Building Back Differently

Building Back through

Supporting Older Volunteers & Sustaining Volunteer-Based Programs in Rural Communities

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> **Building Back Differentl**y is a collaborative project between Trent University researchers and community experts that pulls together local data and experience from the Peterborough region to help envision a healthier, more equitable future in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Rural communities, where populations are aging rapidly, are often challenged to support their older residents, relying on the voluntary sector to provide essential services (Davies et al., 2018). In rural settings, voluntarism can strengthen community vitality, sustain services (Sullivan et al., 2014), and help to facilitate aging in place and community development (Skinner & Hanlon, 2016). In turn, it provides opportunities for social participation (Winterton & Warburton, 2021). Further, older volunteers may positively influence the sustainability of rural communities – ensuring not only the sustainability of the rural economy and services, but also facilitating aging in place and lessening the likelihood that older rural residents become stuck in place – unable to relocate from homes that may no longer be safe, accessible or appropriate – typically for reasons of economic, social, and/or racial disparity (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012). However, restructuring and austerity measures put pressure on voluntarism, causing a downloading of responsibility for rural service delivery onto the volunteer-based programs and older volunteers. This in turn becomes complicated by the reality that the volunteer pool is itself aging (Warburton, 2015).

The phenomenon of 'older voluntarism', whereby increasing numbers of older volunteers and volunteer-based programs are providing services to aging populations can lead to uncertainty regarding rural service sustainability and concerns for the precarity of older volunteers, including both the risk to the older individuals themselves and for the volunteer-based programs utilizing older volunteers (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019). Increasingly prevalent in rural areas, older voluntarism challenges older residents, organizations and communities alike by, for example, creating age-related absenteeism, burnout, as well as barriers to participation (Davies et al., 2018). This raises critical questions about the uncertain capacity and resilience of aging rural volunteers, the volunteer-based programs they support and, more generally, the rural communities in which they live (Colibaba et al., 2021c).

Older peoples' heightened vulnerabilities to COVID-19 have raised awareness about the need for isolated rural older adults to maintain social connections. To support this challenge, rural volunteer-based programs offer support for isolated residents and opportunities for participation and social networking through volunteering (Warburton, 2015). However, given social distancing, volunteering has become unsustainable (Henning-Smith, 2020). Locally, many rural services have adapted the way they utilize volunteers during the pandemic. For example, prior to the pandemic, volunteers were critical to the operations of the Selwyn Public Library. The pool of approximately 174 older volunteers performed duties such as staffing the circulation desk, cataloguing, handling memberships and reservations and conducting children's programming. However, during the first wave of the pandemic, the Selwyn Public Library ceased all public-facing services until it established curbside pick-up and virtual programming, using paid staff only (Colibaba et al., 2021d). As provincial guidelines evolve, it is increasingly important to understand how older voluntarism can be sustained during and after the pandemic.

The _Rural Older Volunteers and COVID-19 Pandemic_ project explored the experiences of three local volunteer-based programs (Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, Selwyn Fire Department, Selwyn Public Library) in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic to determine how both older volunteers and program administrators navigated the challenges of volunteering in Selwyn Township. Key findings reveal personal (resiliency) and program-level (adaptability) responses to volunteering during the pandemic, demonstrating both challenging and growth-oriented volunteer and program experiences (Colibaba et al., 2021a; Colibaba et al., 2021b).

The Resiliency of Older Volunteers

Older volunteers who participated in the study expressed feelings of vulnerability during the pandemic. Old age, pre-existing medical conditions and compromised immune systems enhance the risk for many volunteers of experiencing complications from the COVID-19 virus. A large number, especially the ones at the library who were not actively volunteering at the time,

shared feelings of isolation and being disconnected from fellow volunteers and their community. Despite these vulnerabilities and risks, the volunteers displayed a sense of resiliency, as many continued to volunteer or wished to resume volunteering post-pandemic to ensure community services continue:

> *"Even though they keep reminding me how old I am…I guess it's just built right into me…If someone is in need, I want to be there. I go. I know that we are protected to the last degree. I still love doing the volunteering because you just don't know. It could be your neighbour, relative, or family member. It could be anybody. When they need help, they need help." (Fire department, male, late 70s)*

The Adaptability of Volunteer-Based Programs

Volunteer-based programs demonstrated adaptability, which helped volunteers to continue to navigate logistical and structural volunteering changes brought on by the first wave of the pandemic. Some responses were minor (e.g., increased PPE such as masks) and some were major (e.g., temporary closure of in-person library services). However, volunteers described the importance of continually adapting and evolving to ensure their organization would remain active in some capacity.

> *"We could have just thrown our hands up and given up, but we didn't."*
> *(Abbeyfield House volunteer, male, 63 years)*

To continue to support and sustain older voluntarism in rural communities during and after the pandemic, we can look to a framework that illustrates the multi-dimensional personal, program and community levels of older voluntarism (Colibaba et al., 2021a). The framework reveals ways that volunteer-based programs, like those in Selwyn Township, can maintain levels of personal (individual volunteers), program (volunteer-based organizations) and community (aging rural places) sustainability through a global crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic.
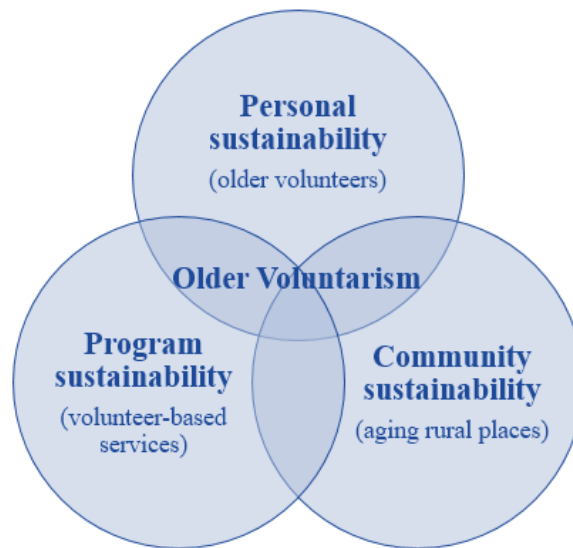
Figure 1. The sustainability of older voluntarism in ageing rural communities (adapted from Colibaba, Russell & Skinner, 2021a, p.295).

The *personal sustainability* of older volunteers in a post-pandemic society is determined by the ability of volunteer-based programs to continue to utilize volunteers in their operations and to manage volunteers' attitudes towards volunteering, post-pandemic. Having a supportive program that is willing to modify its health and safety policies and procedures strengthened volunteers' positive attitudes towards continuing to volunteer post-pandemic.

Program sustainability, where the volunteer-based program can endure post-pandemic, is integral for the volunteers and the broader community. Modifying services during the pandemic, whether through adjusting services and/or creating new policies, ensured program sustainability. Modifications also allowed the programs to adapt to the changes brought on by the pandemic and saw their operations continue in some capacity, maintaining community services and often allowing volunteering to continue, albeit in a modified manner.

Maintaining *community sustainability* ensures that services and supports that would otherwise be lacking remain. The attitudes and actions portrayed by volunteers and programs alike, through their personal resiliency to remain a volunteer during the pandemic and through programs' abilities to adapt, help ensure the sustainability of older voluntarism as a whole.

These recommendations for policy and procedural changes work to support resiliency and adaptation and need to be addressed at the personal, program and community levels. Individually, volunteers need to support their volunteer-based programs as they adapt their policies and procedures to ensure the health and safety of not only the volunteers but of the community at large. Program administrators can work to ensure the changes to their programs best support their volunteers, patrons, and community. Lastly, the community, whether

individual rural residents or at the municipal level, can be supportive of the changes to ensure the sustainability of older voluntarism as a whole.

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