



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

BRIEFING DOCUMENT FOR FEDERAL MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

NATURALLY OCCURRING RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES (NORCS)

May 2025

Preamble

As federal members of Parliament, you may already be aware that the aging segment of our society is growing, creating quality of life and financial challenges for more older adults and their families. Fortunately, NORCS (naturally occurring retirement communities) programs address both issues.

Tony Van Bynen, the former MP for Newmarket-Aurora promoted the benefits of NORCS in late October, 2024. He pointed out that “Canadians 65 years of age and older currently represent 19% of our population, and by 2043 it's estimated they will be around 25% of the population. That represents an increase from approximately 8 million seniors to 11 million seniors” (Van Bynen, 2024). Mr. Van Bynen acknowledged that this major demographic shift is causing, and will continue to cause a strain on Canada's social and health services. Because older adults are aging in their own homes and communities this is contributing to the growth of naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCS). He has correctly pointed out that this is an opportunity “for the government to adapt, innovate, and support care delivery systems for seniors that both meet seniors' needs and enable extended aging in place and help provide early indicators that result in health care cost savings for governments” (Van Bynen, 2024). He points to a study done by the NORC Innovation Centre at UHN estimating a 44% productivity gain for personal support workers if there was a move to an integrated NORCS-based home care model.

The benefits are obvious.

This briefing document is intended to provide you with information about NORCS and to encourage you to support the expansion and funding of NORCS programs across Canada as a made in Canada aging in place strategy.

How Are NORCS Defined?

“NORCS are unplanned communities that have a high proportion of older residents (Queen’s University, n.d.). They may be neighborhoods where people have aged together, or an apartment building in a walkable neighborhood attractive to older adults.

NORCS programs (also called NORCS-SSPs which include services and supports) can be located in both residential buildings, called vertical NORCS, or in neighborhoods, called horizontal NORCS.

Because there are so many older adults located in one place, this density can provide a context for health, well-being, and social programs that enable elders to age in place, to enhance their quality of life, and save the healthcare system money as age demographics increase.

This makes NORCS, organized by older adults themselves, a significant component of an aging in place continuum.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING NORCS PROGRAMS

These are the principles upon which NORCS Programs are based. They are:

- Directed by older adults themselves
- Non-Profit
- Community-based
- Encouraging of social relationships by being inclusive, welcoming, and accessible
- Featured by open and transparent communication
- Equitable in that power and decision-making are shared
- A framework for accessing community assets to support aging in place
- Staffed to ensure continuity or operate entirely with volunteers or with support from a community-based service provider

- An opportunity for older adults to co-learn and collaborate in co-design of programs and services alongside professional allies
- A vehicle for community-based participatory research about NORCS' effectiveness in supporting participants' quality of life, and identifying their value in promoting less reliance on formal health and social services.

NORCS PROGRAM GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

NORCS Programs aim to:

- Mobilize and empower older adults and their allies to create trusting relationships and build on their strengths to generate a sense of community;
- Foster social inclusion and address social isolation;
- Identify participants' learning needs in creating programs;
- Access community assets as well as health, well-being, and social services - employing them to promote psychological, spiritual, and physical wellness for NORCS participants to support aging in place.

CORE ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS WITHIN NORCS

Many NORCS organize public education sessions or informal gatherings to discuss issues of concern to participants, for example, presentations by the police to discuss fraud and safety concerns, presentations about fall prevention, older adult services resource navigation, healthy eating for older adults etc.

Others organize social events and activities, for example, puzzles and board games, book groups, cultural celebrations. Some have fitness classes, movie nights, and dining out programs.

Some invite professionals from the community to provide assistance with medication management, foot care, dental care, managing mental health challenges and other personal needs.

Some help build community, for example, through the creation of a community garden.

Some include all of these features based on the needs and wishes of NORCS members.

STAFF OR NO STAFF

Some NORCS would welcome on-site resource staff but these are unavailable because of lack of funding. Others prefer to use participants' own strengths to further their goals and build their programs.

Staffed NORCS may include onsite coordinators who work with residents to develop programs and access health and social services supports.

Other staffed NORCS may wish to employ community developers to assist them to access and build community assets beneficial for their members and the community in general.

Others may prefer to have both.

Some work with local hospitals and others prefer to build relationships with non-profit health and community social services organizations.

Some have partnered with university researchers and others with hospital-based staff. Still others have developed independent of both.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NORCS PROGRAMS AND PACE (*Program of All Inclusive Care of the Elderly*) OR HUB AND SPOKE PROGRAMS?

NORCS programs have tended to be less formal than PACE or Hub and Spoke programs, that generally serve individuals with higher support needs. NORCS programs rely on the initiative of members to focus more on educational, fitness, well-being, and social programs, often employing community-based assets approaches.

PACE and Hub and Spoke programs are more professionally based integrated health and social services programs where participants work collaboratively with service coordinators to develop plans of care. Because services are integrated, there is less duplication of services, and residents are less likely to experience "falling through the cracks". These programs are relationship-based

where participants and professionals work together to promote wellness, and prevent undue use of more formal social and health programs.

What MPs Can Do to Help

As NORCS volunteers grow older, it may be difficult, in some cases, to keep programs and services going. For this reason, funding provided to work with NORCS Programs and non-profits in the hiring of resource people would be beneficial. This involves very little cost considering the preventive benefits of NORCS Programs in helping to maintain older adults in their own homes and communities. NORCS Programs have real potential as an alternative model of supporting aging in place (Parniak et al, 2022).

This is especially true in provinces like Ontario where over 200,000 people live in NORCS – a much higher number than those who live in long-term care institutions and retirement homes combined.

The NORC Innovation Centre at the University Health Network has shown that in “2022-23, personal support workers (PSWs) delivered close to 3.5 million hours of home care services in Ontario’s NORCS, valued at over \$120 million” (NORC Innovation Centre at UHN, 2024).

What this means is that NORCS are an “excellent means of delivering integrated home care services, and should be incorporated into any new non-profit community/and or seniors’ housing projects” (NORC Innovation Centre at UHN, 2024) in order to maintain older adults in the community and prevent hospitalization and institutionalization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this overview of NORCS Programs is an introduction to a cost effective approach that enhances quality of life and well-being for older adults and could be a key adjunct to the health care system. It is one alternative to expensive and inhumane institutionalization of older adults that deserves your support.

REFERENCES

- NORC Innovation Centre at UHN. (April 2024). A home care model for naturally occurring retirement communities in Ontario.
<https://norcinnovationcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/A-Home-Care-Model-for-NORCs-in-Ontario.pdf>
- PACE Community Hub, Burlington. (2025). <https://alzda.ca/pace-wellness-hub/>
- Parniak, S., DePaul, V.G., Frymire, C/, DePaul, S., Donnelly, C. (April 14, 2022). Naturally occurring retirement communities: Scoping review. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 14:5(2).
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9052023/>
- Peel Senior Link. (2025). Assisted living services for high risk seniors.
<https://peelseniorlink.com/content/uploads/2018/08/Board-Orientation-version.pdf>
- Queen's University. (n.d.). Beyond long term-care.
<https://www.queensu.ca/gazette/stories/beyond-long-term-care>
- Van Bynen, T. (October 29, 2024). Statement by Tony Van Bynen at the Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities Committee. <https://openparliament.ca/committees/human-resources/44-1/132/tony-van-bynen-1/only/>