

Senior's social isolation is a complex and extensive social problem. According to Statistics Canada (2017), an estimated 16% of people, aged 65 plus, experience isolation, which would represent approximately 12,000 isolated seniors in Hamilton. The impact of social isolation is considered a complex social problem that negatively impacts on an individual's health and wellbeing, and macro level systems, namely through high costs to the health and social service systems.

Complex problems, such as social isolation, are considered to require innovative solutions. Kania and Kramer (2011) argue that the only way society will be able to achieve large-scale progress with these types of complex problems is to adopt a collective impact approach. A collective impact approach brings people and organizations together to achieve social change by developing and working toward a common agenda that fundamentally changes population level outcomes at the community level (Innoweave, ND).

In 2014, the National Seniors Council produced a report drawing attention to the importance of social isolation among seniors in Canada and encouraged the federal government to play a role in addressing this issue. In 2015, the Government of Canada issued a call for proposals through the New Horizons for Seniors Program. Communities across Canada were asked to submit community impact project proposals designed to reduce social isolation among seniors.

HAMILTON SENIORS ISOLATION IMPACT PLAN (HSIIP)

Hamilton was one of nine Canadian communities funded for a three-year collective impact project. In 2016, the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan (HSIIP) was launched. This initiative, supported by the New Horizons for Seniors and ESDC, brought seven organizations together in order to run complementary projects to reduce social isolation among seniors and to build community capacity.

The seven partners identified **six** objectives for the HSIIP project:

- 1) build a collaborative;
- 2) identify isolated seniors;
- 3) connect isolated seniors;
- 4) improve and coordinate supports;
- 5) understand isolation and facilitate response; and
- 6) evaluate and scale what works.



They also share four population goals including to ensure that 20% of isolated seniors have improved access to help and support; 10% participate more regularly in activities; 20% feel more connected to people; and 10% feel more valued by people.

WHAT DOES THE HSIIP DO?

While there are many barriers that prevent seniors from participating and staying connected, one key issue identified by HSIIP was the challenges seniors can face in navigating a complex system in order to connect with services and activities. Many seniors often do not know what is available to them, or how to access it. Since May 2016, however, with support from the Government of Ontario's New Horizons for Seniors Program, HSIIP has achieved significant individual and population level improvements through the work of the Community, Hospital and Peer Connector projects, which use an adaptive, collaborative, person-centered approach.

The HSIIP Connectors work with isolated seniors to develop trust, identify needs, provide support, encourage participation, and anchor the seniors into supports. By the end of March 2018, the Collaborative provided Connector services to 1014 seniors, including connections to services and activities that include adult day programs, friendly visiting, government services, health services, home care, housing programs, meal programs, recreational activities, and transportation services.

For one senior, who lived alone on a low-income and was facing eviction, the support provided by the Hospital Connector upon hospital discharge was crucial. The Hospital Connector assisted the senior to apply for Guaranteed Income Supplement, advocated on her behalf with the landlord to pay the arrears, and linked her with essential services, including transportation. A hospital social worker explained that the HSIIP Connector role is a unique and vital one, "that continuity of care and warm handover, it makes such a difference for people's outcomes and follow through... If I did not have the Connector there, I would be making referrals, they would leave, and I would never really know if they had received adequate support" (HSIIP, 2018).

Thanks to the New Horizon's funding the HSIIP Collaborative believes it will come close to reaching 20% of isolated seniors in Hamilton by the end of year three. Equally important is that the HSIIP partners now have a better understanding of isolation and what it takes to identify and connect isolated seniors. One of the significant benefits of the government funding Pan-Canadian projects focused on reducing social isolation, is that the results, insights and best practices can be shared across settings and allow other communities across Canada to replicate interventions that have worked well in addressing seniors' isolation in the Greater Hamilton area.

Learn more about the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan:

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