

Emerging Themes

Discussed by participants at the Roundtable
**Mobilizing for Action: Culturally Responsive
Pathways for Isolated Immigrant Seniors**

*Organized by the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council in partnership
with Catholic Social Services, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers,
the Multicultural Health Brokers and the City of Edmonton.*

Held May 15, 2008, at the Chateau Louis Conference Centre, Edmonton, Alberta



Note: Special effort has been made to summarize the themes that were most frequently mentioned and widely discussed. However, that is subject to the compiler's interpretation. Notice also that whenever themes appear to be repeated, it is done to show their importance for the participants, since these topics were, indeed, discussed recurrently.

I. Expressions of hope and positive experiences that immigrant seniors conveyed to the Roundtable:

On hope:

- To live life fully
- To speak more English
- Not to lose communication with elders in the community
- To reach out to seniors isolated due to language barriers
- Not to lose touch with their mother tongue and their traditions (including traditional food)
- To be healthy and to exercise

On positive experiences and how they became positive:

- Home country left in turmoil but Canada a blessing, as it accepts other cultures by providing opportunities for immigrants to practise their own cultural traditions
- ESL lessons open doors of communication
- An immigrant senior mentioned being surrounded by friendly and patient people (agency workers, bus drivers, strangers) who are helping in the senior's adaptation
- Assistance offered by agencies and by friends of family in locating [settlement] services
- Access to useful (passes) public transportation
- Accessible health care (quick response to senior's call) that relieves senior of burden on family
- Health care professionals helpful despite language barriers
- Existence of opportunities to improve education
- Alberta Seniors Benefit financially helpful

II. Expressions on challenges and proposed solutions:

1a. Language barriers:

- Language barriers make some seniors feel 'illiterate', in spite of their good education.
- Language also a barrier to keeping up with current events, and can limit personal (artistic) expression and create more dependency.
- Communication barriers with (grand) children in Canada, lead to isolation at home.
- Financial problems limit attendance to language classes.

1b. Proposed solutions:

- Identify drop-in centres and language programs as important places to distribute information.
- Make translators more available, particularly in the health care system and for government services.
- Provide information in audio form to surpass written barrier.

2a. On immigrant seniors' functionality in the Canadian system:

- Seniors' ignorance on how to use the banking system generates elder abuse by children.
- Difficulty finding affordable housing.
- Non familiarity with the laws of the land here.

- Immigrant seniors lack information on different issues including computer skills learning [courses] and extra-curricular activities.
- The government legislated 10-years waiting time before sponsored immigrant seniors can apply for government benefits creates a variety of problems and barriers to them and their sponsoring families.
- Sponsored immigrant seniors feel like a burden to family due to limited ability to help with the household expenses as a result of the 10-year sponsorship period.
- Some professional qualifications not recognized here.
- Some financial problems (that create impediments to attend language classes, pay taxes, etc).

2b. Proposed solutions:

- Implement a short seminar for new families upon their arrival to guide them through the necessary government documentation and to explain how to access health and other services and resources. This would enable the immigrant seniors to begin functioning independently more quickly.
- Lower the sponsorship period to five (or less) years to allow immigrant seniors to access assistance sooner.
- Lower the age for receiving higher rates under the Alberta Seniors Benefits program and make an effort to educate seniors about the benefits available to them.
- Publish information in different languages.
- Make many services and opportunities free of charge for seniors, or at least provide or arrange for transportation for them.

3a. On family sponsorship and the roles of immigrant seniors within their families:

- The government-legislated 10-years wait time before sponsored immigrant seniors can apply for government benefits creates a variety of problems and barriers to them and their sponsoring families.
- Some immigrant seniors sponsored by their children arrive with inadequate skills to find work and therefore end up without retirement packages, increasing the financial burden on their families (economic challenges that result are extreme).
- Many seniors are invited to Canada by their families to look after the children and this can be both a blessing and a curse

- Loneliness of some immigrant seniors resulting from being separated from family members (spouses, children) back home for lengthy periods (three to 15 years)

3b. Proposed solutions:

- Open up more spaces for seniors in residences that provide food and opportunities for social interaction.
- Join lobbying efforts, such as the one being done in Toronto, to change legislation requiring sponsored immigrant seniors to wait for 10 years before they can qualify to receive government benefits.
- Facilitate seniors coming together, enabling them to connect with members of their own community first and then branch out to contacts with others in the broader community.
- Reach out to isolated immigrant seniors and recognize it is a myth that *all* ethnic seniors *are always* well looked after by their own families/communities.
- Distribute information at drop-in centres and language programs.
- Have people available at seniors centres who can greet immigrant seniors in their own language and make them feel welcomed (understanding the particular circumstances in the seniors' countries of origin and being able to deal with the seniors' problems more effectively).
- Give priority to seniors in waiting rooms.
- Lobby for the Canadian citizenship application process to be streamlined. This would open up the possibility for ethnic seniors to apply for passports enabling them to enjoy travelling and visiting family members.

4a. *On financial difficulties:*

- Immigrant seniors are often unable to help their sponsoring families' pay expenses as a result of the long waiting period to qualify for government benefits.
- Some immigrant seniors sponsored by their children arrive with inadequate skills to find work and therefore end up without retirement packages, increasing the financial burden on their families (economic challenges that result are extreme).

4b. Proposed solutions:

- Join lobbying efforts, such as the one being done in Toronto, to change legislation requiring sponsored immigrant seniors to wait for 10 years before they can qualify to receive government benefits.

- Make many programs/services and opportunities free of charge for immigrant seniors, or at least provide or arrange for transportation for them.

5a. On personal challenges and challenges faced by the ethnic communities:

- Seniors are dealing with the cold winter weather (a shock particularly for those used to a hotter climate).
- Immigrant service agencies and ethnic communities are struggling with staffing issues, turnover, burnout, and the shortage of volunteers which, in turn, diminishes their ability to offer services.

Miscellaneous proposals:

- Create multicultural senior centres in Edmonton supported through collaborations between different organizations. (Closed schools could be potential sites)
- Form collaborative relationships between mainstream professionals and immigrant communities.
- Use closed schools as seniors centres
- Develop more partnerships with service providers, given that resources, spaces, and volunteers are limited.
- Make financial aid and loans more available more quickly to those who wish to attend university.
- Get more involvement of seniors centres to offer ESL programs (this would strengthen their membership by attracting more seniors).
- Ensure that English language programs for seniors are available in every area of the city.
- Make bus and fitness facility passes transferable among all cities in Canada.
- Bring back 'Klondike Days' and develop them as a means of honouring seniors and their contribution to making the province [of Alberta] great
- Emulate the Korean community [in Edmonton], which has established its own churches, seniors college, and senior centre.
- Counteract the effects of "boom & bust" economy for ethnic seniors.

III. Major themes emerging from all participants' input on reaching out to isolated seniors:

Proposed dynamics amongst some of the stakeholders

- Cultural groups considered particularly important in reaching out. The first connections to immigrant seniors should be through cultural groups, as well as through seniors centres. Workers should tap into the cultural/immigrant groups' ethnic media to announce programs, events and services. Cultural groups could provide space for immigrant seniors' activities.

Role of serving agencies

- Immigrant senior-serving agencies must go out to where the immigrant seniors are. Reach out to immigrant seniors at their frequented places (malls, doctors' offices, supermarkets, libraries, churches, volunteer centres), and reach them as early as they arrival at the airport.
- Agencies should collaborate and coordinate services to immigrant seniors to develop materials that are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Frontline workers must be trained in "cultural competency" and agencies should increase their numbers of ethnic employees. Connect and involve immigrant seniors with mainstream seniors.

Dealing with transportation

- Transportation is still inadequate: Some challenges are the [problems with] communication between drivers and immigrant seniors, and the (in)adequacy of bus services, most notably for immigrant seniors attendance at day programs. Information cards used by immigrant seniors and (bus/taxi) drivers, as well as other communication strategies, should contribute to reducing or removing barriers to accessing services.

IV. Major themes emerging from all participants' input on how to make services more culturally accessible and responsive:

Role of agencies and their workers

- Community centres to reach out to immigrant seniors. Agencies could partner to secure spaces for immigrant seniors' programs and activities. Workers to pay close attention to immigrant seniors' stories and their needs in order to respond to them adequately. Workers to be culturally trained and agencies to hire more ethnic workers. Workers to provide immigrant seniors with an information package that includes their rights and a directory of services.
- Provide services in appropriate language and train workers in (inter)cultural competencies.

Role of immigrant seniors and staff

- Identify seniors who are in key positions to advocate for political changes.
- Develop culturally-specific programs at the immigrant seniors' natural places, rather than taking the seniors out to places where programs are available.
- Develop seniors' advisory groups to steer programs and services. Develop on-line directory of resources.

V. Major themes emerging from all participants' input on what has worked and on success stories:

- Schools and seniors collaborating in various initiatives (e.g., seniors reading to kids, seniors coming to schools to teach about culture).
- Immigrant seniors and English-speaking seniors in the same activity, meeting each others' needs (peer support).
- The Multicultural Health Brokers servicing immigrant seniors, and this Roundtable are examples of success stories.
- English and fitness instructors for immigrant seniors to connect them to mainstream services.
- Special educational courses of particular interest to seniors (e.g., "clear writing course" or fine arts courses) at seniors

centres or elsewhere, expanding interest to educate seniors in cultural issues.

- (City of Calgary's) Diversity Liaisons are paid staff who are interpreters and have extensive medical training. In Edmonton, the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op offers the same kind of service (medical interpreters) but with very limited resources and with significant volunteer hours.
- Volunteer "bus buddies" program.
- Digital videos capturing stories are educational tools for intercultural understanding.
- Municipal politicians advocating for seniors.
- Effective reporting on elder abuse.
- Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton (SAGE) community garden for immigrant seniors.
- Funding for internship within multicultural organizations to develop cultural competencies.
- Immigrant seniors' user-friendly visual information (electronic map) .
- Ethnic speciality food stores [and restaurants].

VI. Major themes emerging from all participants' final recommendations:

- Formation of a follow-up committee.
- Development of a website similar to Calgary's municipal site (www.immigrantseniors.ca).
- Mapping immigrant seniors.
- Advocacy on immigrant seniors' relevant policies.

VII. Recommendations from Roundtable evaluation

("what specific action(s) can you or your organization take to address the issues and needs discussed today?"):

- Prevent duplication of resources.
- Network with other agencies.
- Form a working (follow-up) committee.
- Bring conclusions to own agency.
- Make policy changes at all levels of government.
- Produce on-line resources.
- Encourage advocacy work.

VIII. Working (follow-up) Committee

The following people indicated their willingness to be involved in the Roundtable working (follow-up) committee:

Geralyn St. Louis
Lori Therrien
Ellen Avau Fast
Teresa Johnson
Louise Seymour
Veena Khatri
Tzena Russell
Trina Homeniuk
Rita Loteka
Maureen Gross
Mary Banda
Edith Parsons
Renate Sainsbury
Karla Sonnichsen
Carmen Kent
Claudio Bringas
Julie Westall
Doug Whistance-Smith