



# Age-friendly Communities

*A Preliminary Investigation of the  
Age-Friendliness of Guelph and Wellington*

# Age-friendly Communities

■ It is important that older adults feel safe and comfortable living in their communities. This sense of security will assist them to live active and fulfilling lives as they age. In order for a community to be age-friendly, the unique needs and capacities of older people need to be identified and understood.

There are many physical and social changes that can affect individuals as they age including: vision, hearing, and mobility loss, a decrease in income, and a loss of a sense of purpose in life<sup>i</sup>. As people age it is crucial that their communities continue to be places where their needs are met.

There are many ways to make communities age-friendly including altering outdoor spaces and buildings, providing adequate transportation opportunities, encouraging social participation, communicating information in a suitable way, and providing sufficient health supports and services<sup>ii</sup>.

In October 2008, the United Way Social Planning Department spoke with a group of older adults who live in Guelph and a group who live in North Wellington about the age-friendliness of their communities. Close to 20 older adults and stakeholders shared with us their ideas on what is age-friendly about, what is not age-friendly about, and suggestions to improve the age-friendliness of, where they live. The questions we asked were guided by the World Health Organization's (WHO) *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide*. Our discussion with Rural seniors in North Wellington was further

guided by the Canadian report by the Federal, Provincial, Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors' Report entitled: *Age-friendly Rural and Remote Communities: A Guide*. The WHO's *Age-Friendly Checklist* defined the topic areas we covered with both groups of older adults.

Under 8 topic areas, we have listed Positives in our Communities; Things that need Improvement; and Suggestions for Improvement from older adults in Guelph and Wellington, as well as recommendations outlined in the WHO and Federal, Provincial, Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors' reports. The information provided is meant to be a starting point to develop a more comprehensive picture of the age-friendliness of our local communities.

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## OUTDOOR SPACES

### Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in Guelph identified the following positives in their community:

- The Enabling Garden (story time, scenery, location)
- Good green space in new subdivisions
- Parks that have lots of seats
- Snow removal in some parts of the City

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- Trails for walking
- Pavilions
- Benches
- Access to elevators in many buildings
- The option to walk in arenas in the winter

### Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

There are barriers to getting around, including:

- The city is not walking friendly (yet)
- It can be hard to cycle
- Motorists can be unfriendly to pedestrians and cyclists
- Bylaws are not always enforced (e.g. bikes on sidewalks)
- Driveways in some of older areas cause a steep incline on the sidewalks
- Sidewalks are often uneven/cracked
- Sidewalk snowplows leave the sidewalks slippery in the winter

There are some issues related to local parks, including:

- Maintenance schedules in the parks sometimes conflict with times that people want to use and enjoy parks
- Washrooms in public parks and areas are not open all year round
- There are not enough public washrooms
- Park spaces are sometimes isolated
- More public phones are needed
- Access to parks during paid events can be a challenge

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- Some sidewalks have grass and cracks; they are uneven, slanted, one cannot push wheelchairs
- Stores are not always accessible
- There is a lack of public fountains and washrooms and it can be difficult to access washrooms when out in public

# OUTDOOR SPACES

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

Ensuring the safety of older adults by:

- Increasing the number of payphones and keeping existing ones
- Installing slanted entrances with railing to enter buildings
- Installing security phones in parks (similar to those at the University of Guelph)

Improving access to amenities in public parks and spaces by:

- Opening public washrooms all year round
- Building more accessible public washrooms
- Providing education to local retailers about washroom use/accessibility
- Putting more benches in public areas

Improving walkability of communities by:

- Making Guelph more walking friendly (5 minutes to all essential services)
- Using universal design in planning

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Providing good lighting throughout parks, neighbourhoods and trails
- Ensuring :
  - walkways and pavements are clear and have smooth surfaces
  - Roads have safe crossings for pedestrians
  - Pedestrian Crossing lights allow enough time for older people to cross

In the World Health Organization consultations with older adults in 33 cities across the globe, they found that quality of life, access and safety were the main themes identified under the category of Outdoor Spaces and Buildings. The Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors also specifically highlighted the importance of walkability. Our consultations yielded like results: local older adults highlighted safety concerns, the need for access to amenities and improved walkability. Improvements and reduction in barriers in these areas would increase older adults' ability to be mobile and active in their communities, which are both important aspects of healthy living.

# TRANSPORTATION

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in Guelph identified the following positives in their community:

- Transportation (including friendly bus drivers and good bus schedules)
- Access to parking (including lots of angled parking spots)

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- Free parking on main streets in rural communities
- Ample wheelchair parking
- Aspects of transportation, including:
  - Services offered in Listowel
  - Meals on Wheels
  - Wheelchair accessible taxis/vans (e.g. Twin Taxi in Arthur)
  - Volunteer transportation services
  - Free bus service in Mount Forest
- Phone message systems that can be used to organize or cancel transportation and other services
- Helpful neighbours who shovel snow, take out garbage and blue boxes

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

There are barriers to getting around. In particular they noted:

- Improved access to transportation is needed
- Events in the evening are hard to get to because of available transportation options and/or comfort level driving at night
- There are some challenges when using the bus system:
  - 1<sup>st</sup> seats are usually taken
  - Strollers take up a lot of room
  - Bus signage is too small
- Some people on the road do not read and follow signs
- Out of town specialist appointments are hard to get to; The cost of transportation is high even with a volunteer service
- In town appointments are also hard to get to
- People with special needs may not have access to transportation
- Snowplows do not remove snow at the ends of driveways

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- It is hard to recruit new volunteer drivers and coordinators for transportation – this may lead to less volunteering because of fear of length of commitment.
- Although the work of the Wellington County Transportation Services is greatly appreciated, there seems to be more demand than drivers
- There are not enough parking spaces at some essential services (e.g. Medical Centre)



## TRANSPORTATION

### Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- Larger road signage
- Grooved pavement to alert drivers of stop signs
- City programs to remove snow for seniors
- Changing the snowplows so that snow clearing does not leave snow at the ends of driveways and/or provide service to clear snow at the end of driveways
- More frequent written drivers tests for all drivers to improve road safety
- Transportation service with designated paid drivers
- Small bus service during peak hours for older adults (they specified that capital and operational and Municipal funding would be needed to make this happen)

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Creating parking spots for people with health problems but who do not have a disability sticker
- Increasing frequency of public transportation at night and in the winter
- Making public transportation affordable and available for seniors to travel to health, support and social destinations
- Making public transit accessible for people disabilities and mobility devices and supports by having floors that lower, low steps and wide and high seats
- Making signage more clear and large
- Making priority seating available for older adults
- Locating bus stops close to where older people live; ensuring they are well-lit, have benches and weather shelters
- Designating drop-off and pick-up spots close to buildings for people with disabilities

In line with the World Health Organization report and the *Age Friendly Rural and Remote Communities Guide*, transportation is an issue that impacts many aspects of local older adults' well-being. Not only is it important for older adults to have transportation for essential services and appointments, it also important that they have opportunities to engage in social activities. Snow was a challenge for older adults during the winter months. Research suggests that access to transportation is essential to older adults' quality of life and their sense of freedom and independence to come and go from places at their leisure<sup>iii</sup>. With this in mind, it particularly important to listen to what older adults are saying about barriers to, strengths of and changes needed to transportation systems and services in our area.

# HOUSING AND IN-HOME SUPPORTS

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- There is affordable housing in towns in the County (Including: Arthur, Mount Forest, Harriston, and Palmerston)
- Condominiums and supportive housing are available in some communities

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

- Homes with a lot of stairs and small bathrooms are difficult for older people
- Policies are needed around the designation of seniors housing. (It was noted that some older adults focused buildings will be available soon)
- The policy around “Granny” flats makes it difficult to have one in a house
- There is not enough affordable (not for profit) seniors housing

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- New homes are being built too big and they are too expensive
- There differences in housing options/access across rural communities
- Rent-Geared to Income housing is not designated only for seniors, this leads to some conflicts between residents
- There is a stigma attached to social housing (this is more visible in rural communities)
- Some requirements make it difficult to access support services
- There is not enough homecare available for people after hospital stays and home visits are often delayed

# HOUSING AND IN-HOME SUPPORTS

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- Housing with Registered Nursing and Medical staff available to residents
- Engaging developers and encouraging them to build universally accessible homes
- Housing should be close to amenities (i.e. shopping areas near housing developments)
- Seniors only buildings (i.e. entire buildings designated as 55+) should be made available
- Using a human lens (as opposed to strict policies) when looking at subsidy allocation etc.
- More funding be made available for home renovations to allow people to stay in their homes
- Looking at other community models to guide local planning (*Home at Last* was suggested as a model to investigate)
- Nurses for in home care
- Revitalizing rural communities
- In-home supports should be available and affordable

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Affordable housing for all older people
- Providing a continuum of care
- Providing a variety of housing options, including: housing with varying levels of supports, different size houses and apartments to meet needs, accessible housing for people with disabilities
- Building housing to accommodate the needs of older people (including even flooring, wide doorways and entrances, bathroom and kitchens with needed supports)
- Making home maintenance available
- Providing opportunities for financial assistance with renovations and housing security

The World Health Organization's report makes note of the importance of older adults having access to housing and appropriate supports. Older adults in Guelph and Wellington highlighted the importance of affordable, appropriately designed housing that is close to amenities. Home support services were also noted as important. Improvements in these areas would make it easier for older adults to safely stay in their homes and could reduce the need for early placements in long term care and other supportive facilities.



# SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in Guelph identified the following positives in their community:

- The Evergreen Seniors Centre
- Services that offer subsidized memberships and fee reductions if participants request it and qualify
- Good promotion of activities

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- Affordable space for community use in some areas
- Increased mobility for people who live in communities close to Hwy 9
- The North Wellington Seniors Association, which provides opportunities to meet people from other communities

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

- Some services are not accessible (e.g. theatres)
- Many services are not affordable
- Provincial government user fees are a barrier to taking part in activities (e.g. costs to enter conservation areas)
- Social isolation is an issue
- There is a need for more programs and an increase in the frequency of existing programs

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- Fees for space limit options for social events
- Following amalgamation of municipalities space was lost, leaving limited space for older adults to have meetings
- Municipal buildings and school space is not always accessible and/or available
- Rules/policies/regulations can make it difficult to access space
- Younger seniors may not want to be named "seniors" and may be hesitant to engage in and/or join clubs
- There is a general decrease in group joining

# SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- More options for services (free services or low cost, easier access to services)
- Affordable matinee movies – (for example, Twoonie Tuesdays)

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Locating activities in areas that are convenient for older adults
- Allowances for caregivers and family to be able to join older adults at events
- Scheduling events at times convenient for older adults
- Ensuring line-ups to enter events do not require older adults to stand for a long time
- Making activities (and transportation to and from) affordable
- Ensuring older adults receive news/information about events
- Taking special measures to engage isolated seniors (send personal invitations, make events easy to attend)
- Providing opportunities for intergenerational contact

The World Health Report found that affordability and accessibility were the biggest issues related to social participation. Affordability and accessibility were also themes that emerged when local seniors talked about social participation. Lack of social networks is one of a number of factors that contribute to older adults becoming socially isolated<sup>iv</sup>. This underscores the importance of providing older adults in our communities with affordable access to social activities and events.

# RESPECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- The ease with which they can find support/assistance from neighbours
- Agencies that help with budgeting and accessing services
- Free services at churches

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

- Negative stereotypes about older adults continue to exist
- There is a lack of consultations with older adults when planning takes place

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- Ensuring they are consulted when planning occurs
- The City of Guelph should have an ageing strategy extending through all departments
- More intergenerational programs in high schools and across the community (they suggested this may increase sense of community, respect and responsibility)
- Finding ways to build a sense of community (for example: using knowledge of older adults to educate younger ones, mutual sharing of skills and knowledge)
- Programs for high school students to shovel snow, mow lawns
- More awareness and support from municipal councils for the North Wellington Seniors Council

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Providing supports to prevent elder abuse
- Highlighting positives of aging
- Maintaining and supporting existing outreach and transportation programs
- Ensuring services reflect the needs of seniors and are provided in a respectful and courteous manner
- Making supports available for low-income seniors to access services and events

The World Health Organization report suggests that respect and social inclusion of older adults reflects a number of different personal and community factors. Local older adults suggested respect and social inclusion include consulting them about planning and service provision as well as opportunities to build community (they noted in particular: inter-generational programs and sharing). These are both important starting points to better understand the needs and hear the voices of older adults in our communities.

# CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND EMPLOYMENT

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in Guelph identified the following positives in their community:

- Many volunteer opportunities (They noted the Volunteer Centre is easy to access)
- Some employment opportunities exist (e.g. driving school bus, at golf courses, etc.)

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- Many volunteer options

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

- People are going to have to work longer because of small or no pensions

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- There are very few employment opportunities (not just for seniors, but also for youth)

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- A shift in how volunteers are recruited and who is targeted to fill volunteer positions

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Recruiting older adults of a variety of ages
- Providing a variety of volunteer options
- Providing support for volunteers
- Making a variety of employment, training and re-training options available for seniors
- Ensuring work/volunteer opportunities are accessible, publicized and transportation is available
- Engaging, including and encouraging older adults to participate on council, governance boards and community events
- Ensuring seniors are paid adequate wages

Both the World Health Organization study and the *Age Friendly Rural and Remote Communities Guide* found that older adults are able to find employment and volunteer activities in the places they live. Older adults in Guelph and Wellington said that there are many volunteer opportunities, however employment was not easy to find for people in rural areas and “some” employment opportunities were identified in Guelph. Barriers to civic participation and employment must be reduced to support and encourage older adults to use their skills and knowledge to enhance the well-being of our communities.

# COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in Guelph identified the following positives in their community:

- The availability of information (The City of Guelph was specifically mentioned as an example of good dissemination of information)
- Free internet access at several locations

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- That the Wellington Advertiser is free
- The “Community Page” in the Drayton newspaper
- Community Information that is shared through newspaper columns
- Leisure Guides delivered in rural communities (The section for seniors is especially useful)

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph said:

- There is not enough knowledge of services
- Although information is available it can be hard to find; this can lead to frustration
- System navigation is a challenge
- The use of the internet to share information is a challenge for people who are not computer literate
- They do not like automated telephone systems
- There is a need for more materials in larger print

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- The newspaper is expensive for some
  - The cost of advertising in the newspaper is also high
- There is a decrease in available community bulletins
- Support service information is not centralized therefore people feel as though they have to “hunt down” the information they need



# COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

## Suggestions for Improvement

Older Adults in Guelph and Wellington County recommended:

- Larger print materials
- Assistance with computer and internet
- More assistance to navigate the social service system
- The *Guelph Wellington Seniors Association* continue to advocate on behalf of all older adults
- Putting community bulletins in grocery stores, post offices, banks, library entrances, churches, drug stores
- Letters of appreciation could be sent to stores that have community bulletin boards
- More advertising and education about available services
- Community events listings for older adults should be publicized at least a few times per season (they suggested this could be done through the newspaper)

Other recommendations from the *World Health Organization* and the *Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Ensuring up-to-date written and/or verbal information is available in places seniors frequent and through mediums that are accessible
- Using plain language to share information
- Automated phone systems providing information slowly and clearly and allowing requests to repeat information
- Making a live person available to answer questions and give clarification
- Installing automated machines (for example: bank machines) with large buttons that can be reached by people of varying heights
- Making free public internet available, with assistance for users who need it

In the World Health Organization study participants in developed countries emphasized the importance of receiving up to date information from a variety of sources, but also voiced concern about keeping up with the changing technology. The *Age Friendly Rural and Remote Communities* Guide revealed that people in rural areas used non-technological mediums to gather and share information (including bulletin boards, fliers, word of mouth). There was a similar difference between older adults living in Guelph and Wellington – city dwellers mentioned free internet access as a positive in their community, while people living in rural areas talked about newspapers and bulletin boards as places to access information. Suggestions for local improvements respond to both technological and more traditional means of information sharing. In both cases, local older adults gave practical suggestions that focused on making information more available and accessible.

# COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND HEALTH SERVICES

*This category was investigated in North Wellington only*

## Positives in our Communities

Older Adults in North Wellington identified the following positives in their community:

- The delivery of medication for a small fee (~\$2.00)
- Great supports for people with diabetes

## Things that Need Improvement

Older Adults in North Wellington said:

- They do not like paid parking for vital services (e.g. paid parking at hospitals)
- People living on Canadian Pension Plan can not afford extras (i.e. parking, social fees, etc.)
- The amalgamation of municipalities has negatively impacted access to services, supports, and space in rural communities
- They do not like it when people outside their community make decisions for them
- There is sometimes animosity between communities
- More human responses are needed when determining accessibility and subsidy, etc.

## Suggestions for Improvement

Recommendations from *Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors* include:

- Providing more integrated services for seniors (for example, through cluster-care model)
- Retired professionals could provide volunteer services in rural homes
- Providing services along the continuum of care (including services for people in supportive housing, at-home supports, respite)

The *Age Friendly Rural and Remote Communities* Guide reported that although many older adults were able to find great services in their communities, many expressed concerns about services that were not available in their communities and those that they needed to travel outside of their home areas to access. Older adults in rural Wellington highlighted the importance of more integrated services provided for differing levels of need. Although, they did not specifically mention the need to leave their communities to access services, they did state that accessing services in their communities was not always possible. We know from local older adults' comments on the topic of transportation that travel out of communities can be difficult.

## General Comments

The information outlined above is a starting point to better understand the needs of older adults in our communities. We spoke with a small number of older people in Guelph and Wellington to begin a discussion about the needs of our local aging population; there were many opinions and ideas about what is currently available and working in our communities and also what is needed to make Guelph and Wellington more age-friendly. Further investigation is required to more fully understand our communities' strengths and barriers to becoming places where all older adults can have their needs adequately met.

## General Recommendations

- Anyone who wishes to implement one or more of the suggestions listed above is strongly encouraged to engage in further consultation with local older adults to understand how their needs will be best met.
- An investigation of models in other communities may be a useful starting point for local stakeholders working to make their services more age-friendly. *The Kenneth G. Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program* (MAREP) is developing a toolkit for age-friendly and supportive communities. They may be a resource to guide further discussions in this area<sup>v</sup>.
- A local ageing strategy would help ensure that the needs of local older adults are considered in the planning and implementation of services, supports and infrastructure in our communities.

## Summary

We would like to thank the older adults who took the time to share their experiences, ideas and recommendations with us. The information you shared has helped in the process of developing a clearer picture of how the communities in Guelph and Wellington are meeting the needs of our ageing population. It is hoped that the information in this report will inform conversations and planning decision about how to better serve local older adults.

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<sup>i</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada. (2006). *Communicating with seniors: Changes do*

*come with aging*. Retrieved June 20, 2008, from [http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/communicating/audience\\_e.htm#change](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/communicating/audience_e.htm#change)

<sup>ii</sup> World Health Organization. (2007). *Global Age-friendly Cities: A Guide*.

<sup>iii</sup> Rudman, D.L., Friedland, J.F., Chipman, M., & Sciortino, P. (2006). Holding on and letting go: The perspectives of pre-seniors and seniors on driving self-regulation in later life. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 25(1), 65-76.

<sup>iv</sup> British Columbia Ministry of Health. (2004). *Social Isolation Among Seniors: An Emerging Issue*. Retrieved August 25, 2008, from [http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2004/Social\\_Isolation\\_Among\\_Seniors.pdf](http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2004/Social_Isolation_Among_Seniors.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> University of Waterloo (2008). *A New Toolkit for Age-Friendly and Supportive Communities* in: *Innovations Vol 7(2)*.