

Seniors shaping the way we live, cities grow

September 15 2017, by Paul Mayne

Senior citizens are shaping the way neighbourhoods evolve and grow, all in the name of maintaining deeper connections to their communities as they age, according to one Western researcher's work inside a pair of London neighbourhoods.

"We were looking at how the built-in social environment in London either supports or holds barriers to seniors being socially engaged and participating in activities," said School of Occupational Therapy professor Carri Hand, whose work looked at Westmount and Old South neighbourhoods in London. "We focused on social connections and activities, seeing how they interacted."

Through interviews with seniors, and the use of GPS tracking to follow their movements, Hand found older adults are creating our communities through casual social interactions, helping others and taking community action. From those three areas, Hand has revealed some common truths about these particular neighbourhoods.

Seniors expressed deep connections to physical places in neighbourhoods – restaurants, cafes, parks, libraries. Everyday neighbourhood activities, such as shopping or walking, appeared key to maintaining a sense of connection to the neighbourhood and in developing informal social ties.

Hand also found seniors needed to help other seniors – often relating to gaps in services and support – by becoming [neighbourhood](#)-based supports for their peers.

"They are contributing through helping other seniors by getting them to their doctor, helping them with their medication, helping with home activities. They are stepping in when they see there is nowhere else to turn," Hand said. "I didn't expect to find that. It's just highlighting the impact policies related to cutting back services for seniors is having."

Hand added seniors contributing to change at the community level – such as engaging politically, patronizing local businesses and doing volunteer work – has potential benefits for municipalities collaborating with [older adults](#) to create and maintain liveable neighbourhoods.

Demographic trends certainly show the importance of this work.

- According to Statistics Canada, people over the age of 65 (5.9 million) outnumber children under the age of 14 (5.8 million) in Canada. By 2061, if trends continue, there will be 12 million seniors versus 8 million children.
- In 2017, there are 8,230 Canadians over the age of 100 with five times more women in this group.
- By 2021, 1-in-5 people will be over the age of 65, and 1-in-3 over the age of 55.

Hand hopes her findings can be used to inform age-friendly social change. She has shared her [work](#) with policy-makers from the city and program providers, as well as consulted directly with Age Friendly London (AFL) on its new three-year plan. With AFL, Hand championed the idea of having specific social spaces for the seniors.

"I wanted to look at features of the neighbourhoods that supported people who are active and socially engaged in their community. In both neighbourhoods, we found some features that were good and some features that could be improved," she explained. "It will take time, but I love working with community partners and others interested in this topic"

who are wanting to make possible changes."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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