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Muskoka featured in Trent University Rural age-friendly case study

OPINION May 19, 2019 by Elizabeth Russell, Mark Skinner, Amber Colibaba MuskokaRegion.com



Elizabeth Russell, the principal investigator of the Trent University Rural Age-Friendly Case Study project, roasts some marshmallows at the 2019 Fire and Ice festival in Bracebridge. 2019 - Maury McCrillis photo



MUSKOKA – Several years ago, the District of Muskoka received funding from the Ontario government to support the community in becoming more age-friendly – more accessible to and inclusive of the aging population.

This process included conducting a needs assessment to identify local older adults' needs and forming a steering committee to assess and implement key recommendations. Age-friendly committee memberships typically are comprised of municipal, community, and private citizen members, often including local older residents.

This community-level implementation process has, however, been shown to have challenges with sustainability e.g. not becoming permanent or institutionalized within a host organization.



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Based out of Trent University in Peterborough, Ont., our project aims to document the expert perspectives of rural and small-town age-friendly leaders about the barriers that may prevent, and factors that may support, sustainable age-friendly programming.

Between September 2018 and April 2019, we travelled over 6,000 kilometres (that's approximately the distance of travelling from St. Johns, N.L. to Victoria, B.C.) to five rural Ontario communities implementing age-friendly programming and spoke with nearly 60 age-friendly leaders. With multiple visits each to Temiskaming Shores, Perth County, District of Muskoka, the Durham Region (focused on the rural municipalities) and the greater Arnprior area, participants told us stories about the on-the-ground challenges of developing age-friendly communities, but also the successes, both major and minor, of achieving a more inclusive community.

We found that there is an implementation gap between short and long-term sustainability. However the involvement of community champions, partnerships (e.g. local businesses, non-profits, faith groups, and health and community-based services) and active municipal involvement are pathways toward sustainability. Involving these important factors at the community level will help ensure age-friendly programming will continue to support local residents as they grow older.

Since receiving the funding, the District of Muskoka's age-friendly initiative has developed a diverse steering committee primarily comprised of representatives from the municipality and local stakeholders who conducted a robust needs assessment that evaluated the needs of older adults in Muskoka. Volunteers who were involved on the committee are currently working to move forward on implementing recommendations from the needs assessment.

Thank you for welcoming us to the District of Muskoka and showing us the momentum that exists within your community. We value the time and contributions of everyone involved with the study.

Dr. Elizabeth Russell is an assistant professor in the department of psychology at Trent University in Peterborough and an executive member of the Trent Centre for Aging and Society.

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Amber Colibaba, M.A., is the research co-ordinator for the Canada research chair program in rural health, aging and social care, and for the building sustainable rural age-friendly communities research project, both housed at Trent University.



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