



Older Adults Connecting & Belonging Initiative

Together Forward

Event Summary



Community Foundation
for Kingston & Area

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Together Forward

On June 25, 2024, the Older Adults Connecting and Belonging (OACB) initiative held *Together Forward: Improving Connection & Belonging for Older Adults in KFL&A*, a gathering to explore the pressing issue of loneliness and social isolation among older adults in the Kingston, Frontenac, Lennox & Addington (KFL&A) region. Over 70 participants attended, including community members, front-line service providers, and municipal leaders, all bringing their unique knowledge to the issues at hand.

Throughout the day, participants engaged in eight breakout discussions. In the morning, they examined the issues and challenges of connecting and belonging for older adults in the city. In the afternoon, the focus shifted to exploring opportunities, solutions, and potential innovations to the issues identified. Attendees networked over lunch, forming valuable connections with those in other sectors, and participated in a community asset mapping exercise. These activities aimed to identify and leverage existing community resources, promote cross-sector collaboration, and shape a strategic plan for systems-wide change.

The OACB initiative aims to create sustainable strategies to combat social isolation for older adults and has gained important momentum from this gathering. Now is the time to build on this momentum and work collectively towards implementing solutions to improve connection and belonging for older adults in our community.



Findings Overview



The social environment includes the relationships, networks, and support systems that influence the quality of life and sense of community belonging for individuals.

Social Environment

The discussion sessions on the social environment highlighted significant issues of loneliness and social isolation among older adults, exacerbated by mobility limitations and dependence on care providers. Difficulty accessing information and a lack of centralized services were cited as major barriers preventing older adults connecting, along with inadequate volunteer support, and the stigma associated with aging. Solutions focused on creating centralized hubs for support, encouraging volunteerism, and raising community awareness about the importance of social inclusion.



Personal health and wellbeing relates to the overall physical, mental, and emotional health status of an individual, shaped by lifestyle, medical care, and personal circumstances.

Personal Health and Wellbeing

Participants in the health and wellbeing discussions identified mobility and transportation barriers as critical issues affecting personal health and wellbeing, particularly in rural areas. The lack of sustainable funding for programming for older adults, duplication and fragmentation of services, and the difficulty of learning about available services, were cited as key challenges to improving connection and belonging. It was noted that these barriers are particularly experienced by vulnerable groups like low-income individuals and those facing language or cultural barriers. Proposed solutions included flexible funding models, an increase in intergenerational program offerings, and improved access to information and services.



Built Environment, Space, and Mobility

The built environment discussions noted significant challenges in creating and maintaining accessible community spaces and housing, as well as the difficulties of finding and maintaining spaces for service provision. Major themes included the lack of accessible and affordable transportation options, especially in rural areas, and the inadequacy of current infrastructure to support older adults. There was particular emphasis on how a perceived lack of coordinated planning hindered the development of age-friendly environments. Participants suggested adopting successful models from other cities, improving public transportation routes with older adults in mind, and incorporating lived experiences into the design and evaluation of accessible environments.

The built environment refers to the human made spaces and structures where people live and interact, like buildings, roads, and parks.

Key Issues

Although the specific themes of discussion were different for each group, several key issues and potential solutions recurred throughout the day. The following sections summarize the key issues that arose from the gathering, and list potential solutions frequently proposed in discussions.

accessible fragmented resources
 training stigma centralized health
 awareness activities isolation programming
 administration services opportunities systems
 coordination care share transportation
 spaces



Transportation & Mobility

Key Issues

- Lack of flexible, accessible transportation options, particularly in rural areas.
- Inadequate coordination between transportation systems and community programs/services.
- High costs associated with transportation options.
- Dependence on care providers' schedules, limiting the ability to leave home.
- Lack of accessible public transportation routes and stops, especially near key community centers.
- Insufficient infrastructure to support pedestrian flow, including inadequate sidewalks and curb cuts.
- Safety concerns related to pedestrian crossings and general walking conditions.
- Limited availability of accessible washrooms in public spaces, and shelter at transportation stops.
- Complicated processes for accessing transportation services, such as the Kingston Access Bus.
- Stigma and shame about using accessible transportation or mobility aids, and a lack of awareness about available services.
- The feeling that the needs of older adults are not prioritized in transportation policy and planning.



“Accessible cost-friendly transportation is unreliable at best in Kingston, and it's affecting the trust we are able to build with older community members. It may have taken everything in a person to come out to an event or class in the community, but if they arrive and the entrance is blocked or there is confusion about the meet up point, they may not have the confidence to attend again.”



Possible Solutions

Exploring the possibility of a centralized insurance policy for volunteer drivers.

Creating an information hub to help older adults access transportation and programming, both beyond 2-1-1 and via print methods.

Simplifying the paperwork and processes required to access affordable and accessible transportation services.

Providing volunteer-driven transportation services to assist older adults with appointments and social opportunities.

Implementing free transit for older adults, or specific no-fare hours for older adults.

Having systems navigators who can help older adults navigate transportation options.

Ensuring pedestrian safety with better crossings and curb cuts.

Lobbying for better bus routes and stops near key community spaces used by older adults.

Offering intergenerational programs to foster connections and shared use of transportation resources. E.g. an older adult may be more likely to attend programming if they get a drive or have a family member helping them on and off the bus.

Improving pedestrian infrastructure, including bus shelters, lighting, and sidewalks.

Increasing awareness and reducing stigma around using accessible transportation services.

Incorporating lived experiences of older adults into transportation planning and evaluation.

Fragmented Information & Services

Key Issues

- Lack of centralization of information and services that prevents knowledge and resource sharing both between providers and with the public.
- The existence of multiple resource databases presents challenges for integration and raises concerns about the labor required to keep a centralized database consistently updated if it were to exist.
- Siloed programs and services that do not communicate or coordinate effectively.
- Frequent changes to programs and services due to funding dependencies.
- Absence of a central hub that older adults can turn to in order attain help navigating systems and services.
- Difficulty accessing up-to-date and accurate information about available resources.
- Lack of awareness about existing programs and services among older adults.
- Fragmented communication between service providers, care providers, and community organizations.
- The complexity of navigating different programs and services, particularly for vulnerable groups.
- Insufficient support for older adults to help them understand and utilize available resources.



“The delivery of services to seniors is very fragmented with many organizations functioning in isolation from each other.”



Possible Solutions

Creating a centralized hub or administrative coordination for information and services.

Promoting awareness and accessibility of existing programs and services through targeted communication campaigns.

Providing training and resources for service providers to better communicate and coordinate together.

Partner with healthcare providers to distribute information about community services and programs during medical appointments.

Establishing a system for regular updates between providers to keep information accurate and up-to-date.

Creating a centralized volunteer coordination system to streamline volunteer opportunities and support.

Conduct regular needs assessments to identify gaps in information and services and address them proactively.

Encouraging cross-sector collaboration and communication among service providers, care providers, and community organizations.

Create community outreach programs to educate older adults about available resources and how to access them.

Simplifying processes for older adults to access information and services.

Developing partnerships with other local organizations to ensure comprehensive and coordinated service delivery.

Funding & Resource Constraints

Key Issues

- Lack of sustainable funding for programs and services for older adults, leading to uncertainty and discontinuity.
- Inflexible funding models with strict guidelines and limitations, making it difficult to apply funds where they are most needed.
- Short-term funding cycles that do not support long-term planning and sustainability.
- Resource allocation issues, with limited resources stretched across numerous programs, leading to underfunding and insufficient support.
- Fragmented funding sources creating heavy administrative burdens and inefficiencies.
- High competition for limited funding resources, preventing deserving programs from receiving necessary support.
- Dependency on volunteer labor, which can be unpredictable and insufficient to meet demand.
- Lack of funding for administrative costs, making it challenging to manage and sustain programs effectively.
- Political and economic changes leading to reduced funding availability, impacting the stability and continuity of services.
- Difficulty in accessing funds due to complex and time-consuming application processes.
- Funding application processes that require a high level of English language proficiency, time, and experience in order to attain funds, even for smaller amounts.



“There are great organizations that are working on the issue– each with a ‘piece of the puzzle’. We need to find a model for working together. Any model should: reduce duplication of efforts, improve collaboration, and reduce repetitive and draining processes so we can redirect those resources to solving the problem.”



Possible Solutions

Advocate for increased public funding and policy changes that prioritize the needs of older adults.

Implement shared services models where multiple organizations share administrative and operational resources.

When possible, encourage volunteerism by valuing labor, e.g. providing honorariums to recognize contributions.

Explore microfinance opportunities to support small-scale projects and initiatives.

Offer training programs for community organizations to improve their grant writing and fundraising skills.

Establish emergency fund reserves to provide a financial buffer during economic downturns or funding shortfalls.

Simplify the application and reporting processes for grants to ensure they are accessible to applicants of diverse backgrounds and organizational capacities.

Develop and share program evaluation tools to help organizations measure impact and demonstrate the need for continued funding.

Organize community fundraising events that involve multiple organizations working together to raise funds.

Include provisions for covering administrative costs in grant proposals.

Form cross-sector partnerships with healthcare providers, educational institutions, and other sectors to diversify funding sources.

Social Isolation & Loneliness

Key Issues

- Loss of close family and friends leads to loneliness and can lower social motivation.
- Lack of accessible and engaging community spaces specifically designed for older adults.
- Limited neighborhood-level opportunities for meaningful social interactions and community engagement.
- Insufficient programs and activities tailored to the diverse interests of older adults.
- Limited transportation options to attend non-medical events, like social activities.
- Fragmented information about available social opportunities and support services.
- Physical and psychological safety concerns preventing older adults from engaging in community activities.
- Stigma associated with aging, leading to older adults feeling marginalized and undervalued.
- Lack of awareness and understanding among the general public and service providers about the needs and contributions of older adults.
- Insufficient training for service providers on how to engage and support older adults effectively.
- Difficulty using technology to learn about programming or services.
- Complex administrative processes for accessing services that deter older adults.
- Feelings of pride or shame that can prevent older adults from seeking help or participating in community activities, exacerbating isolation and stigma.



“[Sometimes] we don’t even know that they are isolated. If they don’t have family or neighbours, then we hope they have a health care provider. We should encourage healthcare providers to be informed about social programming and connection resources. They hold legitimacy and the capacity to encourage and inform.”



Possible Solutions

Educate the public about the value and contributions of older adults, to reduce stigma and negative stereotypes.

Create centralized resource hubs for older adults to easily access information and support services without having to travel far afield.

Ensure older adult representation in community planning and decision-making processes.

Develop intergenerational programs to connect older adults and youth.

Provide comprehensive training for service providers on engaging and supporting older adults, including cultural competency training.

Create peer support networks to provide older adults with social connections and systems navigation assistance.

Develop and disseminate accessible information about services and activities available to older adults, ensuring it is easy to understand and widely distributed, both online and in print formats.

Implement buddy systems where volunteers or peers accompany older adults to community activities and services.

Advocate for and develop supportive housing options that allow older adults to live independently while having access to essential services and local opportunities for social connection.

Offer digital literacy programs to help older adults stay informed and connected virtually.

Incorporate inclusive design principles in community spaces to ensure they are welcoming and accessible to older adults.

Intersectionality



Intersectionality is the idea that different aspects of a person's identity, like race, gender, and class, combine to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

Key Issues

- Older adults often face compounded challenges due to the intersection of multiple identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic status.
- Services and programs may lack cultural sensitivity, making it difficult for older adults from diverse backgrounds to feel included and understood.
- Older adults with disabilities and neurodiverse individuals may face additional physical or systemic barriers to accessing services and community activities.
- Socioeconomic status shapes access to resources, healthcare, and social opportunities, further marginalizing economically disadvantaged older adults.
- Older adults who speak English as an additional language may struggle to access services and information, leading to increased isolation and exclusion.
- Some older adults are caregivers themselves, facing unique stressors and resource needs.
- Older adults, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, are often underrepresented in community planning and decision-making processes.
- Older adults without stable housing face severe challenges in accessing services and maintaining health and well-being.
- Managing multiple chronic health conditions can complicate access to care and social participation.
- Older adults with a history of trauma may struggle to feel safe in new or unfamiliar settings.
- Individuals experiencing poor mental health may encounter additional stigma and need tailored support when accessing programs designed for older adults.
- Older adults may struggle with feelings of embarrassment or shame reaching out to support services, pride can be a barrier to access if individuals feel they have lost autonomy or respect.
- Living in a rural or underserved area can impact an individual's access to services, transportation, and community engagement opportunities.



"We don't put ourselves in the shoes of those we are trying to serve and encourage them to take advantage of these resources."



Possible Solutions

Provide cultural sensitivity training to service providers and volunteers.

Engage in fulsome community consultation with diverse representation when designing programming.

Consider offering satellite programming in rural communities or underserved neighborhoods.

Ask communities what their needs are, rather than assuming.

Partner with other service providers to help share resources, e.g. translation assistance or EDII training costs.

Incorporate universal design principles in the planning and development of programs and services.

Consider who is benefitting most from existing services. Are there certain demographics who might be absent, or who might not feel welcome in programming? How could you make your offerings more inclusive?

Recognize and value the perspectives and experiences of older adults from historically marginalized communities. Center their voices in discussions, decision-making, and policy development.

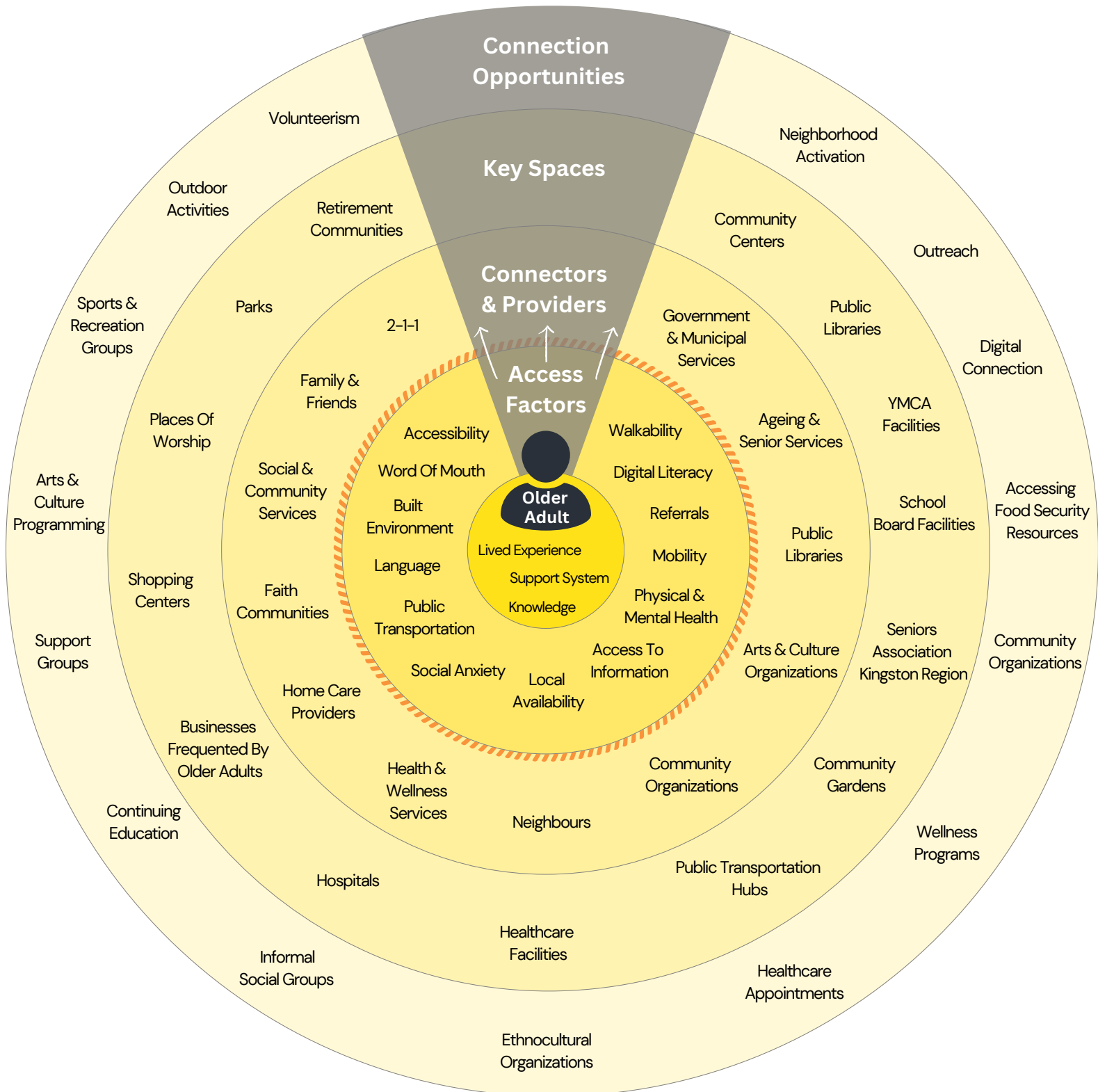
Integrate healthcare services with community programs to provide holistic care management, addressing both health and social needs.

Avoid diminishing the agency of older adults. Respect their autonomy and collaborate rather than imposing top-down approaches.

Implement proactive outreach efforts to engage hard-to-reach older adults.

Moving Forward Together

Building a more connected community for older adults requires collaboration and collective effort. How can we come together to leverage our shared strengths and resources to bring about meaningful, system-wide improvements in KFL&A? Consider the ways your organization or agency could partner with other connectors and providers to achieve this goal.



Older Adults Connecting & Belonging Grant Program

The Community Foundation for Kingston & Area (CFKA) provides grants to support charitable organizations and other qualified donees within Kingston & Area. Through the annual earnings in our pooled Community Fund, Smart & Caring Community Funds, and over 50 individual endowment funds established by generous donors, CFKA granted over \$1.5 million in 2023.

In 2021 the The Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul made a generous gift to the Community Foundation for Kingston & Area to establish the *Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul Community Impact Fund*.

The goal of the Fund is to achieve transformative, sustainable, systems-level change in two issue areas:

1. Help prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), mitigate the impacts of ACEs, and build resiliency generally in children, families, and our community at large; and
2. Reduce older adults' social isolation, and foster connection and belonging for older adults generally.

“Lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day”

(US Surgeon General Advisory, 2023)

The Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul's guiding vision is to bring about a world where the vulnerable experience compassion, justice and peace. They are engaged in numerous works in the local Kingston and area community and elsewhere which seek to empower others, especially the poor and oppressed, to achieve a quality of life in keeping with their human dignity.



Preventing, mitigating, and reducing the impacts of social isolation on older adults requires systemic change. Resilience refers to the capacity of individuals, families, and communities to adapt and thrive in the face of life's challenges, changes, and stresses at any stage in life, from childhood through old age. The needs and strengths of individuals evolve over time and over the lifespan, and community supports must be diverse and adaptable to meet these changing needs effectively. To address social isolation and foster connection and belonging for older adults a collective impact approach has been encouraged, involving partnerships across private, non-profit, and public sectors, through coordinated and localized actions. (Government of Canada, 2022).

The OACB aims to be a collaborative initiative to unite community organizations and agencies serving older adults in the KFL&A region, who share the intent of reducing social isolation and fostering connection and belonging for older adults in the community. We are dedicated to fostering connections, finding productive synergies, developing systemic awareness of key local issues affecting the connection and belonging of older adults, and improving cross-sector communication. Our intent is to create sustainable connections and community-based solutions to prevent, mitigate, and reduce the impacts of social isolation on older adults in KFL&A that will have long-term impact.

We are excited about the potential impact of this work and look forward to working together as we build a more resilient and connected community for older adults.

To learn more about applying to the OACB Grant Program please download the Applicant Guide.

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Stay Involved

If you would like to stay up to date with the OACB initiative, contribute to the OACB Advisory Forum, or learn about future events, please sign up to our email list [here](#).

Questions?

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