

Addressing Isolation of Seniors on the Sunshine Coast

A Summary of the Sunshine Coast Seniors Planning Table Findings
October 2020

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Introduction

As we have been working on how to respond to isolation in our senior population we had no idea that in just a few months this topic would become acutely relevant for everyone, not just for older adults.

On March 18, 2020, British Columbia declared a state of emergency due to an emerging pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus. Suddenly, everyone who was not an essential worker was asked to stay home, work from home and only leave the house for essential needs.

For the following two months, many British Columbians were forced into a way of life that is otherwise only experienced by those who are isolated for various reasons.

The Sunshine Coast Seniors Planning Table (SPT) had been meeting regularly during this time and made an effort to record the experiences of its members during this time, especially as they pertain to the topic of isolation.

In May 2019 the Sunshine Coast Seniors Planning Table wrote a report on the Isolation of Older Adults in Canada. The next steps were to identify what was occurring on the Sunshine Coast, and find ways to address concerns.

In November 2019, SPT members engaged in round table discussions around what was currently being done to address isolation of seniors on the lower Sunshine Coast. This information was shared and members were asked to explore how they might augment their current work in this area. By the next meeting, which was held on April 17, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted all members and had thrown isolation into stark relief for all to see.

Over Zoom, SPT members shared reports of numerous new approaches to addressing isolation that had been implemented within the previous month alone. In Pender Harbour and up and down the Coast, “Telephone Tree” and “Pen Pal” projects were successful in providing information and connection to seniors. Some recreation programs, such as yoga, were offered online to those in a position to connect digitally. Phone contacts were made within social groups that regularly met in person, and group email threads were born out of walking groups. In many areas, isolated seniors were identified via word of mouth, and neighbours were able to check in on them. Community Task forces developed, and key stakeholders focused on collaboratively addressing emerging concerns around food, transportation, volunteers, and a variety of other topics. The Pender Harbour Health Centre (PHHC), the first point of contact for the most rural Sunshine Coast community, joined the Community Task Force to hook into over 30 volunteers for deliveries, telephone trees, mask-making, and delivery of boxes to the Food Bank. Elsewhere on the Coast, Gibsons IGA partnered with a local brewery to ensure increased grocery delivery demands were met (including to isolated communities such as Keats Island) ; Sunshine Coast Community Services (SCCSS) implemented a “Food & Emergency Essential Delivery Service” for those in need of financial support, covering basic purchases and delivery. Info hubs like the Sunshine Coast Resource Centre (SCRC), libraries and the Community Task Force sought ways to get information out.



As the pandemic continued, the community continued to rally around and show support for isolated individuals, particularly seniors. At the same time, the Division of Family Practice, along with many other organizations, expressed concern about people not getting the medical attention they needed, the long term effects of increased isolation, and the lack of access to technology for many.

Three months later, when the SPT reconvened on July 17, the Steering Committee determined it was important to continue focusing on needs related to isolation. SPT members were asked to reflect on COVID-19 impacts on seniors and how they had approached this, successes worthy of sharing, new and emerging gaps of concern, and any further suggestions for the future. BC Seniors Advocate, Isobel Mackenzie, was able to join the Zoom meeting and provided some insight into provincial level findings, and their importance for our community.

What follows are summaries of member updates on three different periods in time from November 2019 until July 2020, starting with the most recent. We will continue to monitor the situation and add to this report, as the situation unfolds, new insights are gained, and as new approaches develop.

As people in our community and all over the world find themselves in a situation that requires some degree of physical distancing, we will need to find ways to stay connected while remaining apart.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Isolation of Seniors on the Sunshine Coast

As identified at the July 17, 2020 during a Zoom meeting with the BC Seniors Advocate, Isobel Mackenzie:

Impact of COVID-19:
Financial and isolation. Federal government pension uplifts and GST rebate.
Cancellation of programs. Planning and meetings via Zoom. Trial of online courses.
Loneliness. Need to connect face to face. Small outdoor sessions [spring and summer]. Others made small outdoor social sessions in the community. Conversations and letter writing are more appreciated. Some have appreciated the slow down time. Connecting students with seniors via letters.
Strong sense of community and systems in place locally to support the most urgent needs of seniors. Grocery and prescription delivery, virtual health options. The role of I&R on the phone increased.



Increase in feelings of isolation at end of life, in bereavement and while caring for those who are dying. Questions about how medical directives / Advanced Care Plans might change in times of COVID-19. Switched to phone and virtual support for those who could still communicate with others. Some outdoor visits with distancing protocol. Held a webinar on Advanced Care Planning.
Isolation, loneliness and fear. Telephone trees, facetime or other virtual visits, notecards.
Fear of the virus, increasing isolation, devastating that clients in care homes can't have family visitors. Use World Elder Abuse Day [June 15] to publicise increased vulnerability of isolated seniors. Handbook called 'Recognizing and Responding to the Abuse, Neglect and Self-Neglect of Vulnerable Adults' was published and distributed.
Isolation from family, friends and support networks, difficulty with transportation, challenges with technology for medical appointments, fear, anxiety.
Isolation when familiar activities are cancelled. Pivot to daily emails that include photos, humour, information, ideas of sharing - conversation starters, recommendations of movies, virtual tour etc.

Gaps:
Impact of pandemic on long term care.
Loss of social interaction.
Loneliness, fear of going out. Fear of contracting the virus.
Volunteerism has been less.
Toll of increased isolation and reduced services - more anxiety and frustration with cancellation of services.
Always a gap with those who are alone at the end of life. Volunteers could not sit vigil.
Affordable housing and support to address the self-neglect of seniors who have lived in isolation for years but are now experiencing health issues and have no family or social network.
Lack of access to respite for caregivers. Shortages of home support.
Access to and finesse with use of technology.



What's worked / successes:
Federal funding programs have enabled some businesses to better provide services to seniors.
Offering pilot online courses using Zoom. Digital newsletters. 10 Fall online courses with Elder College.
Pivot to offer increased phone support, though it's not enough.
Easy transition to virtual or phone support for volunteer Hospice support.
Collaboration on new roles and ideas to re-open Thrift Store, Gift Shop and Loan Cupboard. Encouraged members to rejoin activities with proper distancing. Be persistent and encouraging.
Greater awareness and respect for older adults as vulnerable to the virus and needing extra support. Services and retailers sensitive to additional needs of seniors. Volunteer initiatives to help seniors and families have drawn closer to support aging parents.

Key Concerns:
Much work to be done with regard to provision of long term care
Finding ways to inform people of programs and services so they can stay connected.
People afraid to go out and connect
The pandemic has highlighted the need for adequately funded and accountable residential care for seniors. Informal initiatives like Resilient Neighbourhoods are valuable and creating a local social and support network.

BC Perspective from the Seniors' Advocate

Isobel Mackenzie highlighted key areas of concern:

- Seniors are four times more likely to live alone.
- Internet connection affordability and seniors poverty; those who are poor are poorer than some other demographic.
- Marginalizing seniors under the rubric of “kindness” is eroding a person’s sense of worth and creating a sense of isolation.
- Volunteerism during the pandemic has been inspiring, especially on the Sunshine Coast.
- Now we will need to leverage the outpouring of concern for seniors.



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already challenging situation of supporting isolated seniors. This experience has highlighted core areas requiring attention. At the same time, innovative interventions surfaced within our community, including a letter writing campaign to isolated seniors, telephone trees and daily emails to an intact neighbourhood group that was no longer able to meet in person, and alternative ways to deliver groceries & prescriptions.

Recommendations

Working from priorities previously identified, and insights from the focus on isolation, the SPT proposes the following actions:

1. Heighten awareness of isolated seniors in the community by presenting the isolation report at the CRN round tables project, distributing the Addendum to the Isolation Report widely, addressing the issue in newspaper columns, partnering with locals non-profits such as Hospice or Better at Home in applying for relevant grants (Tech 2 Connect, Covid Companions)
2. Continue to strengthen member-organization collaboration, by identifying and inviting those who should be at the table, as well as increase outreach to our networks by e-mailing regular information on programs, training opportunities, events and research relevant to seniors.
3. Explore how other BC communities are addressing seniors' isolation through online research and reaching out to specific programs.
4. Address the issues of transportation, prioritizing those related to affordability and accessibility of transit options for Lower Mainland medical travel (such as how to get to a medical appointment in Vancouver) and the needs of seniors dwelling outside local public transit service areas by sending representatives to the Healthy Aging provincial working groups.
5. Address the issue of digital access of older adults, including internet affordability, training and support around device use, and community resource navigation by forming a working group on technology and including local and regional government as well as our MP.
6. Continue to engage with, and advocate to, governments: Federal member of parliament; BC legislative member of parliament; local governments by inviting them to Seniors Planning Table meetings and keeping them informed on our work through regular updates.
7. Explore innovative ways to connect people as part of the technology working group and researching approaches in other communities, see point 3.



Appendix

Collaborators:

First Name	Last Name	Role/Title	Organization Name	Organization's Mission
Michelle	Bruecker	Manager, Seniors Programs	Sunshine Coast Resource Centre	Helps community members find the information, services and support they need to succeed in the face of life's challenges, whether big or small. Information, referral services and emotional support are offered in-person, by phone, by e-mail and through group presentations and workshops, at no cost.
Lianne	Carley	Lead, Regional Population Health	Vancouver Coastal Health Authority	Public Health
Marlene	Cymbalist	Coordinator, Pender Harbour Seniors Initiative	Pender Harbour Health Centre	Improve the quality of life of seniors from Middlepoint to Egmont, many of whom, are living in social isolation, by creating easily accessible programs and resources and building better connections within the community.
Annemarie	DeAndrade	Councillor	Town of Gibsons	Municipal Government
Vicki	Dobbyn	Coordinator	Sunshine Coast Community Response Network	Preventing the abuse and neglect of vulnerable adults
Sue	Elliott	Board Director Meeting Chair	Sunshine Coast Resource Centre	see above



Jane	Gladman	Project Manager, Palliative and Seniors Dementia Working Group	Sunshine Coast Division of Family Practice	The Sunshine Coast Division of Family Practice represents physicians who support the communities along the lower Sunshine Coast. Members work to improve local primary care, increase local physicians' influence on health care delivery and policy, and provide professional support for physicians.
Caron	Hawrychuk	Coordinator	Connecting Garden Bay	Neighbours connecting with neighbours
Timothy	Hayward	Clinical Lead	Sunshine Coast Mental Health & Substance Use Services	Mental Health
Pat	Hunt	Board Co-Chair	Resource Centre	see above
Isobel	MacKenzie	BC Seniors Advocate	Office of the Seniors Advocate	The Office of the Seniors Advocate monitors and analyzes seniors services and issues in B.C., and makes recommendations to government and service providers to address systemic issues.
Lucinda	McKiernan	Constituency Assistant	Member of Parliament, Patrick Weiler	Federal Government
Shari	Myhill-Jones	Board Director	Sunshine Coast Resource Centre	see above
Adrienne	O'Donohue	Coordinator Recreation	Sunshine Coast regional District	Regional Government
Susan	Papadionissiu	Executive Director	Sunshine Coast Divisions of Family Practice	see above
Jack	Pope	President	Elder College at Capilano University	Education & Community
Elana	Robinson	Executive Director	Sunshine Coast Hospice Society	End of Life & Bereavement Support
Candice	Sayre	Executive Director	SC Healthcare Auxiliary	Supporting health care on the Sunshine Coast



Darnelda	Siegers	Mayor	District of Sechelt	Municipal Government
Nicholas	Simons	Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction	Powell River-Sunshine Coast	Provincial Government
April	Struthers	Mentor	Sunshine Coast Community Response Network	see above
Anne	Titcomb	Former co-chair of the board, Knowledge Philanthropist	Sunshine Coast Resource Centre	see above
Johanna	Trimble	Steering Committee Director	Sunshine Coast Seniors Planning Table	see above
Anna	Verspoor	Program Lead	Sunshine Coast Community Services	Fostering social equity on the Sunshine Coast by creating opportunities for people to achieve their full potential.
Sophie	Woodrooffe	Staff Writer	Coast Reporter	Media

