

C0091



Piloting a Community Connectors Program to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older adults in New Brunswick

Summary

- Social isolation affects over 30% of Canadian older adults and is associated with a range of negative mental and physical health outcomes. Being socially isolated also makes it harder for older adults to find out about the health and support services available in their community.
- In 2020, a survey in New Brunswick found that people in Fredericton experienced the highest levels of loneliness and social isolation compared to other areas in the province.
- To decrease the impact of social isolation among older adults in Fredericton, Saint Thomas University initiated a pilot program called Community Connectors (CCs).
- Volunteers from Meals on Wheels were trained to provide information about community resources and identify older adults who could benefit from health and support services available through 211. CCs also distributed informational pamphlets to older adults who were on their routes.
- The main goal of this project was to identify the key elements of a successful community connector program. The effectiveness of the program was evaluated by gathering perspectives about the program from the CCs and older adults who engaged with the program.
- 14 volunteers (13 females and 1 male) and 9 older adults (5 females and 4 males) participated in the evaluation of the project.

HSPP Focus Area
Project Start & End Date
Organization/Agency
Location
Principal Investigator(s)

Improving social built environments to foster healthy aging
 January 2019 – March 2021
 St. Thomas University and University of New Brunswick
 Fredericton
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Indicator	Impact / Outcome / Result	Quote
Knowledge of community resources	Volunteers: CCs said they now know more about community resources, especially about using a central information access hub such as 211. This increased knowledge gave them confidence to recommend 211 services to seniors.	<i>"...Before I knew about 211 but I didn't know about 211. I mean, I think I heard it in passing, but I didn't really know what it was. So, it doesn't mean anything, right?"</i>
	Seniors: Out of 9 people interviewed, only 2 said they called 211 to find out about community supports. The others didn't call because they felt they were already getting enough support but were happy to have this information for future use.	<i>"That's what I called, I called 211 for a drive to go for an appointment and I called another time for entertainment...I joined into the Stepping Stone [senior center]"</i>
Sense of connection and community belonging	Seniors: The pilot study wasn't long enough to show a decrease in loneliness among older adults. However, interviews with seniors showed that the seniors remembered the information they received and could explain what 211 would offer them in the future if needed.	<i>"I got 2 cards, one about 211 and all the different organizations that you can get help with. I imagine it would be very helpful for different people as long as you find out about it. Like I say, I would have never known about it had she (CC) not mentioned it and given me the 2 cards."</i>

Indicator	Impact / Outcome / Result	Quote
Sense of connection and community belonging	Volunteers: Many CCs reported creating new connections and being able to converse with not only those on their routes, but different individuals in many contexts.	"It gave me a beautiful opportunity to really meet my clients. So, I would think that the program was more beneficial to me and my clients than the actual information that we were trying to deliver...[prior to the pilot] how many of my clients because of COVID and everything, was I just leaving meals at a door? And who were they?...Now they became friends almost"

Methods and Comparison

14 CCs were interviewed about their experiences in the program and its impact on seniors. 9 older adults who engaged with Meals on Wheels were also interviewed. The interviews were analyzed to identify main themes.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

The study shows that the Community Connectors program helped volunteers and older adults become aware of community support and services. By being aware of these resources, older adults will be empowered to make informed decisions and take charge of their health and well-being.

Recommendations

To support the impact and sustainability of the program, the following areas were identified for improvements:

- Train other Meals on Wheels volunteers to become CCs and revise training materials to include materials that CCs can use during interactions with seniors.
- Create a central hub for CCs to access additional training resources and up to date information about local community events.
- Increase efforts to overcome the structural barriers that may hinder seniors from seeking help or accessing available resources.

Next Steps

Funding has been secured to pursue further studies aimed at understanding the underlying elements that are essential in creating and maintaining an effective and responsive community connector program.

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