

New Horizons for Seniors Program

"Community Connections for Seniors"

Project Results – March 2015

Summary



Community Connections for Seniors is a project sponsored by the Community Resource Centre and funded by a grant from the federal government under its New Horizons for Seniors program.

The project's aim was to learn about the experience of seniors in connecting with community programs and health and social services. This was carried out in October 2014 by holding gatherings of older adults in each of eight local communities up and down the coast.

Each event was led by two senior volunteers from that community who had received training in group facilitation. A combination of display tables, structured content and informal dialogue, followed by networking over lunch, provided an opportunity to gather valuable input and disseminate information about services for seniors.

Community strengths and needs were identified by the 250 participants. Social connection through activities and places to gather was recognized as crucial to the quality of life. Gaps in services included a range of residential options for seniors, support for independent living, transportation options, access to a family doctor and specialists, and readily accessible information to navigate the system of social, health and government programs.

Intended project results were achieved and recommendations will be forwarded to the Sunshine Coast Seniors Planning Table.

Recommendations

Community

- Many seniors are living below the poverty line, are isolated, invisible and need connections. An effective network of coordinated services, a goal of the Seniors Planning Table, will enable the community to better reach these vulnerable older adults. Resources should be sought for positions such as seniors' outreach workers, seniors information counsellors, or system navigators to effectively reach out and connect isolated seniors with the supports they need.
- Refer "Out of the Shadows", Report on the Abuse of Older Women, to the Seniors Planning Table for review of its recommendations and assessment of need for current information. Create a link to the Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) Coordinating Committee to the Seniors Planning Table.
- Encourage social connection through accessible indoor and outdoor common areas, and activities that bring neighbours together.
- Support a range of low cost accessible activities and learning opportunities. Use advisory committees to give citizens a voice in community planning.
- Encourage appreciation and inclusion for the diversity of people on the Sunshine Coast
- Encourage the preservation of the natural environment for recreational activities



Housing and Independent Living

- Create a link between the Seniors Planning Table to the SC Housing Committee and Seniors Housing Initiative for information sharing. (This has been completed, Sue Jackel is representative.)
- Service Provider collaboration and communication via Seniors Planning Table

- Seniors Planning Table to communicate with the Seniors Advocate, Vancouver Coastal Health, local government, and non-profit and business partners about the need and opportunities for range of living options for older adults

Transportation

- Provide project input to Sunshine Coast Regional District and BC Transit
- Create link for transportation issues on the Seniors Planning Table
- Ensure information and referral services know where to appropriately refer seniors who have issues related to transportation, such as bus service, highway safety, and ferry access.

Health

- Connect Seniors Planning Table to *A GP for Me* project
- Provide Vancouver Coastal Health with project findings
- Refer need for medical advocates to accompany seniors to medical appointments to appropriate agencies

Information and Advocacy

- Encourage gathering places such as satellite libraries and coffee houses where people can get information informally
- Ensure information and referral service providers know which government agency deals with which issues and regulations so seniors can be effective advocates.
- Streamline access to information, using plain language. Encourage access to information, support and advocacy through professionals such as social workers and nurse practitioners and other front line workers.



- Consider a project to address the need of older adults to have a more formalized way to engage in discussions about transitions and decisions in being a senior.
- Organize workshops or other information methods on a variety of topics

Summary of Strengths

Activities

Many activities and events are available, particularly in music and the arts, and free events are greatly appreciated. There are opportunities for physical activity at regional facilities and lots of outdoor recreation. Lifelong learners appreciate Elder University and the opportunity for a variety of advocacy activities related to the environment and seniors' issues.

Social Connections

Various groups provide opportunities for social connection and positive impact in the community. People meet others through groups such as the Newcomers Club, churches, community associations, garden clubs, and exercise and sports programs. Older adults connect with others through volunteer involvement with organizations such as the libraries, arts groups, and the hospital/health care auxiliary.

Community Involvement

Community pride is expressed through the accomplishment of volunteer projects, such as participating on an Official Community Plan (OCP) committee or Advisory Planning Commission (APC). Many grassroots projects have created and enhanced community facilities and parks or addressed environmental issues.

Places to Gather

Places to meet are a very significant asset for the quality of life of older adults. Local coffee shops play a big role in providing easily accessible, friendly and informal settings to connect with friends and neighbours. The Sechelt Seniors Activity Centre, Harmony Hall, Gibsons and Area Recreation Centre, the Sechelt Aquatic Centre and Legions were named as friendly places with lots of activities. Older adults also connect at places like farmers markets, thrift stores, and malls. A physical centre to a community or neighbourhood really helps to create a sense of community, such as the pier at Roberts Creek, the sea wall at Davis Bay, or Point Road in Hopkins Landing. Being within walking distance of amenities contributes to feeling connected.

Character and Nature

There is a great appreciation of the natural environment, living near the water, enjoying scenic views and taking walks. There is also appreciation of some of the common characteristics of the Sunshine Coast such as the diversity of interesting people, sense of community, quiet rural small town feel, yet close to the city.



Friendliness and Neighbourhood Support

Many participants describe their community as friendly, and find that strangers talk to one another, neighbours are welcoming and supportive, and there is a sense of inclusivity and community. There is a sense of security in knowing your neighbours and having a shared history. Many felt they can reach out for support from neighbours, community programs, health care providers, and local government.

Summary of Needs

Housing

In every community older adults identified pressing needs for a range of seniors housing and facilities for the different stages of aging, graduated from independent living to assisted living to complex care to hospice care. There is also a need for more affordable housing especially in the rental market. There were suggestions for zoning changes that would permit renovations for caregivers and aging family members. There is concern that there are unacceptable wait lists for long term care, with hospital beds being used to fill this gap. We need facilities that can house couples wanting to continue to live together but needing different levels of support.

Independent Living



Related to housing, more support for independent living is needed. More availability of services such as telephone tree, volunteer drivers, meals on wheels on a regular basis or in emergency situations, home care, help with house cleaning and yard work, surrogate kids to help out, downsizing services, and a screening or scoring system for businesses and contractors were all mentioned as ways to keep adults safe and healthy in their own homes for as long as possible. Home Support Services are restricted in what they can do, and the Better at Home program is a great asset but just needs more resources.

Transportation

More volunteer drivers, a bus from Pender to Sechelt, and ride shares were suggested for those needing transportation both locally and to Vancouver. There were specific recommendations for improved bus service in schedules, routes, bus stops, and Handidart service. Also identified were ways to increase road safety and pedestrian safety, such as more street lighting, crosswalks, bike lanes, and sidewalks. Challenges include the long walkway for ferry foot passengers.

Health

New residents and existing residents whose doctors are retiring are unable to find a family doctor. More specialists are needed so people don't have to go to Vancouver as frequently for care. There is a lack of support groups and programs for less common medical conditions. Medical advocates are needed to accompany seniors to medical appointments.

Community

Many neighbourhoods have absentee owners, so there is no neighbourhood feel. Participants want more access to indoor walking spaces, like schools or malls, longer hours for coffee shops, sports such as bowling, more common rooms in residences. Many seniors are living below the poverty line, are isolated and invisible



and need connections. It is also sometimes hard to make connections when you are new to the community. In general there was a need to improve person to person connectedness for older adults. There is need for employment to attract and retain more young people and young families to balance our demographics

Information and Advocacy

Seniors made suggestions to improve information services, such as bulletin boards for seniors in central locations, more coffee shops, drop-in opportunities in community facilities, and satellite libraries. Information on which government agency deals with what issues and regulations is needed. Access to information needs to be streamlined. Seniors services need better planning and stronger advocacy at the government level, and older adults need a more formalized way to engage in discussions about transitions and decisions in being a senior. Social workers and nurse practitioners could play an important role in information and advocacy. More workshops or other information methods are needed on a number of topics, such as wills.