



## SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

### *Editorial*

# WHAT REALLY MAKES A MUNICIPALITY OR REGION AGE FRIENDLY?

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### **Where Did the Age Friendly Idea Come From?**

[In 2006 the World Health Organization developed a Global Age Friendly Cities Project.](#)

Eight key domains of what made cities age friendly were developed. These included: outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community support and health services.

### **Marketing or Reality?**

Today many municipalities and regions believe that they are age friendly. But are they, or have they missed the mark?

Perhaps an examination of what older adults want most is in order here.

[96% of people over 45 say they want to age in place.](#) Most believe the support services needed won't be there for them. Age friendly communities are supposed to be ones where health and community services are available to them. But are they?

Most regions believe they are being innovative if they ascribe to [Eden Alternative](#) approaches in the institutions they operate. That does not meet the definition of age friendly.

What older adults living in their own homes are most concerned with is whether or not they can obtain assistance with snow shoveling, handyperson services, grass cutting, gardening, cleaning, and food delivery if they require it. Can they obtain help in renovating their homes to make them accessible? Can they access personal support services if they require them? Can they access medical and nursing care? Do they have someone to check in with them periodically? Do they have anyone who could accompany them to events in the community so they don't have to go alone?

They want to stay out of hospital, out of long-term care institutions and remain in their own communities with the support they need.

## **What Would Make Communities Age Friendly?**

If we look at older adults' actual needs, many municipalities and regions are failing badly at meeting them, but still market themselves as age friendly. If they have benches on their trails, or charging stations for mobility devices, or hold a picnic or two during the summer for "seniors" that seems good enough. But do they offer snow clearing services for free or do they charge for them? Do they offer handyperson or cleaning services? Do they offer summer jobs to students to cut older adults' grass or help with gardening? Do they work with seniors serving agencies to create integrated care options in the buildings that they operate so that older adults in those buildings have access to foot and wound care, nurse practitioners, PSW services, physio and occupational therapy?

Do they recognize the existence of naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) and fund service coordinators to connect residents in their buildings and the areas surrounding them to needed services and supports? Do they have programs where volunteers visit isolated individuals and accompany them on outings? Do they organize online older adults book clubs or discussion groups through their local libraries? Do they talk with local businesses to hold memory café nights with music by local musicians for older adults with dementia and their caregivers?

Do they offer a central telephone access to information service for older adults and their caregivers looking for affordable housing, in-home support, assistance with activities of daily living, respite care, and other information?

Are community paramedicine and paramedic services available to support older adults in their own homes and communities?

Are municipalities working with developers to build affordable, accessible market rate housing and assisted housing with PACE (Program of All Inclusive Care for the Elderly) Wellness Hubs or other integrated care services built in?

Are municipalities and regions working with older adult organizations to ensure that the programs and services they offer are indeed age friendly?

Do they partner with non-profits to offer in-home respite services for caregivers?

Do they work with colleges and universities to partner students with older adults to provide support and companionship and build intergenerational relationships?

In most cases the answer is no.

## Some Communities and Organizations Are Taking Up the Challenge

[Halton Region pioneered accessible assisted living residences with PACE Wellness Hubs built in in Burlington](#) – an initiative that has [now also spread to Oakville](#).

In 2020 the University of Toronto took up the challenge and created [The Sage \(Student Association for Geriatric Empowerment\)](#) Project twinning older adults with volunteers in a program called Companion Calls that offered in person visits, creative workshops, weekly phone calls, and educational events. This project is now expanding to other universities and helping to build intergenerational relationships.

The Ontario Non-Profit Housing Corporation now provides a website outlining government [housing announcements and funding available for housing infrastructure and priorities](#).

In Hastings-Prince Edward, communities have embraced the concept of [memory cafes to support individuals with dementia and their caregivers](#).

In Maple, Ontario, York Region CHATS {Community and Home Assistance to Seniors} is launching a [small neighborhood home respite program for older adults with dementia and their caregivers](#).

Also in Richmond Hill, York Region, a non-profit is offering a [staffed, small neighborhood memory care home called Memory Lane](#).

This month the Ontario government recognized age friendly communities across the province, many of which had done nothing more than have activities for older adults, introduced charging stations for mobility devices, or engaged in “community partnerships”.

SSAO looks forward to the day when the Government of Ontario agrees to financially assist and incentivize municipalities to:

- Increase their supply of affordable, accessible assisted housing for older adults with integrated care built in;
- Provide fully staffed, non-profit small neighborhood homes to support people living with dementia in the community;
- Fund NORC service coordinators and community connectors;
- Fund fully accessible transportation services;
- Provide snow clearing, cleaning, handyperson, lawn and gardening services to older adults for free.
- Partner with local non-profit seniors serving agencies to provide friendly visiting, programs, address food insecurity among older adults, create respite services, and beef-up paramedicine programs.

- Provide one-stop telephone referral services to assist older adults and their caregivers to access support, services, and resources locally without having to navigate a complex, complicated system;
- Partner with colleges and universities in pairing students with older adults to provide companionship and support, as well as accompany them to workshops and community activities;
- Provide financial incentives for local businesses and communities to create memory cafes to support older adults living with dementia and their caregivers.

There is something else the Ontario Government could do if it is truly interested in helping municipalities to be truly age friendly. It could incentivize developers to build more fully accessible bungalows, including Canadian-made modular housing, rather than stacked townhouses full of steps, and large two-story homes. That might help older adults to be able to downsize and younger families to be able to afford starter homes.

Taking these steps would go far in making communities truly age friendly rather than having the term be used as just another marketing strategy.

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***Dr. Patricia Spindel is the recipient of a Government of Canada medal for service to her community, Chair of Seniors for Social Action Ontario, a co-founder of the Advocacy Centre for the Elderly, and a former Chair of Concerned Friends of Ontario Citizens in Care Facilities.***