

# Developing Rural Insights for Building Sustainable Age-Friendly Communities Initiatives

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## Background

Age-friendly initiatives often are motivated by a single government funding injection, challenging human and financial resources. A focus on describing elements and features of age-friendly programs has characterized the first decade (2007-2017) of academic interest in age-friendly programming. However, what is missing is research into the pervasive challenge of developing programs that sustain beyond initial development. Critique of the planning model has led to uncertainty and concern for program sustainability: a strong link between early stages of development (e.g., committee formation and the needs assessment) and long-term viability (e.g., implementation and continuation). Building sustainable programs are often challenged by conflicting government priorities, aging populations, and overburdened volunteers, and so it is critical that research progress toward understanding of the parameters and dimensions of program sustainability from the outset, to help minimize program decline and maximize public investment.



## Our project

This project was undertaken in 3 phases, with each study involving key informant interviews with 92 age-friendly stakeholders in the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) and Ontario (ON), exploring rural age-friendly implementation and sustainability.

### 1. Challenges and Opportunities to Sustaining Age-friendly Initiatives

- Goal: Evaluate a province-wide age-friendly program in NL.
- Participants: 35 age-friendly leaders from 11 communities in NL.

### 2. Experts' Perspectives on Building Sustainability into Age-Friendly Programming

- Goal: Examine implementation processes contributing to sustainable programming, emergent from Study 1.
- Participants: 11 age-friendly leaders, each representing their community

### 3. Building Sustainable Rural Age-Friendly Communities

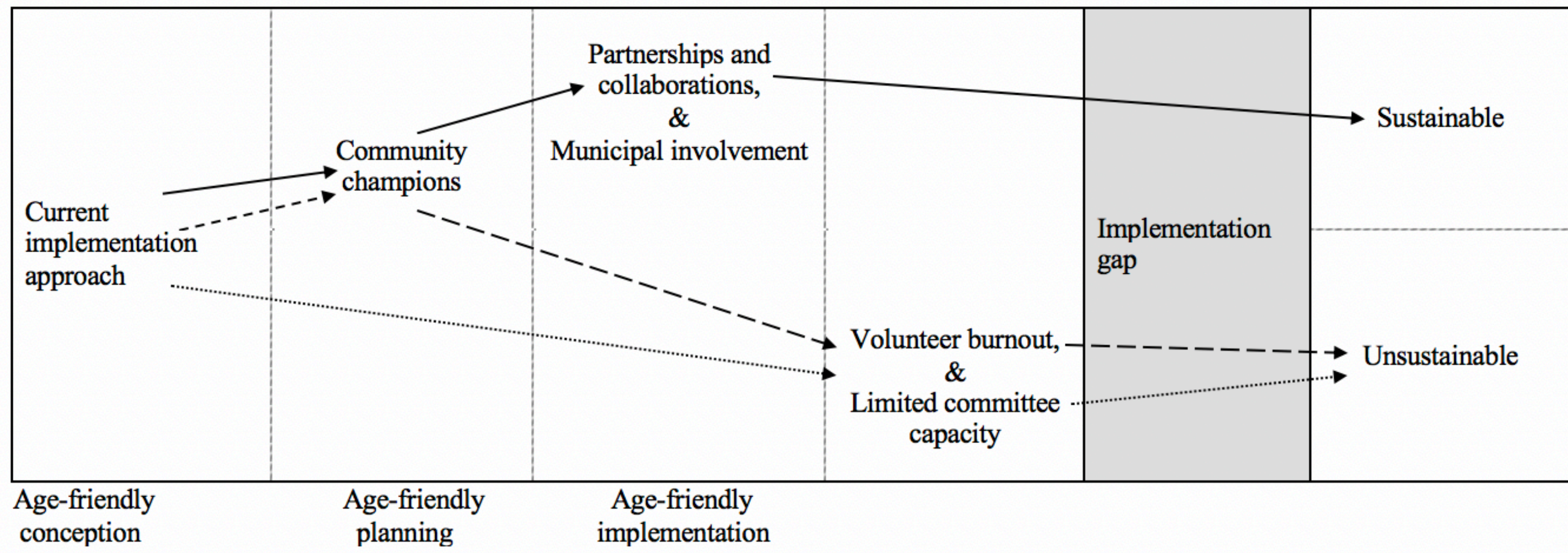
- Goal: Use a case study approach to systematically examine age-friendly sustainability in rural ON.
- Design and participants: Case studies in five age-friendly communities across rural ON, each representing a different rural typology. We interviewed 46 age-friendly leaders across all five case studies.

## Key findings

### 1. Implementation gap between early development and long-term viability:

Age-friendly sustainability may be conceptualized as an implementation gap between early development stages and long-term viability (Figure 1). To close this gap and minimize burnout, sustainable initiatives should include community champions, multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations, and systemic municipal involvement (Pathway 1).

Fig. 1. Emergent challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly initiatives



Typical age-friendly implementation pathways:  
 ————— = Pathway 1: Age-friendly initiative likely to be sustainable  
 - - - - - = Pathway 2: Age-friendly initiative likely to be unsustainable  
 ..... = Pathway 3: Age-friendly initiative likely to be unsustainable

### 2. Individual communities' roles:

The balance of age-friendly sustainability is rooted in the essence of the individual community. Local perceptions of community connectedness in conjunction with an articulated, organized, and formally led community focus on supporting its aging population may be linked to the program's success and sustainability. Age-friendly programs are not unsustainable entities but instead require attention to the critical value of considering individual community connectedness prior to establishing the jurisdiction of implementation.



**3. Challenges of capacity and jurisdictional fragmentation:** When programs are implemented across jurisdictionally fragmented communities, the implementation gap is much more challenging to overcome and the initiative is likely to be unsustainable. Initiatives may avoid the risk of unsustainability by being implemented at a locally appropriate, naturally-occurring jurisdiction.

### 4. Challenges of scope and reach:

The reach and scope of rural age-friendly programs is proving to be limited (e.g., recreational programming rather than transportation and housing), with committees typically unable to make large-scale environmental change and recreational programming dominating the "age-friendly" landscape. This approach prevents those who require the most from an age-friendly environment (e.g. socially isolated seniors) from benefitting. Age-friendly programs are theoretically beneficial; however, in reality they often lack the scope, reach and sustainability required to truly become age-friendly.



## Discussion

Drawing on individual, community, and jurisdictional factors will maximize the success and sustainability of rural age-friendly programs, extending the reach and scale of programs to more directly affect older people and their communities. Sustainability and success of rural age-friendly programs would benefit from consistent, renewable government funding that considers factors relevant to overcoming the implementation gap, including community champions, partnerships and collaborations and municipal involvement, and avoiding challenges created by volunteer burnout, limited committee capacity, jurisdictional fragmentation and de-emphasized community individuality.

## Publications

Russell, E., Skinner, M., & Fowler, K. (2019). Emergent challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly initiatives: Qualitative findings from a Canadian age-friendly funding program. *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2019.1636595>

Skinner, M., & McCrillis, E. (2019). Services for an aging rural population. 2019 Rural Ontario Foresight Paper: Measuring Rural Community Vitality. Phase 2 Initiative. Rural Ontario Institute. [http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Rural%20Ontario%20For%20esight%20Papers\\_Oct%202023.pdf](http://www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca/uploads/userfiles/files/Rural%20Ontario%20For%20esight%20Papers_Oct%202023.pdf)