

ELDER EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION: NORCS ARE ON THE MARCH IN ONTARIO AND ACROSS CANADA



NORCs are naturally occurring retirement communities geographically located where a high proportion of older adults live. They can be vertical - in apartments and condo buildings - or horizontal in neighborhoods.

SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

ELDER EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION: NORCS ARE ON THE MARCH IN ONTARIO AND ACROSS CANADA

January 19, 2026

NORCs are naturally occurring retirement communities geographically located where a high proportion of older adults live. They can be vertical - in apartments and condo buildings - or horizontal in neighborhoods.

“Ontario has 1,941 NORC buildings (apartments, condos or co-ops) where 30 percent or more of individuals are older adults (65+). These buildings house 214,345 older adults”.

TAKING MATTERS INTO OUR OWN HANDS

Today many older adults are banding together with professional allies and are forming NORC-based programs. They are not waiting for government to get its act together. They are organizing programs to address problems of loneliness and social isolation by creating opportunities for social connections and community building.

They are negotiating with local non-profits to help elders in their NORCs to access services and supports as well as information resources.

They are providing ways for members to engage in the community and promote civic engagement.

They are negotiating shared space in their buildings and neighborhoods so that activities, public education, and other programs can be delivered by community professionals and organizations.

NORC LEADERS

It is not possible to name all of the wonderful volunteer organizers of NORCs in this article, but they all deserve to be celebrated for their important work in building connection and community across this province.

To give readers some examples of NORC-based programs and what volunteers have managed to accomplish we do want to salute and recognize some of the volunteer innovators and leaders in the NORC movement in Ontario.

Sudbury

We want to begin by recognizing what may have been the first NORC-based program in Ontario – in Sudbury.

Rockview Towers is located close to medical facilities, shopping, restaurants and natural greenspace. It is an apartment complex consisting of 180 rental units of one, two, or three bedrooms. Approximately 250 tenants occupy the units, the majority of them (80%) are seniors ranging in age from 65 to 96.

In 2003, a small group of seniors formed the Rockview Seniors Club to provide opportunities for elders to socialize. Special activities were planned around holidays - Christmas, St Patrick's Day, Canada Day, and Halloween with a \$3 members' fee supporting the Christmas Wine and Cheese Party.

By 2007 with membership growing, the club changed its name to the Rockview Older Adults Club, formed a Board and became a registered non-profit charitable organization with memberships costing \$4 per year. Members were asked about their skills and interests in volunteering in various activities. Membership reached 180 with volunteers running all of the programs.

The landlord provided 3 attached rooms and a fully equipped kitchen for dinners and special events and two additional large rooms were made available for a range of activities from billiards to movie nights. A steam bath and exercise rooms were also provided.

Activities included morning coffee breaks, fall prevention exercises, a cards night, billiards, movie afternoons, guest speakers on topics of interest to residents, darts, an art club, game nights, happy hours, theme dinners and lunches, visits by local musicians, short affordable trips to various locales and local theatres, fish fries, gardens and dining out.

Special activities include a Canada Day celebration, and barbecues on civic holidays, art shows and high teas, theme nights with entertainments, girls' nights, sports events, cider and singalongs, Halloween event attended by local children with costumed volunteers handing out goodies to passing cars, a scarecrow contest and chili cook off, fundraising events for various causes, the local Legion preparing and delivering meals, and volunteer events including maintaining safe green spaces and walkways, the Seniors Summit, and Seniors Summer Games as well as other award winning events.

During COVID the NORC volunteers set up Zoom events, delivered meals, set up a phone tree and a tranquility garden. Few people got COVID and no one was hospitalized.

This NORC also provides transportation to appointments, safety checks, repair and maintenance of mobility devices, and captains on each floor to assist residents in an emergency.

Enough revenue is generated through fundraising and activities and New Horizons grants that all expenses are covered for things like patio construction, computers, dart boards, smart TVs and a community garden, outdoor kitchen, and billiard table.

New services are being planned including working with Goshenite Senior Services to have 3-4 PSW's assigned to Rockview to provide integrated care. Plans are also underway in working with the City to clear adjacent greenspace allowing local schools to use it for picnics, nature study, and a storytelling program.

Rockview and the Sudbury District Health Unit are attempting to secure funding to create a video of Life at Rockview.

Plans are also underway to provide sandwiches and baked goods weekly to the Maison McCulloch Hospice.

Rockview has been a boon to older adults' families who report feeling relieved that their parents are safe and actively involved.

Rockview is a good example of a NORC community that has built strong community connections and a sense of belonging long before they even knew they were a NORC.

Kingston

Christine MacMillan was, in 2009, President of the Frontenac Kingston Council on Aging. It was a funding announcement for more long-term care beds in her area that got Christine fired up and deciding to organize an alternative.

“Unsatisfied with living alone and being mere passive recipients of health services” Christine, who became a leader in the Oasis NORC movement, decided to transform ordinary apartment buildings in Kingston into a real connected, supportive community. You can hear Christine in her own words here:

<https://oasis.uhnopenlab.ca/oasisstory/>

This attracted the attention of two researchers in the Queen's School of Rehabilitation Therapy – Professors Catherine Donnelly and Vince DePaul to join with colleagues at Western and McMaster universities to expand Oasis to more sites in Kingston, London, and Hamilton. Drs. Donnelly and DePaul are conducting a longitudinal study to illustrate, in very concrete terms, the positive effects of the Oasis program. www.oasisagingwell.com/

When Christine moved to Toronto, Helen Cooper, a member of Seniors for Social Action Ontario's provincial policy panel, a former Mayor of Kingston and Chair of the Ontario Municipal Board and member of the Premier's Council on Health Strategy and the Ontario Round Table on the Environment and Economy and many other roles including being a Distinguished Fellow with the Queen's School of Policy Studies, and a member of the Aging Well at Home project for the Frontenac, Lennox & Addington Ontario Health Team, took over the mantle as President of the Board of Oasis Kingston. Here is Helen in her own words:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRJ4fPiBM-s&t=34s>

Ottawa

Hats off as well to the Ottawa Council on Aging, and in particular, Jennifer Brooks, lead for the NORC-SSP (naturally occurring retirement communities – support services program) Working Group, for initiating discussions with Queen's University in 2019 to bring Oasis to Ottawa. Ambleside Condominiums applied to Queen's and became the first funded Oasis site in Ottawa in 2022. There are now two more.

Residents call themselves The Ambleside Movement. They have a paid coordinator (as all Oasis sites do) and resident-driven programs. They formed partnerships with Olde Forge Community Resource Centre (the agency that receives the funding from Queen's to hire the coordinator and run the programs), the local Community Health Centre, local businesses and other community service providers to conduct programs of residents' choosing. <https://www.fifty-five-plus.com/blog/community/how-norcy-is-your-neighbourhood/>

Toronto

80 and 100 Quebec Avenue

On November 13, 2022 the Toronto Star featured a group of older adults living in High Park condos and apartments who decided to create their own naturally occurring retirement community (NORC). They began a partnership with the University Health Network's NORC Innovation Centre to promote an aging at

home initiative. Educational, health, and supportive services were brought to where elders live.

Jan Hess, Robin Vogl, Dennis Jones, Myrette Paul-Chowdhury, Clare Devlin, Kalene Morgan and Isabel Meirelles are members of the “founding group of seven” residents at 80 and 100 Quebec Ave NORC - two of the three buildings on the street where they organized social activities and potential supports, with assistance from the UHN's NORC Innovation Centre Ambassador Program. They succeeded in creating an inclusive community where people started getting together to meet, have fun, and remain connected and informed. Hats off to them for their efforts! <https://archive.ph/xxJCV>

100 Madison

Meanwhile at 100 Madison, a condo residence in Toronto, Gerry Gryba and other organizers were busy forming their own NORC – a group that is bringing together people of all generations, not just older adults. This NORC has partnered with the North York Toronto Health Partners – one of the teams established across Ontario as part of the government’s plan to bring better connections to health care for Ontario residents – all part of Jane Philpott’s mandate. This has allowed organizers to bring in health services quickly without funding being an issue. 6 nurses and nurse practitioners provided vaccines, wellness checks and hearing tests as part of a clinic attended by 60 residents, and participants are being polled to determine what other services they would like.

Being an intergenerational NORC has made it possible to recruit some younger members as volunteers. Here is Gerry in her own words:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_sUT72Qqx4&t=113s

400 Walmer Road

In 2018 Lynne Slotek, Denise Smith, and other older adult residents at 400 Walmer Road (comprised of two rental towers), with the support of Open Lab University Health Network and property management came together to develop social and wellbeing activities for healthy aging modelled after Oasis Senior Support Living Inc. Kingston.

In 2024 Connections 400 incorporated as a non-profit organization with the goal of increasing and maintaining socialization to reduce isolation and to assist members to obtain appropriate community services through a partnership with SPRINT Senior Care and other community organizations.

In its seniors' lounge, Connections 400 offers a variety of social and wellbeing activities including drop-ins, special interest groups, cards and games, movie nights, health and wellbeing presentations along with a newsletter. In 2025 there were over 3,000 individual visits to the seniors' lounge.

Connections 400 has made a significant positive impact on community wellbeing at 400 Walmer. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3IV2XHvrTO/>

OUR ALLIES

We also want to salute the professional allies who have played such important roles in helping older adults to organize NORC-based programs across the province.

We are especially grateful to Professors Catherine Donnelly and Vincent dePaul at Queen's for their research into, and ongoing support of Oasis Programs expansion. <https://healthsci.queensu.ca/stories/feature/it-takes-village-helping-older-adults-find-their-oasis>

We are equally grateful to the amazing staff of the University Health Network's NORC Innovation Centre and Open Lab - in particular Dr. Howard Abrams, Director, Tai Huynh, Creative Director, and Jenn Recknagel, Senior Design Lead and Director of Innovation and Design. All have contributed to the growth and expansion of NORC-based programs and provided research and information about NORCs in Ontario and beyond. <https://uhnoppenlab.ca/our-people/>

SOME IDEAS FOR YOUR AREA

It can be as simple as asking a pharmacist to do a session on medication management, a local physio to talk about falls prevention and balance, local municipal recreation staff to conduct fitness classes, police officers to talk about avoiding scams and staying safe in your communities. A local lawyer from the legal clinic might come and talk about estate planning and Powers of Attorney for Personal Care.

It might mean speaking with family health teams and non-profit seniors-serving agencies to extend their services to your local NORCs to provide wound and foot care onsite, diabetes education, bone health education, care coordination to help with organizing Home Care, visits by physicians and nurse practitioners, mental health support for those struggling with depression or anxiety.

Some organize neighbor check-ins to reassure people that someone will look in on them.

Local tai chi, mindfulness meditation, or yoga teachers might volunteer an hour a week to do a class.

Local artists or musicians might hold an art or music class or a community singalong. Concert nights might feature local musicians and singers.

Pub nights, coffee mornings, lunch bunches, bus trips, wine tastings organized by the local LCBO. A whole range of meet and greet activities are possible.

WE'RE NOT DONE YET!

The Baby Boomer generation has always been resourceful and in their old age are again showing their strong abilities to organize and take care of themselves and each other.

If you would like to start a NORC-based program in your community, please check out the do it yourself information of the NORC Ambassador Program at the NORC Innovation Centre, University Health Network.

<https://norcambassadors.ca/diy/>

And/or join the monthly NORC Talks and mailing list:

<https://norcinnovationcentre.ca/#connect>

Seniors for Social Action Ontario's online NORC reference library is located at:
<https://www.seniorsactionontario.com/norcreferencelibrary>

With older adults “doing it for themselves” across Ontario, it is clear that we are far from done supporting one another, finding purpose in our lives, and continuing to build community.

Dr. Patricia Spindel is the Chair of Seniors for Social Action Ontario. This article was produced with the assistance of Mary Michasiw (Sudbury), Helen Cooper (Kingston), Lynne Slotek and Gerry Gryba (Toronto), and Jennifer Brooks (Ottawa).

Comments on this and other SSAO articles may be sent to:

seniorsactionontario@gmail.com

