

OLDER AND WISER: Supporting our seniors is challenging right now. It's also crucial.

Strategies meant to keep seniors safe have also caused serious issues such as loneliness and isolation

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Silver Harbour driver John McCann and assistant cook Don Do load 100 turkey dinners for delivery to seniors in need. photo Margaret Coates

The seniors community has been coping with the COVID-19 pandemic for nine months now. Back in March many of us felt optimistic that we would be back to pre-COVID times by now – at least I did. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Many seniors have been dealing with reduced social interactions and have encountered difficulties in pursuing their normal wellness strategies. Required distancing measures, closed or minimally open organizations like seniors and recreation centres preclude attendance.

Daily activities such as shopping, meeting with friends, and eating inside at restaurants are curtailed.

Paradoxically, these strategies meant to keep seniors safe have also caused serious issues for many including increased anxiety, loneliness, isolation and decreased physical and mental activity.

However, the organizations on the North Shore who work with seniors in providing the pre-COVID-19 programs and services have stepped up to do what they can to help seniors through this new and trying time.

I have had the good fortune to work with a group of organizations (called the Seniors Working Group) on the North Shore who meet regularly over Zoom to talk about their redesigned programs and services, brainstorm new ideas and commiserate about the toll the pandemic is taking on themselves as staff and on the seniors they serve.

Many in the group find the meetings invaluable as a way to share ideas and resources, collaborate on delivery of programs and discuss how to deal with Dr. Bonny Henry's new guidelines such as the shutting down of fitness programs.

There are many innovative programs and services being offered by these intrepid organizations.

A variety of groups are offering food programs which are making sure seniors who need it are well fed.

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.

The Food Bank program sponsored by one of the North Shore organizations has been successful in meeting an ever-increasing number of people with their drop-in and drop off programs.

Like many organizations around the province, the North Shore groups have been offering programs by implementing an approach called Seniors Centre Without Walls.

A United Way Healthy Aging report suggests that this approach involves "older adults participating in a variety of programs designed to promote recreational activities, health and wellness, and social connections through group conference calls or other virtual methods."

For example, one North Shore group is offering Zoom concert sessions, while another is offering chair fitness classes on YouTube. There are online book clubs, discussion and writing groups, stroke recovery sessions, holiday craft workshops, elder college classes, online grief support sessions, bingo, tai chi and more.

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 run programs for seniors using loaned iPads and also an ongoing support program on other uses of technology.

In lieu of face-to-face meetings with seniors many of the organizations are providing 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, and provide emotional support.

Right now, as the holiday season approaches many centres are sending 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. Some organizations instead of holding big festive dinners for the holiday season at their centres are dropping off turkey dinners with all the trimmings or a festive lunch to seniors.

To access many of the redesigned programs and services mentioned above, get out your well thumbed (by now) 2020 Seniors Guide published by North Shore Community Resources Society and the North Shore News.

While we are all experiencing COVID-19 fatigue, let's stay healthy and safe over the holiday season.

Try to stay away from too many helpings of those special cookies or yummy stuffing and let's all enjoy this unusual holiday season.

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