

Expression

NEWSLETTER OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON AGING

Member's Editorial

Senior Friendly Communities

Community resilience. Community competence. Senior friendly communities. You may not have heard these terms before, but you'll be hearing them more as population aging challenges communities to adapt to demographic change. A commitment to senior friendliness is one way to adapt to one of the most significant changes of the coming decades — population aging. Responding effectively can actually strengthen a community, its resources, and its coping strategies.

Resilient communities see themselves not simply as a geographic place or physical environment, but as a complex and interdependent network of social relationships made up of people of widely varying

ages, abilities and interests. Senior friendliness means looking at whether the community is a good place for seniors to live. But the underlying philosophy is that every community member, regardless of age, should

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Canada

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Is your community ready for the senior friendly challenge? This issue of *Expression* will help get you started.

Ruth Schiller

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Friendly is as friendly does

have the opportunity to participate as fully as possible in community life.

Canadians want to age well and live independently where they have always lived — if not in their own homes, then at least in familiar surroundings. A senior friendly community recognizes these aspirations and takes steps to make them a reality.

Perhaps more than anything, senior friendliness is an attitude — based on respect for all community members' contributions and their right to enjoy the fruits of community life, no matter what their age, stage of life, or level of ability. A senior friendly community is a healthy community — one that listens to its members and works together to meet needs and solve problems. The point is not to provide services or facilities "for seniors" but to work with seniors to make sure the community supports their desire to live fulfilling lives.

How can we make Canada a "society for all ages" — the United Nations' theme for the International Year of Older Persons (1999)? With the crumbling of stereotypes about aging (dependence, frailty), there's a new emphasis on active and resourceful aging. This requires what the UN calls an "enabling" environment, with opportunities for everyone to realize their potential, and adjustments in the family, community and country to reflect demographic trends.

A desire to create "enabling" environments inspired the *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit*. The brainchild of the **Alberta Council on Aging** (ACA), the kit offers a wealth of tips for making communities more senior friendly, including neighbourhoods, stores, seniors' apartment buildings and centres, banks, restaurants, taxis, exercise programs — and even seniors themselves.¹

Building on the success of the Alberta venture, Senior Friendly™ Canada is now a

national initiative, with funding from **Health Canada**. Materials created by the ACA have been

TAKE UP THE SENIOR FRIENDLY™ CHALLENGE!

To help communities launch a senior friendly initiative, the *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* offers these materials:

- Senior Friendly™ thank you stickers, to reward community businesses and services that show they're senior friendly
- Senior Friendly™ check-up
- Kick-start workshops
- Community Guidebook
- Presenter's kit
- Senior Friendly™ training seminars

translated and adapted to spread the senior friendly approach across the country. Seniors are key participants, from the conception of the toolkit to the delivery of training.

Taking it a step further, the **Alberta Tourism Education Council** is forming a national network to deliver Senior Friendly™ Training to businesses — to demonstrate the benefits of senior friendly services and give businesses knowledge and skills to identify the needs of their senior customers and modify their products, services and facilities to meet them.

Senior friendliness underpins every issue of *Expression*. Take our "technology" issue (spring 1999), or our look at connecting

the generations (summer 1998), and you'll see senior friendly principles in practice. A decade ago, through consultations with seniors, NACA identified seniors' central desire to live independently as part of the community. The recipe for ensuring such independent living contains the following ingredients:

- A well thought out environment, designed to take account of the health, sensory and mobility changes associated with aging (in both private homes and public spaces).
- Good information — designed to overcome communication barriers related to language, culture and physical abilities — about how to gain access to needed services and programs.
- Social contact and support to counter loneliness and depression.
- Convenient, accessible, safe transportation, especially in inclement weather.
- Community-based support services for health, nutrition, daily chores, home maintenance.
- Good information about home safety and security measures and devices that are affordable and easy to install.²

In short, senior friendly communities create the conditions for seniors to live how and where they want to. The senior friendly approach can be applied to just about every area of life. Let's start with housing.

Universal housing design

The vast majority of Canadian seniors (93%) live in private homes. As we age, we tend to spend more time at home, so having suitable housing takes on more importance in our quality of life. Seniors' ability to keep living independently depends on housing that is affordable, safe, secure, comfortable and adapted to reflect personal preferences and physical, mental and social needs.³ This suggests two basic requirements: housing designed to be adaptable and barrier-free, and housing options that give older persons a range from which to choose.

Barrier-free housing is free of architectural, design or psychological features that might prevent anyone, regardless of age or ability, from using the environment to the full extent of their abilities.

Housing options include single-family homes and apartments, but also dwellings designed to accommodate multiple generations, small group homes, individual apartments with support services, and multi-level housing combining fully independent units, assisted-independent units, and institutional or long-term care units.⁴

Another option is independent apartments with communal dining rooms and kitchens, which offer social contact and reduce isolation. This encourages healthier eating and creates opportunities to

plan outings or form mutually supportive connections — a telephone pal to remind each other to take medication, or help with daily chores.⁵

NACA's *Housing an Aging Population* offers a detailed design guide for seniors' housing. Among its many pointers is a site checklist highlighting the importance of locating housing close to the services seniors want — churches, parks, shopping, public transportation, health care, recreation facilities.⁶

John Philips, a forward-thinking urban planner in Victoria, B.C., proposes mapping cities to pinpoint existing facilities and services — seniors' centres, adult day care, intermediate care and extended care — as well as projected requirements based on the age and current location of older people's homes. Facilities could serve as multi-level, multi-service centres, reaching out to seniors living on their own and possibly reducing the need for crisis intervention and institutionalization.⁷

Much of today's housing stock is in the suburbs — which are designed essentially for families with young children and two cars. It's where many seniors — today's and tomorrow's — raised their families. Will they be able to age in place there? Housing design, distances to services and amenities, and the emphasis on private vehicles rather than public transportation may prevent this.

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DESIGNS FOR LIVING

The User Friendly Demonstration Home in Vancouver shows how a little forethought can produce a home that families won't outgrow as they age. Innovations include a flexible floor plan (main-floor office/bedroom, second-floor closet placed right over main-floor closet to permit later installation of a lift), lower light switches and thermostat controls, lever-action handles, reinforced bathroom walls to accommodate grab bars, wider hallways, and heated outdoor walkways. The extra construction cost — about \$1000 in a 3-bedroom house — is much less than the cost of retrofitting a non-senior friendly residence. (*Ottawa Citizen*, 14 August 1999)

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The senior friendly community thinks about these issues, consults seniors about needs, involves them in planning housing options, and makes choices available. It also makes choices *viable*, for example, by supporting services (whether publicly funded or provided by volunteers) that help seniors remain in their own homes — home care (medical and non-medical), Meals on Wheels/Wheels to Meals, help with home repairs, lawn care and snow removal.

Transportation links

Transportation is the passport to independent living for most seniors. Safe, convenient, affordable transportation helps reduce isolation and provides access to services, recreation and leisure pursuits. Its absence is a major barrier to social contact and active living. At least half the seniors in one survey said they rarely or never went out to community functions, ate out or visited friends because of transportation problems. Clearly, transportation

should be an integral component of all programs designed to serve seniors.⁸

Walking is the most basic form of transportation and one that many older people enjoy for its health benefits and the chance to stay in touch with community goings-on. Safety is a concern, however: seniors account for a disproportionate share of pedestrians killed in traffic accidents. A senior friendly community designs intersections, traffic light timing, curb height and signage to take account of the mobility, visual and hearing capacity of all community members, not just the young and the agile.⁹

Holding a driver's license — as 70% of Canadians age 55+ do — signifies freedom and convenience; its loss may require a complete change of lifestyle. The senior friendly community recognizes that chronological age is not the sole determinant of driving ability and finds ways to assess the competence of older drivers in ways that weigh safety concerns while respecting the dignity and independence of each individual.¹⁰



Photo: Photodisc

Public transportation can be promoted as an alternative provided it is convenient and accessible. Universal access means recognizing that travellers have widely varying mobility needs as a result of age and physical, sensory or mental abilities. Senior friendly public transit also recognizes that not all disabilities are visible. Seniors with lung and/or cardiovascular problems, for example, may not qualify for "paratranspo" and similar services designed for people using wheelchairs, even though they lack the stamina to use regular public transit.¹¹

Urban and rural realities

Cities — where 80% of Canadian seniors now live — may be more senior friendly in terms of access to services, public transportation, recreation and culture, but seniors may find other aspects of urban life less than friendly — higher costs

for housing and other necessities, greater isolation or loneliness because of the anonymity of city life, less sense of safety and security.¹²

Rural seniors may have better social and support networks, developed over a lifetime of community involvement, yet still lack access to medical services, home care, transportation, or suitable housing. As a result, the potential benefits of living in a rural area — less expensive housing and taxes, fresh air and outdoor activities, a more peaceful way of life — can be offset by more expensive food and transportation costs and limited access to the services that support independent living.¹³

Senior friendly communities recognize that one size doesn't always fit all — the distinct needs of each community and its senior population have to be considered on their own, with flexibility to accommodate the inevitable adjustments needed over time.

Friendly surroundings

Senior friendliness should also extend to shops, malls, offices, public buildings, and care facilities. Ensuring a congenial physical environment means designing for accessibility, convenience and enjoyment; just as important, good design enhances safety and security and can prevent debilitating injuries.

Falls result from interaction between individual

characteristics — diminished muscle strength, impaired vision, poor balance — and factors in the environment — poor stair design, cracked or icy sidewalks, bad lighting, slippery floors, insufficient contrast between changes of level, poor maintenance of walking aids. A senior friendly community takes a holistic approach to reducing the number of preventable injuries — educating individuals and adopting safe design, impeccable sidewalk maintenance, and programs such as mall walking (with transportation to the mall) that promote

OUNCE OF PREVENTION

In Toronto alone, 5000 seniors are admitted to hospital annually because of falls. The Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre has a program to teach seniors about the risk and consequences of falling and how to protect themselves from falls and injuries. One simple and cheap solution: reflective arm bands to make sure seniors crossing the street are clearly visible to drivers.

(Source: "Canada's safest cities", Chatelaine, April 1999.)

fitness and social interaction without exposing walkers to slippery winter sidewalks.¹⁴

Another element of an enabling environment is feeling safe and secure. Even though

older Canadians are no more likely than other age groups to be victims of a crime, fear may keep people isolated at home, especially at night in urban areas. In addition to good street lighting and neighbourhood-based policing, a senior friendly community reaches out to seniors to involve and empower them on safety and security issues.

What makes cities unsafe today, however, is not crime, but what are commonly called "accidents" — car crashes and falls, both leading causes of injury and premature death. Urban safety depends on preventing these incidents, especially for older people, who are disproportionately represented among victims of falls and traffic fatalities.¹⁵

But senior friendliness is not simply a product of the environment, although it's a good start. Just as important are the knowledge and attitudes that business and public employees bring to their dealings with seniors. The *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* and Health Canada's *Communicating with Seniors* offer plenty of advice on making businesses and services more aware of how to be senior friendly.

Senior consumers also need to be consulted and involved in developing product and service standards. An international group of volunteer experts in building design, transportation, health care, product safety and ergonomics is working on CSA

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standards in health care, assistive devices, and product and environmental design. Among the challenges are determining priorities (which products and services should be standardized or adapted through senior friendly or universal design first?) and involving older consumers (how can they convey their needs and concerns?).¹⁶

Communication

Communicating effectively and clearly with seniors is important, because information underpins virtually every area of life, from health and nutrition to travel and recreation. The subject is broad — so much so that Health Canada's **Division of Aging and Seniors** has published a 40-page booklet about it, offering advice, techniques and tips for developing senior friendly communication in a wide range of situations and using the full spectrum of communications media.¹⁷

If the advice can be summed up in a few words, it's these: know your audience, and if you don't know, find out — by asking them about what information they need and how they prefer to receive information. As one Vancouver senior commented, "Why don't retirement show organizers ask retirees what they really want? There's a lot more to retirement than mutual funds and travel to exotic destinations."

Social connections

Finally, senior friendly communities strive to strengthen connections between members through shared problem solving. What are older adults' perspectives on where they live and their everyday environments? How can we understand people's journeys as they negotiate these environments and use this understanding to shape discussions about community needs and the development of inclusive places and spaces? How can we help reconnect the generations for the benefit of all? These are the

CAN A SCHOOL BE SENIOR FRIENDLY?

Of course! Strong connections and reciprocity between generations are among the hallmarks of senior friendliness. Schools can

- involve seniors in curriculum development and review
- invite seniors to speak about healthy aging, current and historical events, or their own areas of expertise
- match seniors and students for mutual help — with reading and other subjects, computer skills, odd jobs, yard work, meal preparation
- pair seniors and students to research mutual concerns, such as drug use

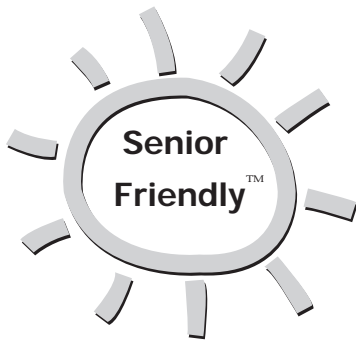
kinds of questions senior friendly communities ask themselves — and enlist the help of seniors in finding the answers. As authors **E. Gallagher** and **V. Scott** (Victoria's **STEPS** project) observe, "consultation, collaboration and coalition-building can enhance the needed understanding between groups and can help to ensure that the best use is made of human creativity and public tax dollars."¹⁸

Beyond the physical environment and accessible design is a broader view of senior friendliness — one that embraces community resilience based on mutual support, collective expectations of success in meeting challenges, high levels of community participation, organizing co-operatively, working hard voluntarily, egalitarian treatment of community members, and optimism about the future.¹⁹ What's more, by assessing its senior friendliness and adjusting to demographic change, a community strengthens its own capacity to meet future challenges, because a healthy environment and strong social relations are among the principal contributors to community resilience.

In our desire to build a more caring society for all ages, we need to tap the ideas, energy and enthusiasm of all community members, no matter what their age. The *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* suggests intergenerational approaches that bring all community

members together for mutual benefit.

The result is win-win-win. Seniors benefit from a better quality of life, with the independence they want and the interdependence we all need. Businesses benefit from the continued patronage of loyal customers who are part of a healthy community. And communities benefit from the enhancing presence of older people in the community, as active citizens, role models, volunteers, and taxpayers.



Logo of the Alberta Council on Aging's Senior Friendly Program

WORDS TO LIVE BY

These planning principles were developed for transportation, but they're words to live by in planning senior friendly communities:

- Enable, not disable
- Include, not exclude
- Integrate, not segregate
- Consult and empower, not alienate

Source: Transportation Development Centre, Transport Canada

Tips List

Making your community more senior friendly

- Conduct a safety audit or falls prevention audit in your neighbourhood or building.
- Challenge. Find out about the Senior Friendly™ Canada initiative and take the lead in your community. The *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* has everything you need to get started. It will help you dispel myths about aging and promote better service for seniors.
- Be on the lookout for senior friendly services in your community — restaurants, stores, schools, banks, hairdressers, government offices. Let them know you like their style and let others know as well.
- Make sure the clubs, classes and other groups you belong to are senior friendly. Do they work to draw isolated seniors into the community? Do they communicate in a senior friendly way? Do they consult with seniors, rather than assuming what's best for them?

On line, please

www.compusmart.ab.ca/acaging — Alberta Council on Aging.

www.atec.ca — Alberta Tourism Education Council.

www.csa-international.org — website of CSA International, which is working on the development of standards related to population aging for products and services.

www.chatelaine.com/read/news+views/safecities.html — online version of the article published in the April 1999 edition of *Chatelaine* ranking the relative safety of 25 Canadian cities; includes a resource list.

<http://iyop-aipa.ic.gc.ca> — website of the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP) Canada Coordinating Committee, which has information kits for communities and businesses as well as on the Senior Friendly™ Canada Initiative and related projects celebrating the IYOP.

www.metrac.org — for information about safety audits.

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines> — Health Canada - Division of Aging and Seniors site, for electronic copies of *Communicating with Seniors*, *Bruno and Alice*, and *The Safe Living Guide*.

Find out more...

A list of resources for senior friendly communities and those that want to be senior friendly.

Alberta Council on Aging, 401-10707 100th Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5J 3M1, for copies of the Senior Friendly™ Toolkit (\$30), video and other materials. Also available from the Association québécoise de défense des droits des personnes retraitées et préretraitées (AQDR), 1160 St. Joseph Boulevard East, Suite 105, Montréal, Quebec H2J 1L4.

Association québécoise de gérontologie, *Le gérontophile* 15/2 (spring 1993), special issue devoted to seniors in the city, including a bilingual bibliography on the urban environment, services and urban planning.

Canadian Seniors Packaging Advisory Council, 2255 Sheppard Avenue East, Suite E330, Willowdale, Ontario M2J 4Y1 (416-490-7860).

Offers tips for business, seniors, community groups on senior friendly product packaging and labelling.

Central West Seniors' Safety Committee, *Home Safety Checklist*. Contact the Trauma Prevention Council of Hamilton-Wentworth, 237 Barton Street East, Hamilton, Ontario L8L 2X2.

CSA International, 178 Rexdale Boulevard, Toronto, Ontario M9W 1R3.

Health Canada, Division of Aging and Seniors, *The Safe Living Guide, A Guide to Home Safety for Seniors* (1997); *Bruno and Alice, a love story about seniors and safety* (1999); and *Communicating with seniors: Advice, techniques and tips* (1999).

STEPS, Dr. Elaine Gallagher, School of Nursing, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 1700, Victoria, B.C., V8W 2Y2, egallagh@HSD.UVIC.ca. Project report, with falls prevention checklist and video, *Stepping Out*.

Notes

- 1 Alberta Council on Aging, *Senior Friendly™ Toolkit* (Edmonton: 1999).
- 2 National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA), *Understanding seniors' independence. Report no. 1: Barriers and suggestions for action* (Ottawa: 1989).
- 3 NACA, *1999 and Beyond: Challenges of an Aging Canadian Society* (Ottawa: 1999).
- 4 NACA, *1999 and Beyond*.
- 5 Linda Macleod and Associates, "Toward healthy-aging communities: a population health approach", prepared for Health Canada, Division of Aging and Seniors (1997), pp. 25, 68.
- 6 NACA, *Housing an aging population: Guidelines for development and design*, second edition (Ottawa: 1992). See also John M. Phillips, "A redeployment for the elderly: of buildings, services and people", paper presented to the Canadian Public Health Association conference, Ottawa, June 1980.
- 7 Phillips, "A redeployment".
- 8 Macleod, "Toward healthy-aging communities", p. 15.
- 9 NACA, *1999 and Beyond*.
- 10 NACA, *1999 and Beyond*.
- 11 Transportation Development Centre (Transport Canada), *Making Transportation Accessible, A Canadian Planning Guide*. See also Division of Aging and Seniors, *Communicating with seniors: Advice, techniques and tips* (Ottawa: 1999).
- 12 Association québécoise de gérontologie, *Le gérontophile* 15/2 (spring 1993), special issue devoted to seniors in the city.
- 13 NACA, *1999 and Beyond*.
- 14 NACA, *1999 and Beyond*; Sylvie Bérubé, Renée Blanchet and Marguerite Hogue-Charlebois, "L'hiver en ville pour les aînés", in *Le gérontophile* 15/2; Elaine Gallagher and Victoria Scott, *Taking steps: Modifying pedestrian environments to reduce the risk of missteps and falls* (Victoria: University of Victoria School of Nursing, n.d.).
- 15 See Shawna Steinberg, "Canada's Safest Cities", *Chatelaine* (April 1999).
- 16 CSA International, "Standards for an aging society" (1999); American National Standards Institute, "Meeting the needs of aging populations: Enhancing the quality of life through standards", proceedings of the International Organization for Standardization Workshop, Washington, D.C., 10 May 1999.
- 17 Health Canada, Division of Aging and Seniors, *Communicating with seniors: Advice, techniques and tips* (Ottawa: 1999).
- 18 Gallagher and Scott, *Taking Steps*, p. 62.
- 19 Miriam Stewart et al., "Community resilience: strengths and challenges", *Health and Canadian Society* 4/1 (1996).

Expression is published four times a year by the National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA), Ottawa, Ontario K1A 1B4
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The newsletter is also available on Internet:
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/seniors-aines>

The opinions expressed do not necessarily imply endorsement by NACA.

ISSN: 0822-8213

