

OLDER AND WISER: North Shore organizations stepping up to help seniors during COVID-19

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Don Do, John McCann and Zoltan Csapkay of Silver Harbour Seniors Centre's Go Bus Food Delivery program, one of many programs on the North Shore that have been supporting seniors during the COVID-19 crisis. photo Margaret Coates

I hope everyone is keeping well and safe over these last few weeks.

I also hope everyone has been vigilant about physical distancing, staying at home as much as possible, and of course, practising the hygiene suggestions for keeping COVID-19 at bay. When I look around my community – I do get out for a self-distanced walk everyday and a weekly shopping trip – I believe that

seniors are adhering to the three mainstays in this difficult time and hopefully this will keep older people safe.

But what is the community doing to assist seniors?

In my last article I talked about what you could do while staying at home and maintaining physical distance when out for a walk. As we know, most seniors centres and organizations that provide services have closed their doors and suspended group activities – but not their hearts or their more creative programming ideas. Their main preoccupation and motivation I believe is keeping seniors socially connected through this crisis.

People who work with seniors have told me that they are especially concerned about isolated frail seniors who can't get to the shops, can't stay socially connected to their friends and family members, and many who are feeling anxious about this new reality.

As Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, notes in an article on helping seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic that "the protective measures of physical distancing and isolation of seniors – who are already at heightened risk of loneliness and feelings of depression – can take a toll on their mental health."

For many mentally able seniors, the suspension of daily routines which include activities geared to older people could bring challenges. Dr. Tam continued, "Staying connected has never been more important," encouraging Canadians to keep in touch with loved ones through phone or video calls.

It seems like the community is stepping up to do their bit to assist seniors. Organizations and groups are assisting where they can over the phone, virtually over the internet, emailing or through innovative programming.

At a telephone meeting organized by the three municipalities to talk about the impact of COVID-19 on their communities, I heard that groups are engaged in a variety of activities.

Most of the organizations are providing a phone check in service, seniors help lines, telephone outreach services and social prescribing services.

They hope to provide information, ascertain needs of seniors and then try and match them with services, as well as provide emotional support.

Some are providing meal programs: West Vancouver Seniors' Activity Centre (604-925-7280) is providing a takeout and delivery service to replace their usual dine in cafeteria service; Silver Harbour (604-980-2474) is starting a drop-off meal program using their Go Bus and food prepared in their kitchen; and Parkgate Community Services (604-983-6350) is providing special lunches for Easter.

These meals are in addition to the regular meals provided by the North Shore Meals on Wheels program (604-922-3414). North Shore Neighbourhood House (604-987-8138) is providing extra food through the Food Bank which is held weekly at the centre. Getting the food to seniors provides them with an added contact in their day, albeit from a safe distance.

Some older people in seniors-only buildings are receiving regular check-ins from volunteers and staff. I heard that, in one seniors building, program co-ordinators are leading seniors in fitness classes from the parking lot while seniors exercise on their balconies. In another building, seniors are taking their chair outside their door for chair exercises so long as they are a good distance apart.

The Better at Homes program, run by North Shore Community Resources Society (604-985-7138), is switching up its programming to include grocery delivery, check-ins, prescription pick up, laundry and driving for critical appointments. The Care Giver Support program also run by NSCR is running groups online.

Organizations are sending out care packages, organizing and setting up tablets for seniors to access the internet, quarantining and then sending out puzzles and other games, providing virtual dementia services, free counselling, lunch and learn programs and so on. Capilano Community Services Society (604-988-7115) is organizing Gift Packs for Easter and is keeping the Red Cross lending program open two days a week.

Many organizations such as Family Services of the North Shore (604-988-5281), Hollyburn Family Services Society (604-968-7111), and most of those mentioned above are trying to keep their main programs live through their phone lines and responding to email. As Erin Smith from Parkgate Community Centre says, 'We're trying everything to see what sticks.'

This is an unprecedented time for the community, and it seems that organizations are stepping up brilliantly to support seniors.

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