

Aging Actively In Burlington

Executive Summary

October 2008



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Aging Actively in Burlington is a report commissioned by the United Way of Burlington & Greater Hamilton and prepared by Community Development Halton. United Way has identified pressing issues affecting the quality of life of seniors in Burlington and has articulated this concern through an investment priority, *creating supportive neighbourhoods that enable community seniors to maintain their independence and dignity*. United Way aspires to a fuller understanding of the current situation of seniors in Burlington that would identify community challenges and opportunities to address basic needs but also issues of social inclusion and civic engagement. This report is based on document analysis and demographics available in the 2006 Census.

Changing Demographics

Burlington has the highest number (25,425) and percentage of seniors (15%) among the local municipalities in Halton region – over 46% of the region's seniors live in Burlington and the senior population is increasing. The report identifies important patterns such as the growing senior group over 80 years who are disproportionately women. Aging is very much a gender issue. Through mapping, neighbourhoods where seniors live are identified across the City of Burlington, with the most important concentrations of seniors south of the Queen Elizabeth Way. This is essential information to guide the location of programs and services. Maps unveil where seniors living alone reside. Most seniors (77%) own their homes and would like to remain in their homes and neighbourhoods as they age. The report discusses a continuum of housing options where affordable and safe housing are essential if seniors are to “age in place.” Also, maps locate retirement homes and long term care facilities throughout Burlington, the latter a health service needed by some but wait lists act as barriers to care of an elderly individual and, simultaneously, much needed support for their family.

Poverty and Inequality

The report affirms the effect of low income on body and soul. Low income is associated with social exclusion and poor health. *Aging Actively in Burlington* reports that 11% of the seniors or 2,578 seniors in this community are low income. Interestingly, over half (54%) of Halton's low income seniors live in Burlington. Seniors living alone are increasingly poor (17%) of whom the majority are female. A senior alone is classified as low income if their incomes fall below the Statistics Canada low income cut-off of \$20,778. The report talks of the intersection of limited income, increased cost of living and decreased social supports, that place many seniors in the difficult position of choosing between housing and food. This leaves them at risk of poor nutrition and poor health, not to mention, the effect on other areas of their lives such as civic and social participation.

Human Services

Availability and access to health services and social programs remain significant challenges for people as they age. Access issues are often determined by availability of doctors, health care practitioners and social services, location of services, income, and the level of insurance and benefit coverage available to seniors. Affordable adequate home care and home help services have been noted as critical for those seniors who are struggling with chronic disease and/or disability and want to live independently in their homes.

Participation and Social Connectedness

Aging Actively in Burlington suggests that seniors contribute to change in their community through civic engagement. Social connectedness allows for the development of meaningful and supportive relationships. Through engagement and connectedness, seniors remain part of a community and have a sense of belonging. Seniors tend to engage in their local communities through public spaces in their neighbourhoods. The location of libraries, community centres and places of worship in areas where a high percentage of the population are seniors creates a forum in which seniors can meet others with similar interests. They are spaces that nurture intergenerational contact. Engagement of seniors in local neighbourhoods becomes more important with age and, as studies show, mitigates isolation.

Transportation

Aging Actively in Burlington discusses local transportation as a critical link to community engagement and is associated with independence. Again, access to transportation is dependent upon an adequate local transportation infrastructure, income and health.

Built Environment

The built environment of the City of Burlington is raised in the report as a factor influencing quality of life. Both accessibility to the local transportation system and the physical accessibility of buildings affect seniors. Issues such as safety and 'walkability' of Burlington neighbourhoods where seniors can safely access both public spaces and community resources impacts their lives. Also, the study points out that neighbourhood satisfaction and capacity to age in place can be affected by proximity of amenities and necessary services. For example, the seniors concentrated in the Burlington downtown, those in Aldershot, as well as some other smaller pockets, do not have easy access to food shopping.

Frameworks on Aging

Fittingly, the framework for discussing seniors in Burlington is based on the active aging perspective of the World Health Organization in their *Global Age-Friendly Cities Project* and the complementary new vision of Health Canada that:

- values and support the contributions of older people;
- celebrates diversity, refutes ageism and reduces inequities; and
- provides age-friendly environments and opportunities for older Canadians to make healthy choices, which will enhance their independence and quality of life.

The determinants of active aging are complex and interdependent. This interconnectedness means very simply that if one need is not met, a cascading effect occurs and other needs also go unmet thus, affecting well-being and social inclusion.

Moving to the Future

Aging Actively in Burlington makes a series of recommendations for future actions that encourage active aging. Most important, the study calls for the convening of a Seniors' Roundtable to engage stakeholders, such as seniors, funders, service providers, senior organizations, faith communities, the Burlington Seniors' Advisory Committee, Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee, and the Region's Elder Seniors Advisory Committee and others to look at Burlington's organizational capacity to coordinate, plan and work together to implement the creation of supportive environments for seniors in Burlington.