PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT

This document has been developed using content from the draft version of “Social Isolation of Seniors, Volume 1: Understanding the Issue and Finding Solutions, F/P/T Toolkit”, to support participants in the upcoming Ontario Ideas Exchange Event on Social Inclusion of Seniors. Participants are encouraged to read through this material prior to the event to provoke thought on how age-friendly community planning can advance innovative solutions to address seniors’ social isolation in the Southern Ontario area.

BACKGROUND

In October 2014 the Federal, Provincial and Territorial (F/P/T) Ministers Responsible for Seniors met to discuss ways to further support the well-being of seniors living in Canada. Out of these discussions, Ministers directed that government staff work on two priority areas: explore ways to **increase caregiver readiness** for current and future Canadian caregivers; and share promising approaches that lead to innovative solutions to **address social isolation among seniors**.

To address social isolation among seniors, a new *Social Inclusion Toolkit* (the ‘Toolkit’) is being developed to assist community organizations across Canada. Prior to finalizing the Toolkit, its methodologies and guidelines are being tested in three provinces across the country in the form of Ideas Exchange Events. Ontario is one of the three test provinces that will be hosting an Ideas Exchange Event, which will take place on Monday, March 7 in Hamilton, ON with the participation of members from the Southern Ontario Age-Friendly Network.

## DEMOGRAPHICS & TRENDS

Seniors are living longer and healthier lives and it is expected that Canadian seniors will comprise 24.2% of the population by 2041, which is a sizeable shift from 16.1% of the population seniors currently make up today. The trend towards an increasing proportion of seniors will also impact Ontario greatly over this time period: the number of seniors aged 65 and over is projected to more than double from about 2.2 million people in 2015 (representing 16.0% of the population) to over 4.5 million by 2041, representing 25.5% of the population. As baby boomers choose to remain in the labour force longer and to age in place with the support of family, friends and their communities, societies must make social and economic adjustments to support this trend.

With seniors rising in proportion and numbers, seniors’ issues will become more prominent and have a greater impact on society as a whole. The need for social services such as health care, public housing, and income support are also likely to rise, bringing with it a chance for a dialogue on the priorities of Canadians and meaningful change to the social safety net. Seniors will increasingly be called on to participate in the labour market as Canadians will look to them more for their knowledge and skill as well as continue their role as tax payers and consumers. Seniors will be asked to volunteer in greater numbers to maintain the many important functions of community organizations.

With the expanded participation of seniors in society, it is more important than ever to ensure seniors remain healthy and engaged in their communities.

Canadian society cannot stay healthy without the participation and contribution of seniors, making social isolation an issue belonging to everyone.

## The Impact of Social Isolation

“Social isolation is commonly defined as a low quantity and quality of contact with others. A situation of social isolation involves few social contacts and few social roles, as well as the absence of mutually rewarding relationships”[[1]](#footnote-1). Social isolation may lead to negative outcomes such as poor health, loneliness or other emotional distress.

Social isolation among seniors is an ongoing issue that can arise as a result of a variety of factors. Many seniors experience physical changes such as illness or disability, along with changes in personal lives such as the loss of a spouse, which can reduce the number of social contacts and limit activities. Social and environmental factors such as poverty or infrastructure barriers such as inadequate transportation may also increase seniors’ chances of becoming socially isolated. Statistics Canada reports estimates of 19%[[2]](#footnote-2) and 24%[[3]](#footnote-3) of those over age 65 feeling isolated from others and wishing to participate in more social activities.

Social isolation can result from large events or an accumulation of small things that together have a domino effect on seniors’ lives. Seniors have extensive life experience in managing the difficult times in life that they can draw on in dealing with the challenges of aging. However, too many changes, especially if they occur close together, can make it more difficult to cope at a time when fewer personal and social resources may be available.

The consequences of social isolation are significant. Emotional distress resulting from loneliness and depression as well as poor physical and mental health is associated with social isolation. These changes can sometimes result in a premature move to institutionalized living.

It is important, however, to note, that not all socially isolated seniors suffer negative consequences from social isolation. For example, some seniors may prefer to be alone and do not experience loneliness. On the other hand, because loneliness is a subjective experience, there are seniors who although socially active may still feel lonely.

## Finding Innovative Solutions

It is evident that social isolation results from a myriad of circumstances and situations that involve the interplay of personal, individual, social and environmental factors, only some of which are within the control of, or can be modified, by individuals and their families. Others, such as poverty, relative deprivation, racism, ageism, discrimination, and high crime environments that “shut out” seniors from gaining access to services, citizenship and other activities, require population and systems-level interventions by communities and governments.

Despite a number of past interventions to encourage and foster seniors’ social participation, seniors’ social isolation is an issue that continues to affect Canadian seniors. New ways of thinking could bring valuable knowledge and insights to finding lasting solutions. Social innovation is showing promises as a way of thinking that could benefit Canadians in preventing and reducing social isolation in a sustainable way via targeted, localized, and measurable coordinated action, also referred to as collective impact.

**Social innovation is characterized by non-traditional multi-and cross-sectoral partnerships** that include the participation of individuals in the planning and implementation of ideas, private and non-profit organizations, academics, public institutions such as libraries, schools, school boards, recreation facilities, and all levels of government to address social isolation at the community level.

The partnerships work to reduce several risk factors of social isolation by purposefully coordinating a set of activities that could be inter-related and could leverage assets, expertise, space, exposure, etc. Opportunities are generated for seniors and local residents to be involved in designing solutions for their own benefit, which in turn benefits families, neighborhoods, communities, local businesses, public services and/or public spaces, and society as a whole. The idea behind social innovation is to continuously explore different ways of working together, which may challenge or improve the existing system.

Social innovation is a way that community organizations, governments and public institutions, academics, seniors, and businesses work together and combine resources to generate new ideas and tools that address social problems, such as social isolation, in new ways.

Many projects and initiatives have pioneered such an approach and their success is attributable to a number of core principles of social innovation:

* Cultivating and committing to coordinated efforts tailored to the needs of the community;
* Welcoming new partners across sectors to create a web of community interventions that support each other, building from strengths, (e.g. aligning existing assets, programs, initiatives, funding, expertise and experience);
* Adapting existing activities, services, and programs to new audiences;
* Leveraging expertise and resources across sectors (business, community, individuals, and governments);
* Adopting an entrepreneurial approach to achieving sustainability and scale;
* Linking solutions to changing attitudes and behaviours and to structural, institutional and systemic change;
* Leveraging new technologies[[4]](#footnote-4).

The age-friendly communities (AFC) movement is a powerful example of social innovation that can be used to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors for social isolation in communities. The intent of AFC is “to encourage active aging by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” [[5]](#footnote-5). The strength of this approach is its’ inclusive and flexible structure which encourages collaboration across sectors, laying the foundation for diverse perspectives and novel solutions to emerge.

The Ontario government continues to implement activities, such as its AFC initiative (Planning Guide, Planning Grant, and Outreach Initiative) <http://www.agefriendlyontario.ca/age-friendly-communities> and Seniors Community Grant program http://www.seniors.gov.on.ca/en/srsorgs/scgp.php, which help to keep seniors in the province socially included and engaged in their local communities.

## OUR CALL TO ACTION

## As members of the Southern Ontario Age-Friendly Network, participants in the Ontario Ideas Exchange Event for Social Inclusion will come equipped with unique local experiences and ideas that will provide valuable insight to the event discussions.

The Ontario Ideas Exchange Event for Social Inclusion will provide an opportunity to use elements of the draft F/P/T Toolkit, and discuss how age-friendly community planning can advance innovative solutions to address seniors’ social isolation in the Southern Ontario area.

We will explore the opportunities presented through the core principles of social innovation and build from locally applied successes and visions for change.

1. Keefe, J., Andrew, M., Fancey, P. & Hall, M. (2006). Final Report: A Profile of Social Isolation in Canada. Submitted to the Chair of the F/P/T Working Group on Social Isolation. Retrieved from: http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2006/keefe\_social\_isolation\_final\_report\_may\_2006.pdf (September 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Statistics Canada 2008-2009 Canadian Community Health Survey, cited in National Seniors Council (2014). Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors 2013-2014. Government of Canada, p 1. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from http://www.seniorscouncil.gc.ca/eng/research\_publications/social\_isolation/page00.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gilmour, Heather (2012). Statistics Canada Health Reports October 2012. Retrieved September 14, 2015 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2012004/article/11720-eng.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Taking Care Discussion Paper – Advisory Council on Social Entrepreneurship. Retrieved July 15, 2015 from <http://tamarackcci.ca/files/taking-carefinaldiscussion-paper1_-bc_social_innovation.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. World Health Organization (2007). *Global age-friendly cities: a guide*. WKO Retrieved June 12, 2015 http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global\_age\_friendly\_cities\_Guide\_English.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)