

Hearing the Needs of an Aging Demographic

Karen McCall, M.Ed.

info@karlencommunications.com

Abstract

This CSUN 2017 conference session consolidates the results of gatherings held in 2015/2016 among the communities of the City of Brantford, the County of Brant and the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario Canada to identify and understand the needs of an aging demographic.

Keywords

Aging, Government, Research and Development

Overview

The Grand River Council on Aging began holding community gatherings in 2015 to listen to the needs and experiences of seniors in their region. The eight gatherings are based on the *Eight Age Friendly Domains* by the World Health Organization (Turner & Lydia, 2016).

- Outdoor spaces and buildings.
- Transportation.
- Social participation.
- Civic participation and employment.
- Housing.
- Community support and health services.
- Respect and social inclusion.
- Information Communication.

Participants for all gatherings came from a microcosm of geographic and demographics, from Peri-urban, rural and aboriginal communities.

The City of Brantford is a Peri-urban community (population 93,650) with a public Transit System, including Brantford Lift for those of us with disabilities.

The County of Brant is an agricultural-based rural municipality (326 square miles with a population of approximately 35,638). The only “public” transport is a subsidized taxi-based paratransit service for those of us with disabilities.

The Six Nations of the Grand River is composed of the First Nation and Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. The Six Nations (population 25,660) and New Credit (population 1,375) are included together for the gathering reports. Neither Territory have formal transportation services.

The gatherings were held in large halls with approximately ten tables of eight people each, one of whom is a moderator from the Grand River Council on Aging Advisory Board. The role of the moderator is to take notes and listen, asking questions when warranted.

At the first gathering, participants were purposely segregated so that tables had only participants from Brantford, only participants from the County or only participants from the Six Nations.

By the second gathering, participants were encouraged to sit where they wanted and share ideas and experiences. This turned out to be a better working model as it illustrated commonalities among the participants from the three areas.

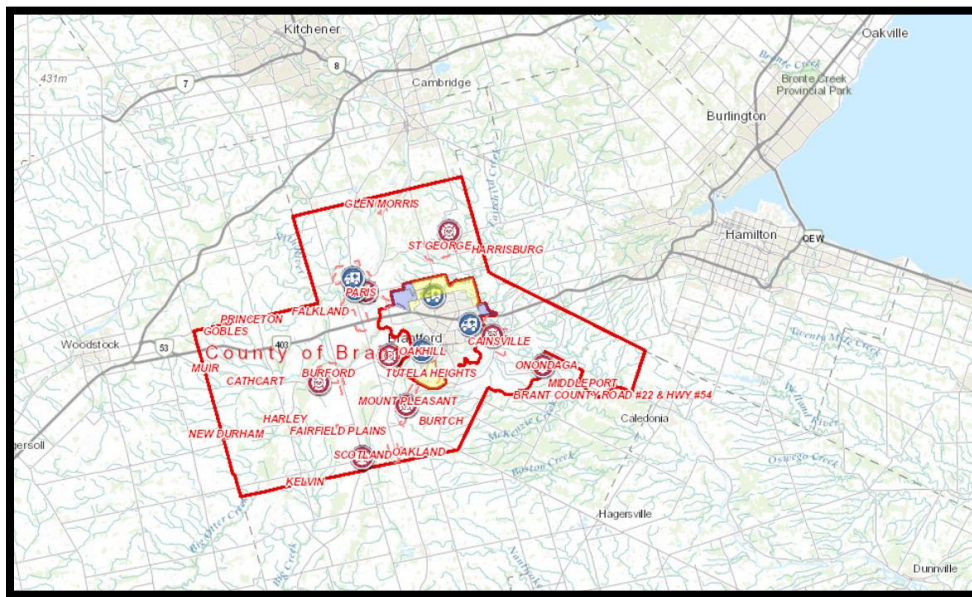


Figure 1 Map of the County of Brant from the County's web site.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

For those living in retirement residences, there was an increased need to be able to access green spaces and to have access to small garden plots for growing both flower and food gardens.

There was concern for the lack of well placed accessible washrooms in the community for the public along with the ability to access water to prevent dehydration.

Safety was a key concern for those using scooters, walkers, biking and walking. Well lit trails, standardized sidewalks with ramps and “safe options for other than drivers” were identified as problem areas.

A couple of interesting outcomes of the gathering were an identified need for accessible pedestrian crossings over busy streets, for example, over highways connecting one part of a city or town with another; and to have accessible crosswalks. As this region is in southern Ontario, snow removal was a key concern for both side roads in the rural areas and sidewalks in all areas.

Another interesting element identified is the need for more advanced “rules of the road” for scooters” to prevent accidents and promote safety.

For buildings in general, a need to establish a Canadian standard building code that includes accessible/universal design and the enforcement of the provincial Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act were key points.

Transportation

One of the key themes throughout all of the gatherings was the lack of transportation in the rural County.

For the City of Brantford, participants had suggestions to use smaller buses on less travelled routes, change the location of some stops so they are more convenient, improve the downtown bus terminal, add more benches and shelters and provide easy to read/access route maps at stops, on buses and in the terminal.

The story is quite different in the County and the Six Nations area where there is no public transit. The only transport available in the County is a subsidized paratransit taxi-based service for those with disabilities who meet provincial eligibility criteria.

For those participants from the six Nations, there is no paratransit or transit service. There are volunteers that will take people into Brantford for medical appointments or for medical appointments outside the municipality. There is a van that sometimes goes once a week into Brantford for shopping.

Participants suggested the development of a public transit plan for the County as well as exploring ride-sharing options using retired people to help seniors. One of the barriers to ride sharing programs was identified as increased insurance costs. The insurance company Ally now offers rates for people who drive for ride-sharing companies like Uber so maybe this is one way to further explore the ride-sharing option.

For all three areas, it is difficult for those who do not drive to get to medical appointments outside of the area. Crossing municipal boundaries using public transit is virtually non-existent and the cost to go to specialists outside of the municipality are high.

Social Participation

There were several elements identified that contribute to social isolation including the death of a spouse, loss of a driver's license, lack of transportation, safety concerns, retirement from the workforce and friends and family that have moved away.

Accessing information was identified as a barrier to social participation. Participants didn't know where to find information on activities they may want to participate in. Brantford does have a 211 Community information line but few knew of it or what types of information were available.

The lack of transportation exacerbates social isolation for those who do not drive or live in the rural County or Six Nations areas.

Chief Ava Hill from the Six Nations identified barriers to inclusion for aboriginal people that contribute to social isolation:

- Lack of public transit.
- Many shut-ins with no way to reach them.
- There was no place for seniors to congregate but they now have a new Ohsweken Youth/Elders facility.

All participants identified the need for a variety of activities to choose from. One concern is that the only activities available are ones people think seniors would be interested in, not actually what seniors are interested in.

Funding and limited income play a critical part in social isolation. Even if activities exist, they are often cost prohibitive.

Civic Participation and Employment

A few of the major concerns of participants were the lack of public transportation to attend community and local government meetings or employment opportunities as well as a lack of accessible employment opportunities for those with disabilities.

While volunteer opportunities were mentioned as possible solutions for employment searches, participants who require employment to help fund their retirement indicated they would prefer paid employment.

For those who could not find employment opportunities, starting their own business and becoming entrepreneur's was identified as a possible solution.

Participants identified the need for those in business to treat them with dignity and respect and to understand how to communicate with a senior and someone with a disability.

Housing

Participants identified that one of the main problems with the concept of aging in place is the increased cost of maintenance of one's home and the lack of access to public transit. There is also a concern that there is a lack of affordable safe housing for seniors.

Not all seniors have friends or family that can assist with changes in their lives. Many do not have anyone who can be a true advocate for them and help them through the changes in residence and health issues.

Participants identified the need for a central service where they can get reliable information on living options, residences that are safe and secure, affordable, clean and near public transit.

Participant's noted that Canada Pension Plan and other financial supports are not meeting the increases in living costs and inflation which affects their ability to find affordable housing as well as maintain a healthy lifestyle/groceries.

Many diverse housing options were discussed including planned senior communities, shared housing/taking in boarders to help cover the cost, more affordable housing options with green space and activity areas, and ground maintenance supports for those aging in place.

Community Support and Health Services

Financial circumstances weighed heavily in the discussion of health care. This gathering dealt almost exclusively with health care barriers.

Participants identified a lack of financial support for dental care. As with other topics, access to public transit within and connecting to outside medical specialists is a barrier to health care.

As more of us with disabilities attended the gatherings, more accessibility barriers were identified. For the discussion on health care and community support, access to buildings, websites, one's own medical records and clear, easy to understand information about treatment and medically related options were barriers to participating in one's own health care options.

Participants expressed that they experience PSW (Personal Service Worker) interaction as less than optimal. Expressions of loss of dignity and respect toward the people the PSW was there to help were discussed and ways that PSW's can get training on communication, how to talk to and treat those they are caring for and those of us with disabilities so that we can feel heard, understood and respected. Wages for PSW's were also discussed.

Participants identified the lack of understanding that their time is worth something, that often they have to arrange for transportation ahead of time, that Paratransit is on a fixed schedule for drop-off and pick-up and long waits in doctor's offices or hospitals for tests often take an entire day and often leave them fatigued and stranded for hours.

Respect and Social Inclusion

As with every topic thus far, transportation was identified by participants as a barrier to social inclusion. For many, losing their driver's license due to poor health affected their self-esteem and ability to do even basic activities such as grocery shopping and going to medical appointments. This was especially true in the County of Brant and the Six Nations on the Grand where there is no accessible, affordable public transportation.. While the County of Brant does have a quasi-paratransit system, it is not advertised and is for those of us with disabilities who can provide medical certification as to our disabilities.

Other factors of social isolation were economic restrictions due to limited incomes and the need to pay for basic home maintenance in order to "age in place." It was generally felt that a lack of a centralized point of contact in order to find out about activities was a barrier to social inclusion although some participants did not have access to the Internet or a digital device and much of the information is now being put online. For those who could access digital information, there were frustrations at not being able to quickly find one place with the information they needed. Some complained about how complex it was to sort through the various websites (city, county and Six Nations of the Grand) in order to find something.

One of the significant factors leading to social isolation was the lack of family and friends and/or someone who could reliably assist them with the changes in their lives that aging brings. For example, downsizing from a farm or rural home to an apartment in the City of Brantford. Participants want someone they can trust to listen to their needs and assist them without over-riding their wishes and making life more difficult. Some also wanted a place where they could get reliable information on secure, accessible and affordable housing once they leave their own homes.

Most of the participants recognize that social and physical isolation can breed environments where their security is at risk from physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse by anyone, family members included.

An interesting element that contributes to social isolation for those who can travel is the increased cost for those who are “solo travellers.” Group travel opportunities often charge single people more for accommodations and other parts of a group trip than they charge those who have a spouse or travelling companion. Since many seniors live alone and like to travel alone and/or can’t find someone to travel with, the increased cost of independence makes travel unaffordable. Participants who like to travel alone cited security as a reason for not wanting to share a room with a stranger.

Information Communication

For those working in the field of Information Communication whose focus is on accessible document design and the international standards for digital content accessibility, the participants of this gathering provide insight into other barriers to finding and understanding information.

Participants identified the lack of income, or rather the fact that they are on a fixed income as a barrier to purchasing and using technology to acquire information. For those participants who overcame the financial hurdle of purchasing the technology, two barriers still existed: there was no tech support and the cost of Internet access and data were prohibitive. While some could go to their local library, those living in the County (rural community) or the Six Nations (rural community) had no means of transportation to local...if there were local libraries.

Several participants expressed frustration when encountering customer service representatives who talked too fast, had little time to listen to the problem, blamed the consumer for the problem and or who used acronyms or had thick accents. The participants were divided on the use of the Internet as a good resource or not citing lack of availability of service, affordability, and community based training as well as community based tech support.

As mentioned, access to accessible affordable transportation was a concern when participants thought about information communication. The interpretation by participants for information communication was broad enough to encompass one to one communication with retail clerks and community help or information lines. The City of Brantford has a 211 phone support program that can access a database of community events, activities, and other up to date information yet participants stated that they weren’t aware of this service.

With respect to phone calls, the suggestion was made that phones be able to record conversations so that those who can’t hear well or who need instructions repeated can play the recording. This would also provide documentation in case another call is needed. This

feature is not related to capabilities of cell phones due to restricted bandwidth in some areas and the afore mentioned cost of technology.

One of the other prevalent barriers to information communication is the lack of federal, provincial and municipal legislation, rules and guidance available in plain language. Hand in hand with this barrier is the lack of assistance in filling in forms in a secure manner. The Internet was raised as a barrier with governmental forms as many are only available online and the cost for technology and the Internet is out of reach of most participants (This was a recurring theme with this topic.)

Summary

In all of the gatherings, access to transportation is critical to not only aging in place but aging in retirement communities. The ability to remain independent in determining when one travels and where one travels to is important to seniors, especially those who have driven for years and live in rural communities.

Many did not want to move into Brantford because they saw it as a loss of friends and community that they have interacted with for most of their lives.

In 2016, articles are being written that suggest that 1 in 4 seniors are living with a disability whether it is sensory or mobility related (Preidt, 2016). One organization has estimated that for those 55 to 64, 2 in 5 people have a disability while for those 65+, the number is 1 in 2.

This means that the overlap between those who are seniors and those who have disabilities is significant.

One of the dangers in focusing on “age-friendly” communities without expressly including disability is a segregation of two communities that can truly be “better together” (Turner & Lydia, 2016).

The other aspect to the development of age-friendly communities is that there is existing legislation to include those of us with disabilities, for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. As Baby Boomers age, we can't afford to take the time to reinvent the wheel...let's use existing frameworks to create truly inclusive communities.

Resources

Grand River Council on Aging. (2015). *Gathering 1 – Outdoor Spaces and Buildings*.
Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from
<http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>

- Grand River Council on Aging. (2015). *Gathering 2 - Transportation*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2015). *Gathering 3 - Social Participation*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2015). *Gathering 4 - Civic Participation and Employment*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2016). *Gathering 5 - Housing*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2016). *Gathering 6 - Community Support and Health Services*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2016). *Gathering 7 - Respect and Social Inclusion*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Grand River Council on Aging. (2016). *Gathering 8 - Information Communication*. Brantford Ontario: Grand River Council on Aging. Retrieved from <http://grcoa.ca/html/compass-project.shtml>
- Neal, M., & Wernher, I. (2014). *Evaluating Your Age-Friendly Community Program: A Step-by-Step Guide*. Portland State University Institute on Aging.
- Preidt, R. (2016, August 3). *Nearly 1 in 4 U.S. Seniors Has Some Form of Disability*. Retrieved from MedLine Plus: https://medlineplus.gov/news/fullstory_160231.html
- Turner, N., & Lydia, M. (2016). *Better Together: A Comparative Analysis of Age-Friendly and Demensia Friendly Communities*. Association of American Retired Persons (AARP).
- World Health Organization. (2015). *Measuring the Age-Friendliness of Cities: A Guide to using Core Indicators*. World Health Organization.
- World Health Organization. (2015). *World Report on Aging and Health*. World Health Organization.