place where we had a fighting chance,” to prove that such connections were still possible.

Tara Murphy, a YGB board member and vice president of public affairs at Wellesley College, said the impetus for the campaign also stemmed from how the Y adapted during the pandemic to respond to the needs of its members, be it rolling out child care programs for first responders or launching food distribution efforts.

“We started really thinking about the Y as a problem-solver on some of the big things. What are we about and what are the challenges we’re bringing the full force and our scale to solve?” she said. “It showed us that we could think a little bit bigger.”



A Zumba class at the Lynch van Otterloo YMCA, located in Marblehead. MARK LORENZ

Calling it both a “catalyst” and a “call to action,” Murphy said the goal of the effort was to give a name to a problem that too often goes unrecognized. And she’s hoping it will help

major players in the city to reframe their missions and be more intentional about building community.

“I think a lot of community-building organizations might not think of themselves as being ‘We-fight-loneliness organizations,’” Murphy said.

So far, more than a dozen local nonprofits and civic institutions have signed on, including the Boston Public Health Commission, Boston Police Department, and Boston Public Schools. The City of Boston’s Office of Youth Engagement and Advancement is also taking part, as is the Boston City Council. Nonprofits Catholic Charities, Embrace Boston, and the Red Sox Foundation are all engaged in the effort, with Mass General Brigham and NeighborHealth joining as health care partners.

Boston Public Health Commissioner Dr. Bisola Ojikutu said she’s thrilled that the campaign will help destigmatize conversations about social isolation and mental illness.

“I know my patients don’t necessarily come out and say, ‘I’m lonely,’ even though loneliness is an experience that most of us face in our lives,” she said. “Loneliness is a critical public health issue, and we believe that creating space and opportunity for people to feel connected is a high priority” in an increasingly digital world.

She hopes to partner with the Y to help bring culturally and linguistically appropriate behavioral health specialists into communities across the city and normalize the idea that you can not only go to the Y to lift weights, but also to lift your spirits.

“Just how amazing would it be if people could step into a YMCA and feel like there was someone they could talk to?” Ojikutu said.

Boston’s YMCA was the first in the nation, and Shapiro said he hopes the Greater Boston Y can also be a national leader in shaping these conversations.

“Institutions need to be stickier, there aren’t as many as there used to be,” he said. “We want to demonstrate that there are places where this is happening and those places need

to work harder, including us, as we've never faced such headwinds. We want Boston to be the most relationally connected city.”

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