Celebrating Seniors in our Communities Through Volunteerism and Story-Telling

The Triple "E" Elder Bank and the Tapestry Project

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March 2016

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Introduction

The aging of Canada's population has been well documented and discussed at length in a multitude of policy sectors from the front-line to Parliament. Front and centre in these changing demographics are the broad implications for health care, leisure, social assistance, and quality of life among other factors. It is this reality that has contributed to a much-needed discussion of the often marginalized place that seniors hold in society and the concomitant recognition that this cohort of the population has tremendous untapped contributory potential in economic, political, social and cultural terms. The fiscal and social landscape painted by the statistics presented by various stakeholders mandates a new and progressive approach – one that more explicitly acknowledges the research indicating an inverse relationship between quality of life measures and economic costs associated with senior citizens.

Of the top ten municipalities in Canada (with a population over 5,000) reporting the highest proportion of seniors, seven are found in British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2011). While British Columbia has a lower proportion of seniors overall than the rest of Canada, at 13.3% compared to 14.8%, and Surrey's aging population represents 12% of the total Surrey population, these figures represent a significant number of citizens that are not fully engaged in their communities.

Given these demographic trends, there is a pressing need for greater attention, in part through enhanced social engagement, to more creative approaches to improving the physical and mental health of our aging population. With this growing population of seniors, the need to reframe the experiences of many aging individuals becomes even more pressing.

The current construction of older persons in Canada is grounded in a *burden* orientation, whereby programs and services are often designed as *busy activities* and assistance-driven initiatives. Instead, older persons need to be more progressively constructed as integral members of their communities who have not stopped contributing but have simply transformed the nature of their engagement. The beginning of this transition requires strategies and meaningful engagement of government and community agencies in reframing the role of seniors. In time, the profile of seniors in our communities will be the most effective tool in driving this much-needed and dramatic shift.

PROMOTING A SHIFT

There is clear evidence that seniors benefit from volunteering in terms of social relationships and the development of social networks (Collom, 2008) as well as improving physical and social well-being (Anderson et al., 2014; Grimm et al., 2007; Pettigrew et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al. 2013). There is equally compelling evidence to indicate that individuals who engage with seniors in meaningful ways shift to more positive attitudes toward older citizens (Guttell, 2006).

It is clear "that volunteering increases social, physical, and cognitive activity (to varying degrees depending on characteristics of the volunteer placement) which, through biological and psychological mechanisms, leads to improved functioning" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 1505). To that end, this report outlines two components of a project aimed at developing meaningful and strategic opportunities for seniors to contribute to their communities, to sustain and improve their health and well-being, and ultimately to contribute to a cultural shift in the positions that seniors hold in society.

The project outlined in this report represents one such effort in shifting this re-visioning by developing a robust and locally-driven model of volunteering that incorporates an expansion of the volunteer role of seniors and contributes to the development of an oral history repository to facilitate inter- and intra-generational elder engagement. These two components of the project are an Elder Volunteer Bank and a Community Engagement Initiative through Story-Telling.

Experts, Entertainers, Educators:
Transforming Lives through the Triple "E" Elder Bank

RESPONDING TO A NEED

Seniors as a potential volunteer pool is not a new concept and most communities in B.C. have an active senior volunteer base operating in a variety of capacities. However, discussions over the last decade have engaged with more progressive models of community engagement for seniors that incorporate opportunities that are more connected to their identities, skills, interests, and knowledge. This direction necessitates a reconceptualization of retired individuals in a manner that acknowledges their pre-retirement lives and offers a continuation of their journey as opposed to a fork in the road (Kaskie et al., 2007).

There is an important cautionary note associated with this direction as these older citizens may be more vulnerable to exploitation in economic, political and social terms than other volunteer groups. This may be particularly problematic when seniors and other vulnerable groups (e.g. disabled individuals, youth) are engaged in activities that unburden the state in some fashion (Martinson et al., 2006). This risk is significant as it has been noted that seniors volunteer for more altruistic reasons than other volunteers (e.g. youth) and because of this tend to be more engaged in activities supported by public agencies in the service of public goals (Chappell, 1997). In some ways, a shift to more professional/occupational (e.g. engineer, landscaper) and/or personal (home cook) volunteer activities might alleviate some of these concerns as private citizens are seeking the service with only a coordination role played by government. The first component proposed in this report is an effort to engage seniors in a manner that is more congruent with their lives.

THE TRIPLE "E" ELDER BANK

The Triple "E" Bank is a volunteer hub connecting seniors with a range of skills, knowledge, and interests (e.g. accountants, home cooks, landscapers, and mechanics) to members of the community seeking advice in some realm. Volunteers within this model would be referred to as "E" Citizens. While the audience for the services provided through the Elder Bank would be the broader community, one of the important aspects of this initiative is seniors *working* with and for other seniors. There are numerous studies that highlight the positive impact of peer relationships within seniors' communities in learning, advocating, and socializing (Peel and Warburton, 2009; Scharlach et al., 2014; Uryan, Matusitz and Breen, 2012). It is this aspect of community development that is particularly compelling.

As noted by Brown (2011),

> all communities can be stronger because of older volunteers. These older volunteers can provide valuable needed services that communities cannot afford to have if they have to pay for them. Nurses can act as spokespersons for older adults and assist with education of organizations and individuals regarding the contributions that older adults can make and foster a more positive attitude towards aging. McBride (2006) challenges all communities to develop ways of engaging all older adults who have the interest to be engaged. She offers an "institutional capacity perspective" for development of civic roles for older adults that takes into account interests, abilities, and capacities. Approaches such as these could help to increase numbers of older volunteers (p. 7).

While all forms of peer-based, familial and community engagement can be positively related to seniors' health (on all of its dimensions), there is evidence to indicate that formal volunteer programs outweigh informal volunteer opportunities in their impact on various mental health challenges including depression (Li and Ferraro, 2005). This initiative aims to expand access to formalized and innovative volunteer activities. It is clear, in cases where seniors are engaged in working toward greater visibility and recognition, that their agency and consequently their social power are magnified (Martinson, Minkler and Garcia, 2013). This initiative, and indeed the Tapestry Project discussed later, are both examples of innovative engagement of seniors in raising and celebrating their roles in their communities.

The primary objective of the Triple "E" Bank is to promote more meaningful engagement with seniors. The program would be operated by the City of Surrey (and potentially other municipalities) in partnership with other government, corporate and community stakeholders. There would be a coordinator position supported by a staff position housed in Surrey's Community and Recreation Services. This location is important as many of the mechanisms, safeguards and connections associated with connecting volunteers and members of the public are well established through existing programs. The success of this initiative is contingent on this coordinator role. This multifaceted position includes website development and maintenance, community education, recruitment, supporting information and training opportunities, and developing the "E" Citizen program. An advisory committee would be established to support the work of the coordinator in their three primary functions: community education, recruitment, volunteer activity (see Figure 1).

The advisory committee would include members from various business and community sectors, ethnic and geographic categories, and members of seniors' communities.

FIGURE 1: COMMUNITY EDUCATION, RECRUITMENT AND VOLUNTEERISM: A SUSTAINABLE CYCLE

Community Education

There is a critical role for local community organizations in Surrey in educating potential "E" Citizens about the Bank. It is important that there be a meaningful educational strategy to maximize recruitment and facilitate continuous improvement in the delivery of volunteer services to the community. Agencies currently working with seniors are best positioned to understand the particularities of the senior population with respect to language, culture, housing, ethnicity, diversity, and consequent needs associated with these factors. Therefore, these service providers will be integral to the development of a comprehensive and innovative outreach strategy.

The most critical objective of this project is to contribute to a shift in the culture of communities so that the social construction of seniors as part of a *silver tsunami* is no longer tolerated. This shift will only be realized through continuous education of community members about their role as potential "E" Citizens and as consumers of the services provided by those volunteers. These target awareness efforts will ultimately highlight and contribute to this profound shift in our socio-cultural beliefs.

Recruitment

Recruitment of volunteers is a primary task of the coordinator and requires a deep and nuanced understanding of existing agencies and programs, demographic and neighbourhood characteristics, among other factors. Implementation of this initiative must attend to key motivational factors for seniors as they consider volunteerism (Petriwskyj, 2007).

In an analysis of these factors for older citizens it was found "that specific motives for volunteering – to feel useful and productive and to fulfill a moral obligation – were significant predictors of frequency of volunteering" (Morris, 1994, p. 115). In thinking about recruitment, the range of potential recruits to the Bank needs to be acknowledged to maximize the accessibility to the model for potential participants. This is particularly important given the evidence that individuals from

lower socio-economic status accrue greater benefit from volunteer engagement (Morrow-Howell et al., 2008) and yet may also be the least likely to apply. One of the greatest challenges facing existing programs and the development of this volunteer initiative is to maximize accessibility (Pettigrew et al., 2015) in regard to both the community education and recruitment functions. Appendix A provides examples of some of the organizations that will be accessed as the initiative is developed and implemented.
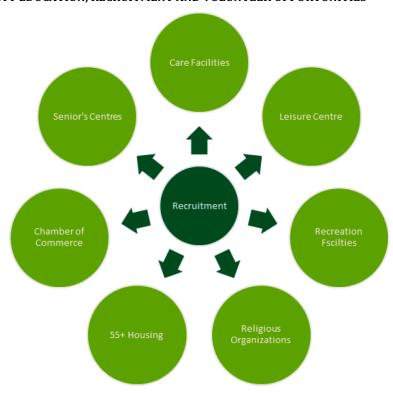
Volunteer Activities

Members of the community, from all age groups, will be accessing the talents of "E" Citizens, which in turn will increase the profile of the program, which will increase recruitment opportunities and support a model of continuous improvement. It is critical that as these volunteer connections are made, they are promoted and celebrated as a part of a model of continuous outreach and improvement.

Website

The "E" Bank would be an online hub whereby community members interested in becoming "E" Citizens would be able to access information about the program, application requirements and forms, and testimonials. Community members interested in utilizing the Bank for assistance would be able to find an appropriately qualified "E" Citizen and connect. It is critical to remember that while the "E" Citizens are all seniors, all community members will be able to access the Bank and the services provided by the volunteers.

FIGURE 2: COMMUNITY EDUCATION, RECRUITMENT AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES[1]

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[1] See Appendix A

Information and Training Opportunities

Once potential volunteers have expressed an interest in being part of the "E" Bank, the coordinator will be responsible for providing information and training opportunities for interested elders. Additionally, community information sessions and media campaigns to promote usage of the "E" Bank will be mounted. It is critical to the program that the potential pool of volunteers be understood in as broad, imaginative, and progressive a fashion as possible.

"E" Citizen Appreciation

Elder Bank volunteers would be given "E" Citizen status and be able to access a variety of forms of recognition, potentially including: discounts at local businesses, priority registration for community programs, and an array of other possibilities. It is anticipated that this public affirmation will have a number of positive impacts associated with recruitment, community education, sustainability, and will ultimately contribute to the broader cultural shift.

Sharing our Stories, Weaving our History: A Tapestry Project

The second component is the Tapestry Project, which is an effort to celebrate the lives of seniors through the telling of their stories. As we approach Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation, this documentation of oral histories has an added allure; however, it is not the goal of this initiative to be event-driven. Instead, as these stories are captured, it is a key objective to develop an ongoing and sustainable mechanism to archive individual and collective histories. A critical aspect of this depository, as others have noted through similar projects, is that it must be user-friendly and reflect the critical role of positionality in the telling of stories and consequently any shared understanding of events and relationships.

The effort to document various historical narratives is not new or unique and in a description of a like-minded project, it was noted that "a child in the year 2025, 2050 or 2095 should be able to activate the Internet and say I'd like to know about the Halifax explosion, or the Canadian involvement in D-Day or the Canadians who marched through Holland (at the end of the Second World War)" (Mullington, 1999).

As discussed in relation to the Elder Bank initiative, there are significant positive consequences associated with this component. It has been noted that "for some seniors volunteering means a powerful way to develop abilities and skills already gained in professional life that fit well into the constellation of other activities. Volunteering is here a tool for gaining significant psychological and emotional satisfaction. Acquired new skills and abilities do not only enrich seniors themselves, but these pass their life experiences and positive values to youngsters" (Pavelek, 2012, p. 23). This initiative absolutely provides a supportive context for these experiences.

RESPONDING TO A NEED

A critical objective of this initiative is to increase the visibility of seniors in their communities by documenting their journeys, and through those stories, to build a fuller and more layered and

nuanced history of British Columbia. Additionally, it is anticipated that parallel to the development of a richer historical understanding of these individuals' experiences, there will be a clear challenge to various stereotypes of seniors and renewed appreciation for their continuing and valuable contributions (Martinson, Minkler and Garcia, 2013). It is in this regard that the Elder Bank and Tapestry initiative further complement one another and contribute to the work that is already being undertaken in the City of Surrey.

This initiative should be characterized as a "legitimated recovery of marginalized voices and community knowledge as part of a process of affirming community self-identity" (Seedat, 2014, 22). It is critical to understand that intergenerational experiences cannot be generalized at such a high level that we don't attend to the important variations in these experiences (Spurdich and Spurdich, 2010).

Notably, "oral history provides a way of making concrete one's experiences and wisdom and of creating from them a heritage to hand down to one's family and communal heirs. There are great therapeutic benefits or enhancement-of-life benefits to the narrators doing an oral history. Benefits are directly in proportion to how rigorous a historical effort it is, and therefore, the less "therapeutic" the goal, the more therapeutic the result will be" (Baum, 1981, p. 49). Importantly, these broader benefits mirror the outcomes anticipated with the E-Bank initiative.

THE TAPESTRY PROJECT

Building on research that has examined intergenerational knowledge exchange (Gau, 2013), this program would ground the gathering and sharing of stories in the City of Surrey in collaboration with the K-12 system. Schools as key partners in these types of initiatives is well established (Powers et al. 1989; Sears, 1991); however, community and business partnerships as well as post-secondary opportunities would be integral to the development of the repository. The intergenerational orientation of this initiative is foundational to the overarching goal of cultural change through a re-visioning of the integral roles and value of seniors in communities.

Central to this initiative is the public access and indeed celebration of the individual stories captured by the project. Importantly, affirmation of their difference-making behaviour has been noted as important to seniors in the valuing of their identities (Gau, 2013), and this observation adds further support for the healthy communities focus of this work.
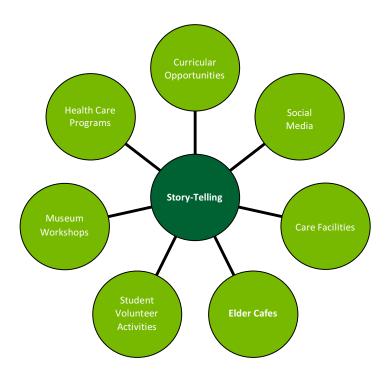
The technology emphasis of this initiative is intriguing in a time shaped so strongly by social media. In a description of another project, "high school students who grew up in the digital age are learning about their city's past through the ancient art of storytelling" (Brant News). With the need to return to these traditions acknowledged, there are tremendous opportunities to explore the relationship between story-telling and the technological era we find ourselves in (Bazley and Graham, 2012).

As noted above, this program will be operated out of the City of Surrey in collaboration with other key stakeholders including the Surrey School District, Surrey Museum, other government partners and community organizations. A coordinator will be working with an advisory committee with representation from a variety of sectors, including business communities, cultural organizations

and constituencies, and educational stakeholders. Additionally, the City of Surrey will provide technical support for website development and maintenance to ensure that the site is user-friendly in its accessibility and interactional orientation.

This initiative is dependent upon a creative, flexible and ever-expanding array of contributory pathways employing accessible and diverse entry points (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: STORY-TELLING AVENUES FOR EXCHANGE

CIRCULAR OPPORTUNITIES

The K-12 system is an essential collaborative partnership as it contains a multitude of possibilities within which storytelling can be integrated into existing courses. English or Humanities 9 and Social Studies 11 are considered cornerstones as they are mandatory courses, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to engage in storytelling as a creative and academic enterprise. In using these examples, it is acknowledged that numerous innovative pedagogical strategies are being employed by teachers every day. Additionally, the course-based opportunities are only confined by the creativity and energy of the staff and the support of administrators.

In thinking about other possibilities within a curricular discussion, the Surrey Academy of Integrated Learning presents a unique opportunity within the district. As noted on the district website (2016), "SAIL students focus on inquiry and project based learning, through an interdisciplinary program. Students explore real world topics that foster independent learning and critical thought. Rather than traditional subjects taught in isolation, SAIL students integrate concepts from Science, Math, and Humanities into their learning". SAIL is an intriguing location for storytelling to be integrated across the curriculum as students have the opportunity to incorporate storytelling into more than just one class, and potentially through multiple projects. Also, the blend

of online and in-class interactions increases the variety of projects that students can incorporate in their learning plans. Online and alternative schooling are becoming more popular options for students in the public school system. Incorporating storytelling into such a unique program could harness the growing trend of blended and interdisciplinary educational efforts.

Additional opportunities to engage in story-telling through curriculum would include, but not be limited to, both provincial and district-wide scholarships; graduation projects; and study tours. Irrespective of the vehicle and medium, the stories collected through various efforts in curricular innovation will be uploaded to the website and incorporated in various distribution formats through the website and other avenues (e.g. a documentary about the Tapestry Project).

SOCIAL MEDIA

As discussed above, the tapestry website will be an interactive site for the collection and viewing of stories fuelled significantly by the contributions developed in relation to K-12 curricular opportunities. However, equally important will be contributions to the website through individual video contributions uploaded from cell phones and other forms of technology. Again, the opportunities to develop and populate this site are only limited by the imagination and ingenuity of those involved.

CARE FACILITIES

There will be multiple and varied opportunities to utilize care facilities as sites of story-telling. Consequently, story-telling has been studied as a therapeutic strategy (Willis, 2008) and the use of high school students, elder volunteers, staff, and family members will have individual and relational benefits beyond the contributions of the stories in themselves.

ELDER CAFES

Employing the *World Café* or like method, hosting an elder café with the expressed purpose of sharing and documenting stories would be another exciting opportunity to facilitate the development of the website.

STUDENT VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

B.C. high school students are required to complete a specific number of work and/or volunteer hours prior to graduation. The Tapestry Project would provide an ideal opportunity for students to satisfy this graduation requirement and potentially link this work with a graduation project (e.g. District/Authority Scholarship) or other curricular opportunities.

MUSEUM WORKSHOPS

There is a tremendous opportunity to build on the work of the Surrey Museum and the Surrey Archives through community-based workshops that provide immediate opportunities for story-telling, as well as community education that supports a longer-term and broader appreciation for the Tapestry initiative. The Tapestry Project has the potential to offer a sustainable, effective, and exciting opportunity for continuous development of a broad volunteer base through highly affirming engagement of seniors in the community.

Moving Forward

In summary, "elderly people are often *organizational firekeepers*. They maintain community memory, pass on organizational practices, and ensure social continuity" (Carroll, 2011, p. 7). No longer can this function be acknowledged without the concomitant valuing, and out of this, an action orientation. Both of the initiatives described in this report represent meaningful approaches to support the health and fiscal benefits of more progressive and inclusive engagement with and of seniors in communities around British Columbia.

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Appendix

APPENDIX A: EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND RECRUITMENT SITES FOR "E" CITIZENS AND/OR TAPESTRY CONTRIBUTORS

Seniors (55+) Programs

Bridgeview Community Centre
http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/11534.aspx#sthash.IWCfLQZy.dpuf

Cloverdale Recreation Centre
http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/8524.aspx#sthash.xVSJpw7H.dpuf

Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre
http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/1914.aspx#sthash.dxsMVAHz.dpuf

Fleetwood Community Centre
http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/1858.aspx#sthash.cgTFoFVu.dpuf

Guildford Recreation Centre
http://www.surrey.ca/culture-recreation/1876.aspx#sthash.Ug38UDA9.dpuf

Newton Seniors' Centre

South Surrey Recreation Centre

Seniors (55+) Assisted/ Independent Living

Arbourside Court
http://www.arbourside.com/

Bear Creek Villa
http://chartwell.com/retirement-homes/chartwell-imperial-place-retirement-residence

Chartwell Imperial Place Retirement Residence
http://www.bearcreekvilla.com/

Elim Village
http://www.elimvillage.ca/

The Evergreen Hamlets at Fleetwood
http://www.evergreenhamlets.com/

The Gateway
http://gatewayassistedliving.ca/

Guilford Seniors Village
http://www.retirementconcepts.com/homes/guildford-seniors-village/

Kinsmen Place Lodge
https://www.kinsmenlodge.ca/

Morgan Place Care Facility
http://www.morganplace.ca/

Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS)
Job Options BC: Urban Older Workers (55+)
http://pics.bc.ca/

Rosemary Heights Seniors Village
http://www.retirementconcepts.com/homes/rosemary-heights/

Strive Assisted Living
Fraser South
http://striveliving.ca

Fitness Facilities

Anytime Fitness
http://www.anytimefitness.com/gyms/

Club16 Trevor Linden Fitness
http://www.trevorlindenfitness.com/clubs/fitness-centre-surrey/
http://www.trevorlindenfitness.com/clubs/newton-fitness-centre/

Fit For Women Gym Ltd
http://www.fitforwomengym.com

Goodlife Fitness Surrey
http://www.goodlifefitness.com/locations/britishcolumbia/surrey/newton

G.T.C. Walking Club
https://www.guildfordtowncentre.com/info/group-programs/

Snap Fitness
https://www.snapfitness.com/gyms/surrey-bc-v3s3y2/6414

Steve Nash Fitness World
http://www.snclubs.com/locations/surrey/

Religious Services

The City of Surrey is home to numerous religious denominations and services. These religious associations may provide access to individuals which would otherwise be inaccessible.

Clubs, Associations, Organizations

CARP White Rock/Surrey Chapter 11
http://www.carp.ca/

Diversecity Community Resources Society
http://www.dcrs.ca/

The Guilford Lions Club
http://www.e-clubhouse.org/sites/guildfordbc/

North Surrey Lions Club
http://northsurreylionsclub.com/

Peace Arch Monarch Lions Club
http://e-clubhouse.org/sites/peacearchmonarchbc/

Royal Canadian Legion Crescent Branch 240

Surrey-Delta Indo-Canadian Seniors Society
http://indocanadianseniorssociety.com/

Seniors Come Share Society
http://comeshare.ca/

Sources Community Resource Centre
http://www.sourcesbc.ca

Valley Women's Network-Surrey/Delta Chapter
http://www.valleywomensnetwork.com/

Acknowledgements

Author's Biographical Information

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