

SENIORS WORKING GROUP – COMMUNITY REPORT

HISTORY OF THE GROUP

At the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, several groups were formed on the North Shore to respond to the pandemic. One of these was the *Seniors Working Group* facilitated first by the District of North Vancouver Community Planner and then later by Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. LSPS took over the group in August 2020 and with funds from the West Vancouver Foundation, has been facilitating the group meetings almost every two weeks for 1 ½ years, and now monthly, with plans to carry on into 2022.

Funding for the Seniors Working Group is provided by the West Vancouver Foundation



PURPOSE OF THE GROUP

The original purpose of the Seniors Working Group was to come together around the issues arising for seniors' organizations and their clients and participants because of the negative impacts of Covid-19. Organizations in the group found the meetings invaluable for sharing resources, collaborating on delivery of programs, networking on different approaches to reopening and discussing how to deal with new guidelines as they were rolled out. As one member put it, "The Senior's Working Group has been a lifeline for me over the course of the pandemic. I am truly not sure how I would have coped without this group. The collaboration, referrals, helping one another, making collective decisions, and brainstorming has just made me feel that we are truly 'in this together'. I look forward to the meetings and really appreciate every single person involved in this group."

In a virtual setting, much of the discussion since March 2020 and up to July 2021 involved:

- The redesigning and pivoting of programs and services to meet some of the needs of seniors in the community
- Brainstorming new ideas, sharing resources, and looking at the toll that the pandemic was taking on staff and community.

Since July 2021, as some of restrictions of COVID-19 were lifted the discussion involved:

- Strategic reopening and repurposing of centres
- Rejigging of a variety of programs and services
- Dealing with a constantly changing landscape as restrictions are lifted then put back in place, as for instance, allowing fitness programs then restricting them
- The rollout of the vaccination process.

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More recently discussion involved:

- Interpreting Public Health Orders and applying it to protocols and programs
- Working across agencies to support and reach isolated seniors
- Sharing problems and supporting one another in finding solutions
- Looking at food security issues and connecting with the community to deliver food
- Problem solving how the rollout of the vaccination process is working for seniors
- Sharing issues around disaster preparedness as the community dealt with the heat dome, smoke from fires and, more recently, harsh weather conditions such as rain and flooding.

RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

In the response to the pandemic, there were many innovative programs and services offered by the Seniors Working Group members. Below is an overview of many of the activities' the groups have undertaken to:

- Initially respond to COVID-19
- Start the process of reopening and repurposing
- Deal with the waning (hopefully) effects of the pandemic and what that means to the community in terms programs and services.

Outreach

Telephone outreach:

In lieu of face to face meetings with many seniors who may still feel uncomfortable returning to centres or may not have a vaccination passport required by centres, many of the organizations continue to provide a phone check in service and seniors help lines. These provide information, raise awareness of services, ascertain needs of seniors, and then try and match them with services. Some calls are meant to provide emotional support and counselling.

Gift bags, Care Packages and Goodie bags:

Many of the organizations continue to send regular bags of goods to isolated seniors, especially around various significant dates such as Valentines, Canada Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. During the Christmas holiday season many centres sent out lovingly wrapped gift bags with cheerful and useful contents such as gift cards, coffee pouches, soup mixes, calendars, newsletters, and toiletries. Much of the content has been donated by local business and grant programs (West Vancouver Foundation Community Fund).

Newsletters and media coverage:

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Some organizations continue to offer newsletters, sending them out by snail mail or email to their members. These offer seniors many ideas about how to cope with the three phases of the pandemic, lock down, semi lock and reopening. The newsletters informed seniors on where to get assistance, what is open or closed and perhaps a joke or two, a personal story and so on. These groups have more than doubled their usual distribution to meet the needs of isolated seniors. Lately, organizations have been advertising how to get a vaccination passport and have listed instructions on how to load a passport on their phone.

A regular column (biweekly) is written by one of our organizations and is published by the North Shore News on-line and in the paper format and as well is sent out by the organization to a wide group of people in the community. These columns are meant to keep seniors informed about a variety of topics including, keeping yourself safe, getting exercise, eating well, providing lists of services to support them through the pandemic and more. A column talked about the Seniors Working Group and its achievements. More recent columns have looked at the vaccination rollout, transportation issues in getting to a site for a jab, and most importantly the importance of getting the vaccine.

Virtual Programs and Services

Like many organizations around the province, the Seniors Working Group members have been offering virtual programs. Following are a taste of what was and is still being offered:

- Two organizations are presenting zoom programs for their clients with dementia issues
- One North Shore group had offered Zoom concert sessions
- Another is offering chair fitness classes on You tube
- Many of the organizations were and are offering on-line book clubs, cooking classes, painting classes, multicultural discussions and exercise groups, discussion and writing groups, stroke recovery sessions, holiday craft workshops, elder college classes, on-line grief support sessions, on-line support for caregivers, bingo, tai chi, chair yoga and more.

However, because many seniors have had trouble accessing or using technology, organizations have been implementing programs to assist seniors to participate in this type of programming.

- The libraries through their seniors programming run programs for seniors using loaned iPads . They also provide an ongoing support program on other uses of technology.
- One of the organizations partnered with a local library to provide in-person COVID-safe training on how to Zoom, in a large room at their Centre – a volunteer was following up with weekly phone or in-person mini-sessions for those wanting additional support for using Zoom.
- A training program for small groups to learn about technology and how to use it is starting soon.

Food Services

Meal drop off and pick-up programs:

Several groups had to redesign their onsite food services to respond to COVID-19.

- These groups have been dropping off meals to various seniors at their private homes and at various buildings with a high concentration of seniors. The food programs are also designed to provide an outreach service to seniors, so tucked inside a food delivery package might be a kindness card or a list of services they can access in the community.
- Some groups are offering a low-cost pick-up meal program as well, utilizing volunteers and staff to make it a smooth process. These meals are selling like hot cakes so to speak.
- The Food Bank program sponsored by a North Shore organization has been successful in meeting an ever-increasing number of seniors with their drop-in (pick up on site) and drop off programs. Over this past year, numbers of participants have increased from 180 in March to approximately 780 in November. Seniors are also given information about the vaccination process and rollout.
- Through the *Feed the Need* project, which raised \$402,000, West Vancouver vulnerable seniors will be provided free meals for 2021.
- A recent evaluation showed that seniors are appreciating the taste, nutritional value, and low cost provided by purchasing meal bags. Many seniors bought the meal bags to compensate for health conditions that make accessing and preparing food difficult.



Silver Harbour driver John McCann and assistant cook Don Do load dinners for delivery to seniors in need.

Photo Margaret Coates

Transportation

Transportation services provided by organizations have been repurposed – groups are not using their regular and mini- buses to provide trips, travel or large group pick ups and drop offs. This is largely due to COVID - 19 restrictions around distancing and masking. The result is that buses can only accommodate a few seniors and volunteers.

- Buses are being used for a limited group of seniors to go shopping and to go to important appointments
- Buses have been used to take seniors to vaccine appointments
- Private cars are also being used to transport people to vaccine appointments although this strategy presented several challenges
- A new program “Cycling without Age” involving Volunteers will take senior for a ride around their city in a Tri-Shaw Cycle. The goal will be to have 3 of these cycles up and operating by mid- summer.



Capilano Community Services Society provides rides on their bus.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

The Seniors Working Group by its nature has many partners, including the ones listed below.

The 22 group members include participants representing seniors from Parkgate Community Centre, Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre, Capilano Community Services, West Vancouver Seniors' Activity Centre, VCH members from across the North Shore, Family Services of the North Shore, North Shore Community Resources, the Better at Homes Program, North Vancouver Recreation and Culture, Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society, North Shore Neighbourhood House, City and District of North Vancouver and West Vancouver Social Planning, City of North Vancouver Library, North Shore Stroke Recovery Society and North Shore Keep Well Society.

Groups who joined later represented seniors with a disability, ethnocultural seniors, low-income seniors, and Indigenous seniors. These groups included Hollyburn Family Services, North Shore Multicultural Society, North Shore Disability Committee, and Squamish Nation Elders Group. We also invited North Shore Emergency Management to join our committee as they have an interest in working with us around Disaster and Emergency Preparedness and its effects on seniors.

- Several groups have formed partnerships to provide services, especially in Food Programs.
- The Seniors Working Group has a partnership with the municipalities as they send community planners to our meetings which gives us a link to how local governments are managing COVID-19 for their citizens
- Two organizations provided a tax clinic for low-income seniors. A few organizations have built relationships with restaurants to provide meals for drop-off.
- Many organizations are sharing their resources as requested and needed. So, for instance iPads have been shared between two organizations to provide online training.
- Some organizations have given groups their unused items to assist a senior (telephones not being used shared out). Many have shared PPE if they have an abundance but also have collaborated on where to find PPE.
- The Christmas Bureau (which is a part of Family Services of the North Shore) delivered 1200 hampers with seniors being a large portion of the total number.

- The City of North Vancouver Library through their Seniors Gathering Zoom group offered a Christmas program with jokes, games, and stories – very popular.
- One organization has worked with multiple service clubs, youth organizations, and other informal groups to receive a wide variety of holiday cards and gifts (decorations, gift baskets, items for the home) that have then been delivered to seniors along with their regular programming and deliveries.
- Some organizations offering free mental health services. One is providing up to 6 free counselling sessions to seniors in the community and a Grief Support online group will be offered in January.
- A program funded by New Horizons for Seniors has been repurposed to allow a different delivery system in welcoming ethnocultural seniors to the community with information and resource gift bags.

REOPENING, RECOVERY, AND REBUILDING - PROGRAMMING AND SERVICES

Groups have had to balance the need to provide short-term supports to respond to COVID-19 with resuming normal services. They have had to formulate and adapt safety protocols for staff and participants; all of this not without incredible challenges. Staff and volunteers have been stepping up to the plate to facilitate programs while they themselves are experiencing the pandemic and its impacts.

- Reopening has been a challenge, as organizations cannot offer the wide array of programs available before COVID-19. However, organizations who provide on site programs have been realigning program space so that participants can easily self distance.
- Most organizations require participants to have a vaccination passport which means those seniors who are not vaccinated will not be able to attend programs. With that in mind, those seniors are being followed up with an offering of virtual programs and phone calls and email.
- Following provincial guidelines, they have provided programs in spaces limited to a fixed number of participants
- During the warmer months, organizations offered programs outside under tents, in parking lots or on terraces
- One great innovative idea was the offer of a bridge program, checkers, and computer training using an X-shaped plexiglass divider.



Volunteers check Vaccine Passports at a seniors centre

Photo: Annwen Loverin

NEXT STEPS

The Seniors Working Group will continue to meet to discuss and collaborate around reopening, rebuilding, and repurposing their activities. They will continue to make adjustments over the next year because of the variants of COVID-19 and the evolving vaccine process, including obtaining booster shots for seniors, staff, and volunteers. SWG will look at a complexity of issues for how member organizations will begin to integrate and transition their participants and volunteers to many more on-site programs and services. At the beginning of the pandemic, organizations went to zero on-site programs. Now most are open but running at approximately half the programs than they ran before the pandemic.



A seniors' committee meeting with physical distancing and some members attending using Zoom.

The groups may have to deal with some participants attending on-site programming who may be vaccinated while others are not. However, many organizations are choosing to allow only those participants who have been double vaccinated to attend their sites. This has meant working on innovative ways to keep participants engaged who cannot or will not get vaccinated. At one organization, some of those seniors do volunteer work at home making crafts for sale at bazaars. The unvaccinated participants are also phoned and/or emailed on a regular basis.

In a survey of SWG in 2021 summer, members of the group were asked if they wished to continue to meet, and if the group should expand their agenda. Ninety percent of the respondents said yes to both questions. As emergency preparedness became an issue over the summer with the heat dome, smoke and more recently extreme weather causing torrential rain and flooding, this was deemed a crucial item for the group's agenda.

As was ascertained last year, organizations will need to look at the return of participants who may have had a sharp decline in physical or emotional health over the last 10 months. This could mean collaborating on setting up different programs with a mental health component.

SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Facing an overwhelming issue such as the impacts of Covid-19, the activities of the Seniors Working Group confirmed that the community has a robust appetite for collaboration and cooperation. We learned that the group was successful in bringing people together to strategize, brainstorm, problem solve and share resources in the interests of seniors, one of the most vulnerable populations dealing with the pandemic. We learned that members were able to successfully pivot and rebuild their programs and services with the ongoing support of the group.



Photo by Wallis Dixon