REDUCING SENIORS' SOCIAL ISOLATION: LINKING COMMUNITY IN THE HSIIP PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH INITIATIVE

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SENIORS AND COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

WHY IS SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG SENIORS A PRIORITY ISSUE?

- Social isolation refers to the absence of meaningful social or family contacts, inadequate social participation, and lack of integration and involvement in the community[1].
- Risk of isolation is higher among disadvantaged seniors and/or seniors with low income[2,3,4].
- Social isolation contributes to serious physical and mental health concerns, and premature death[1,4].
- Seniors living in isolation are more likely to be admitted to hospital than non-isolated seniors[5].
- Service providers often struggle to identify and connect with isolated seniors, leaving a gap in knowledge about the issues of highest priority to those at risk.
- Collecting and sharing insights from seniors and community stakeholders can help develop guidance and recommendations for policy and practice.

AIMS OF THE PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT

- To identify high priority issues for socially isolated seniors and community stakeholders.
- To work alongside six organizations of the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan (HSIIP) Connectors program to educate community workers about social isolation and to share knowledge about how to identify, connect and anchor isolated seniors in Hamilton, Ontario.
- To co-create innovative solutions and policy recommendations to reduce social isolation across Greater Hamilton.

WHO DID WE SPEAK WITH?

28 seniors (age 55+) living in Hamilton (interviews and focus groups)

- All were deemed socially isolated, had experienced isolation or were identified as 'at-risk' of social isolation.
- Some participants had received support from an HSIIP Connector, others had not.

37 community stakeholders working in Hamilton (interviews and focus groups)

- Stakeholders represented 28 community-based and government organizations providing programs and services for seniors, and included representatives from the six HSIIP partner organizations in the greater Hamilton area.

Priorities voiced by seniors and community stakeholders in Hamilton* informed five clear recommendations for policy decisions and actions aiming to reduce social isolation among older people.

1. **Provide sustainable funding for a Connector Program and community programs that address barriers to social engagement**

    - There is urgent need for community support roles like the HSIIP Connectors, who:
        - Break down barriers that cause and complicate social isolation.
        - Provide information and links to services to the community and socially isolated seniors.
        - Instill confidence,motivation and opportunity for seniors to engage outside of the home.
        - Invest the time to build trust and rapport with clients.
        - Fill a gap in the current social support service model.
        - Help prevent unnecessary emergency room visits and hospital admissions.
    - Short-term funding threatens the sustainability of vital community-based supports and services.
    - The most vulnerable seniors are those with multiple, intersecting, complex health and social needs. These seniors are at greatest risk of falling through the cracks without ongoing funding for designated care and case management.

    ACTION: Allocate sustained, long-term funding for case management and community / social support providers for seniors at risk of isolation.

    ACTION: Invest in community organizations and partnered programs already supporting socially isolated seniors (eg. HSIIP Connectors).

2. **Support transportation initiatives for seniors in urban and rural areas**

    - Accessible and affordable transportation is integral for seniors to maintain independence and to facilitate access to programs and services.
    - Lack of accessible transportation is a barrier to social engagement, particularly for low income seniors or those living in under-serviced areas (eg. rural communities).

    ACTION: Provide a range of transportation options that include access to regularly scheduled community bus programs, develop ride sharing programs, create options for fare reductions or free access to taxi when needed.

    ACTION: Hold public consultations with seniors to identify specific priorities related to transportation.

3. **Invest in person-centred, supported housing options and services along the continuum of care**

   - Proximity to and affordability of social and practical supports make it easier for seniors to stay in their homes and remain socially engaged as their health and mobility change.
   - Domestic and personal care (housekeeping, bathing), food access, and medication management are critical priorities. The right support can help lift seniors out of isolation and avoid health and safety issues that worsen their situation.

   ACTION: Prioritize funding for safe, affordable, supported and affordable housing options along the continuum of care (independent living, housing with supports, 24hr care).

   ACTION: Guarantee access to affordable amenities, services, and practical supports for essential life needs (housekeeping, grocery shopping, personal care).

   ACTION: Provide practical and financial support to develop and sustain a culture of social engagement and participation (residents' associations; social programs/meeting spaces; social support workers).

4. **Support initiatives/service delivery models that build community awareness and capacity**

   - One of the greatest challenges of reducing isolation is reaching those in need.
   - The most underserved seniors live "behind closed doors," are not engaged through existing channels nor supported until a health issue or crisis occurs

   ACTION: Support and invest in in proactive, preventative models of outreach and care, including programs that bridge gaps between hospital and community/home-based care.

   ACTION: Centralize care navigation (a single 'hotline', platform, and/or organizing group) to connect contributing organizations and services, clarify roles, and facilitate outreach, referrals and service delivery to isolated seniors.

   ACTION: Promote public education initiatives for community members (eg. PSWs, emergency workers, superintendents, neighbours) to recognize and make referrals to appropriate providers.

5. Improve access to programs, services and public spaces

- Mobility and issues of access are key to remaining independent and socially connected.
- Confidence, physical and practical impediments, and safety concerns can limit seniors use of public transit and usage of community spaces and buildings.
- Language and cultural barriers exacerbate social isolation among newcomer and immigrant seniors.

ACTION: Advocate for and provide support for mobile and delivery services for meals, groceries, prescriptions and other basic needs.

ACTION: Prioritize translation technology and cultural diversity of seniors' support staff to address language and cultural barriers.

ACTION: City of Hamilton policy makers and staff to continue to pursue objectives outlined in: "Getting around Greater Hamilton; Mobility, Outdoor Spaces and Public Buildings goal of Hamilton's Plan for an Age Friendly City".

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Learn more about the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan:

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