



Age-Friendly Communities: A Focus on Social Engagement

Most older adults want to age in their community, with access to the supports and services needed to live safely and independently in their home. However, many older Nova Scotians find this difficult to do due to living in sparsely populated areas that are often underserved. Many also experience diminishing social networks due to outmigration trends and changing family configurations.

Meeting health care needs and providing the support with activities of daily living does not guarantee optimum quality of life. Without opportunities for social participation, aging in one's home can be an isolating experience, especially for those who live alone. Maintaining close relationships and remaining engaged in one's community are important components of aging in place.

There have been advances in publicly-funded programs and services to support older adults to remain in their home. However, there is no mandated or coordinated approach to the organization and delivery of activities that support social engagement. What does exist is largely organized at the municipal level through local recreation departments, or at the community-specific level through not-for-profit organizations, churches, seniors' clubs, and informally organized gatherings. Some communities have accessed grants from the Department of Seniors or New Horizons aimed at enhancing the lives of older adults in their community. Communities are increasingly interested in being "Healthy Communities" and "Age-Friendly Communities" in which all citizens, regardless of age, are valued and enjoy an optimum quality of life. However, challenges remain with keeping older adults socially connected.

Did you know? Social participation has been associated with a number of benefits including reduced mortality rates, disability, and depression; and better cognitive capacity, self-rated health, and health related behaviours.

Did you know? Factors that influence social participation include: access to transportation, scheduling, fees, accessibility, relevance of activities and programs and health status.

How to support older adults to remain at home

Nova Scotia is one of several jurisdictions that is working to become more “age-friendly”. The information gathered through the provincial Age-Friendly Communities initiative offers valuable insight into the needs of older Nova Scotians. (www.novascotia.ca/seniors) The information provided here is intended to help individuals working in different sectors at the provincial, regional or community levels, become more aware of the significance of social engagement for quality of life of older adults. As well, opportunities are identified in which different players – older adults, elected officials, government, business leaders, service providers, and community leaders – can work independently or collaboratively to address these concerns.

What we know...

The majority of participants in the age-friendly communities’ consultations felt there were opportunities for older adults in their communities to participate in activities that keep them socially connected to others. Church-related activities, community dinners, concerts and dances were commonly identified. During long winter months, when formal organized events sometimes dwindled, card games became the means of social interaction. Often, these were held in people’s homes, accompanied by a potluck. Some specific initiatives fostering social interactions across generations were noted, but most participants referenced opportunities for intergenerational relations through family or at the community level through local festivals, or the church.

Community Space Important

The range of organized opportunities, whether recreational or social, was typically greater in and around towns and villages where venues such as a curling or skating rink, and specialized groups and activities are more apt to be available. In more rural communities, social and recreational events and activities were typically held in the community hall, or a church.

Barriers to Participation

Though most were satisfied with the range of opportunities available to them, a significant number of older adults identified several barriers that prevent them from being as active as they would like to be. These include:

Transportation

A number of participants who still drove, pondered how they would get to social activities when they could no longer drive and recognized the importance of transportation for many community members who don’t get out. While some areas are served by a transit system, many others are not. Even in areas served by a transit system, limitations were noted such as unavailability of service in evenings, advance booking and fees.

Health Status

Participants noted that hearing or visual impairment kept them from attending social events. They also discussed the challenges when a spouse is ill which limits the extent to which a couple is able to remain active.

AN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY is a community in which the policies, services and structures related to the physical and social environment are designed to help seniors “age actively.” (Public Health Agency of Canada)



“Many older adults avoid driving after dark, and drive much less during winter months, which in turn, frequently limits their opportunities for social engagement.”

“Provided people have a means of transportation I think it’s fairly easy for older people to socialize on a regular basis in this community.”

“I do not socialize easily...husband was a good visitor when able, but often wish more folks would visit him now that he is so confined.”

Finances

For older adults living on a fixed, and often low, income, their budgets can be stretched just to pay for their daily living expenses. Service providers felt that many social and recreational events were not inclusive of the needs of older seniors, especially those living in rural areas. They noted that a significant proportion live in poverty and cannot afford to pay for the transportation to get to events, much less pay to participate.

Support and Encouragement

Participants noted that some older adults required physical assistance as well as sometimes encouragement. There may be anxiety associated with unfamiliar settings, excessive noise or stimulation, or hesitancy about trying something different. They may need someone to assist them prepare, assist them during the event, or accompany them.

Activities Suited to Differing Needs and Abilities

People in a number of communities indicated that activities, events and programs that are targeted to older adults are often unsuitable, or inaccessible, to older seniors who typically have one or more health issues. Further, many recreational programs were geared towards young seniors. Participants noted that not all activities appealed to everyone.

What are other factors to consider...

Redefining “Senior” – Participants who were age 50-60 were typically very active and engaged in a wide range of cultural, educational, and recreational activities. Few identified themselves as “seniors” and did not see themselves reflected in programs and organizations (e.g., seniors’ clubs) targeted to them. Computer usage was felt to be one major dividing line between Boomers and their older counterparts.

Community Infrastructure - In some rural communities, the range and frequency of events had been decreasing over time due to challenges with maintaining community spaces. The expense related to heating, maintaining and insuring the old buildings, in which activities typically were held were sometimes too much for a small community to afford.

Community Dynamic - Many older adults had lived in their community their entire lives, had lifelong friends, and had well established familial roots. These communities were typically characterized by interdependence, a shared history, communication networks, informally organized support networks, activities, and a strong volunteer ethic. However, older adults “from away” often had a different experience.

Did you know?

Almost 20% of older Nova Scotians in private households are low income and the proportion is higher in select rural regions. (Nova Scotia Community Counts)



There are opportunities for socializing in the community but some older adults need personal encouragement and support to get involved. That can be less available.



“I feel there are different levels of activities needed.”

“Some newcomers have a hard time really connecting to the community, finding services they’re expecting, and feel quite alienated in a lot of ways.”

Here's what you can do...

There are opportunities for a range of stakeholders (public, private, voluntary) to identify and work on solutions to the concerns raised. Here are a few examples:

Transportation:

You could initiate a discussion amongst municipal leaders, local business and non-profit organizations about how to offer transportation services.

Community Space:

You could initiate a discussion with municipal leaders, church leaders school board officials or others to identify space that could become the “community hub” for activities that foster social connections across age groups. You could provide direct financial support to community organizations responsible for maintaining buildings.

Companionship:

You could provide outreach to older adults by developing a program that addresses the need for support to participate in social activities or a program that provides social interaction for those unable to get out. Church or service groups and student placement programs could be involved.

Here's what is working...

Many communities are creating solutions to address needs such as the ones highlighted here.

Mahone Bay Community Centre Seniors' Project supports social connections through its in-house activities (e.g. life long learning, recreation) and its Seniors Helping Seniors program.

Mahone Bay and Musquodoboit Harbour are two communities using surplus schools to create a community hub where all ages can connect.

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The information presented in this document is based on work that the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging and the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors has completed through working with a number of municipalities in Nova Scotia to assess their age-friendliness. Between May of 2011 and December of 2012, more than 900 Nova Scotians – most 65 and older – from 13 rural municipalities provided input as part of their Age-Friendly Community consultations.

Did you know?
Rural Transportation Association, is a partnership among health care providers, local business and municipal governments, is working to improve access to transportation for rural Nova Scotians.



For more information on this project or the age-friendly communities initiative in Nova Scotia, contact Nova Scotia Centre on Aging, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia
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