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Emergent Challenges and Opportunities to Sustaining Age-friendly Initiatives: Qualitative Findings from a Canadian Age-friendly Funding Program

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ABSTRACT

Age-friendly initiatives often are motivated by a single funding injection from national or sub-national governments, frequently challenging human and financial resources at the community level. To address this problem, this paper examines the challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly programs in the context of a Canadian age-friendly funding program. Based on a qualitative thematic content analysis of interview data with 35 age-friendly committee members drawn from 11 communities, results show that age-friendly sustainability may be conceptualized as an implementation gap between early development stages and long-term viability. Consistent over-dependence on volunteers and on committees' limited capacity may create burnout, limiting sustainability and the extent to which communities can truly become "age-friendly". To close this implementation gap while still remaining true to the grass-roots intention of the global age-friendly agenda, sustainable initiatives should include community champions, multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations, and systemic municipal involvement.

Introduction

Based on an analysis of data drawn from a program evaluation of a Canadian age-friendly funding initiative, this paper seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly programs. Our analysis was guided by three research questions: 1) under what circumstances are age-friendly committees successful in establishing sustainable age-friendly initiatives? 2) under what circumstances are age-friendly committees challenged to establish sustainable age-friendly initiatives? and 3) is a burden of sustainability placed upon community leaders implementing age-friendly initiatives? The aim is to contribute to the age-friendly literature by explicitly articulating and exploring those factors underlying age-friendly sustainability and describing

ways in which developing age-friendly programs have been able to success-fully address these barriers. Despite implementation challenges communities often face (Menec, Novek, Veselyuk, & McArthur, 2014), the current research does not directly address issues of sustainability, potentially over-looking unique pathways to sustaining age-friendly work. Towards this end, this paper turns to the empirical example of an age-friendly funding program from a province in Atlantic Canada to provide exploratory, theory-generating insight.

Age-friendly community initiatives often are motivated by a single funding injection from national or sub-national governments, proving to challenge available human and financial resources in rapidly-aging communities (Greenfield, Oberlink, Scharlach, Neal, & Stafford, 2015). Parallel with the growth in public funding and policy interest, a focus on describing elements and features of age-friendly programs has characterized the first decade (2007–2017) of academic interest in age-friendly programing (see *Journal of Aging and Social Policy's special edition* edited by Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014), often using case descriptions and conceptual reviews (Greenfield, 2018) or describing key age-friendly attributes or features (Lui, Everingham, Warburton, Cuthill, & Bartlett, 2009). This effectively captures programs' typical development and implementation mechanisms, but what is missing is research into the pervasive challenge of developing age-friendly programs that sustain beyond initial program development (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018). Recent studies in the age-friendly literature have increasingly suggested that the approach advocated by the WHO (2007, 2015) may challenge commu-nities to consider the social and economic diversity of older people (Menec, 2017), the individual characteristics and resources of communities (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018), and their dynamic, changing nature (Keating, Eales, & Phillips, 2013). This potentially imparts undue stressors by locally down-loading state-level responsibility. Further, Scharlach and Lehning (2016) point out that defining age-friendly work as primarily physical or social infrastructure, without examining their intersections, problematically simpli-fies the domains of age-friendly programs.

Critique of the age-friendly planning model has led to emerging uncer-tainty and concern for program sustainability, generally defined as those programs that continue, becoming permanent and institutionalized within a host organization (Savaya & Spiro, 2012). Sustainability of social programs is an important area of research as those that prematurely cease fail to comply with commitments made to the target population; in this case, older adults and the local community. Further, premature cessation of social programming may be wasteful of the public funding that instigated it, as is typically the case with age-friendly programs, and so examining factors contributing to and inhibiting social program sustainability is warranted (Savaya & Spiro, 2012). Within the context of age-friendly, sustainability

further refers to a strong link between early stages of development (e.g., committee formation and conducting the needs assessment) and long-term viability (e.g., program implementation and continuation). The commitment of financial, political, social, and human resources to sustain age-friendly initiatives has been referred to as a particularly challenging obstacle that warrants further study (Greenfield et al., 2015; Lehning & Greenfield, 2017). Challenges to building sustainable age-friendly programs are often exacerbated by conflicting municipal and state-level priorities, aging populations, and overburdened volunteers (Neville, Napier, Adams, Wham, & Jackson, 2016). Given rapidly aging populations, program sustainability in individual communities may be in doubt (Greenfield et al., 2015; Ozanne, Biggs, & Kurowski, 2014; Russell, 2015a; Winterton, 2016). Initiatives may support the development trajectories of communities responding to population aging; that is, community-based, often volunteer-driven initiatives are key to sustaining the aging communities in which older people are aging in place (Skinner & Hanlon, 2016). However, sustainability in turn may not be guaranteed by top-down (government) injections of funds. Sustainability challenges are emerging within age-friendly implementation trajectories, beginning with seed funding, striking a committee, and ending with a small-scale project or community group formation. As funding is depleted, however, program continuity often falls to volunteers, and momentum tends to disappear (Russell, 2015a). Grantmakers in Aging (2015) describe guiding principles for sustainable age-friendly efforts, suggesting that partnerships, research, and evaluation relate to sustainability beyond provision of funds. For example, this was supported by research identifying the need to clarify where responsibility lies (e.g., federal, state/provincial, local) to support and engage older adults through age-friendly efforts, especially in resource-poor locations, in order to sustain initiatives (Winterton, 2016). Among community programs funded to maximize rural ethnic Australian seniors' social participation, Winterton and Hulme Chambers (2017) found that interactions between resource and staffing challenges and government and health care institutions limited program sustainability. Further, Ozanne et al. (2014) identified program sustainability beyond initial funding periods as a critical theme transpiring from research conducted with age-friendly Project Development Officers. Taken together, this demonstrates that sustainability challenges are raised as a concern within the age-friendly literature; however, systematic research is still required to fully understand overarching barriers faced during implementation. As we move forward in the second decade (2018–2028) of global age-friendly initiatives (and in beyond into a post-age-friendly era), it is critical that research progress toward developing an understanding of the parameters and dimensions of age-friendly program sustainability from the outset, to help minimize program decline and maximize public investment.

Method

Study context

This paper reports on findings from a larger evaluation of a provincial age-friendly funding program in Newfoundland and Labrador; Canada's most easterly Atlantic province. An ideal jurisdiction for the purpose of age-friendly research, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador was among the first Canadian jurisdictions to launch a provincial age-friendly funding program in 2010. One-time grants of CAD$10,000 were allocated to support successful community applicants in forming an age-friendly committee, conducting a needs assessment, and actioning items derived from the assessment. The program emphasized rural communities and small towns, which dominate the provincial settlement landscape and are home to the most rapidly aging populations (Government of NL, 2007). The evaluation was initiated after four years to assess community-level impact and make recommendations to strengthen the next phase (Russell, 2015b). Our exploratory analysis focuses on qualitative data derived from interviews with age-friendly committee members conducted in 11 rural communities and small towns, with the goal of systematically examining and articulating the challenges to sustaining age-friendly initiatives. While our data is drawn from rural sites and particular rural issues are discussed, this paper emphasizes age-friendly programs more generally.

Sampling strategy

With university ethics approval from Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research, members of age-friendly committees funded by the provincial government program were invited to participate in interviews about their initiatives. When data collection was initiated in 2014, the province had funded 41 committees to launch age-friendly initiatives; however, only 29 had begun planning. During the initial sampling phase, 4 of these 29 committees were targeted to represent the dominant geographic characteristics of communities in the province (i.e., urban adjacent, regional hub, and rural) (Statistics Canada, 2017). Second, to maximize data confirmability (Schoenberg, Miller, & Pruchno, 2011), systematic case selection was used by inviting 7 additional committees (drawn from the initial 29) who had completed surveys for the program evaluation to be interviewed for this study. In total, our sample included 11 provincially-funded communities that had completed a needs assessment and had begun programing and infrastructure development. Of these 11 communities, two (*Coldbank* and *Jagged Cove*) were urban adjacent (i.e., rural communities adjacent to a Census Metropolitan Area), one (*Inland Bay*) was a regional hub (i.e., population of 5,000 or more; acts as an economic, cultural and

educational hub for the many surrounding rural communities), one (*Whelan's Bridge*) was a Census Agglomeration Area (i.e., a smaller version of the Census Metropolitan Area in which the urban core population was greater than 10,000 but less than 100,000), and seven (*Crane Cove, Mizzle Cove, Morganville, Rhubarb Point, Shell Beach, St. Christopher's*, and *St. Peter's*) were designated as rural (i.e., those communities that are not included in Census Metropolitan or Agglomeration Areas, and with populations less than 5,000) (Community Accounts, 2018).

With written and informed consent, interviews were completed in these 11 communities with 35 age-friendly committee members (57% female, *n* = 20). Committee sizes ranged from two to 10. Among the participants, 43% were volunteers (*n* = 15), 31% were municipal employees (clerks, recreation coordinators, or age-friendly coordinators, *n* = 11), 17% were elected municipal officials (*n* = 6), and 9% represented local organizations (*n* = 3). Participants were interviewed individually (*n* = 9) or in small groups (7 groups of two to six) depending on their availability. Of the 11 communities, 36% (*n* = 4) considered their age-friendly committee to be fully sustainable, whereas 64% (*n* = 7) identified their committee as presently unsustainable or likely to become defunct in the near future.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted in settings such as community centres, libraries, schools, and private homes to maximize ecological validity. Data collection centred on an interview protocol based on results from the larger evaluation survey, a pilot study of the protocol, and to maximize dependability, protocol revisions were advised by an expert panel not directly involved in the study. Primary questions focused on age-friendliness in the community (e.g., "Was age-friendly a part of your community prior to receiving the grant?"), program development processes (e.g., "How was your program implemented?"), program outcomes (e.g., "How has the initiative impacted age-friendliness?" "What is the best way to help newly funded communities begin?"), and community experiences of population aging ("Is population aging affecting this community?"). Protocol items were developed for the larger evaluation but were effective in spontaneously producing a discussion that we have encapsulated as "age-friendly sustainability", re-analyzing these data as such. Individual participants spontaneously and repeatedly described sustainability challenges in answer to our primary questions, and so follow-up discussion and probes about sustainability consistently occurred and became a component of the emergent protocol. Questions were generally consistent between communities, but at times, the order changed depending on the flow of questioning; additional questions pertinent to the evolving discussion were often asked. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed

verbatim, and input into NVivo for analysis. All participant and community names (including as listed above) were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity. In total, 35 participants from 11 communities were interviewed, and all interviews from the larger evaluation are included in this analysis.

Analysis

Qualitative thematic content analysis was used, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles and phases, in which dependability was considered by systematically developing, testing, and revising a code manual, collaborating across multiple coders, and external expert review. Researcher team members individually reviewed all transcripts, noting connections and preliminary themes across data, discarding those that were not pervasive. Each person separately developed their own code manual, used as the basis for a single aggregated code manual, including detailed definitions and explanations of what concepts would fit within a given code. To reinforce code reliability, two team members tested the manual by separately coding several transcript excerpts, discussing inconsistencies or points of confusion or repetition, revising the manual accordingly. This process was repeated with two complete transcripts. The draft manual was then vetted through the outside panel of experts. Once a reliable code manual was established, all transcripts were first coded: team members assigned individual codes to segments of raw data. First-coded transcripts were independently crosschecked (second coded) for consistency against the manual. Essentially, using a multiple collaborator coding process, the manual was systematically developed, repeatedly tested, and revised until reliability was achieved, following which all data were independently double coded.

Selections of data and primary findings represented within each final code were compiled and individually reported on, aiming to logically and concisely explain the data set. These reports were then used to draw key findings, presented in this paper. Only cross-cutting themes were included in the analysis. Two additional steps beyond this qualitative analysis were taken to strengthen internal validity (Schoenberg et al., 2011): initially, regarding confirmability, the first author participated in two provincial age-friendly forums, observing consultations between both newly and previously funded committees, policy makers, and civil servants. Themes that arose at these discussions were consistent with those obtained in this analysis. Subsequently, regarding credibility, an earlier version of the present analysis was documented in a community report and shared with participants and the expert panel prior to development of this paper, and ensuing feedback was incorporated. Taken together, these secondary approaches further reinforce the relevance and internal validity of the following thematic analysis. The

findings of this analysis are presented using verbatim quotations from participants, anonymized to ensure confidentiality, authenticity, and municipal involvement.

Findings

The 11 communities under investigation represent committee experiences and perspectives across a spectrum of sustained and unsustained age-friendly initiatives. As an example of an unsustainable initiative, the rural community of *Crane Cove* was challenged to execute their programming in the longer term, stemming primarily from volunteer burnout, limited committee capacity, and community disinterest, despite the municipality's financial and in-kind support. In contrast, the regional hub of *Inland Bay* is an example of initiatives in this research who considered themselves sustainable. Following implementation of small-scale programming necessary to initiate partnerships with the municipality and local businesses, organizations, and institutions, this committee ultimately positioned themselves to secure funds to purchase a bus for regular, affordable transportation for older people, facilitating a wider reach of age-friendly outcomes. As an example of sustainability, the bus program – managed by an operating board and about 100 volunteers who take reservations and drive and assist on the bus – was funded in part by the provincial government, by ongoing donations from local organizations and businesses, and by the CAD$2 fares collected from users and caregivers. Since its inception, it has become a model for age-friendly transportation in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the group has mentored other communities seeking to establish similar programs. Taken together, these operational points demonstrate that the bus service has become a sustainable program within the broader Inland Bay age-friendly initiative. What links these, and the nine other communities under investigation, together across this spectrum are overarching challenges of rapid demographical change (aging) and, in many cases, rural population decline which complicate the viability of initiating, implementing and sustaining age-friendly programs.

To build an understanding of the experiences of the communities across the spectrum, our qualitative findings focus on the concept of an implementation gap between the early stages of age-friendly work and long-term viability, identifying the conditions that made it possible for some communities to sustain their initiatives and led others to become unsustainable. As illustrated in Figure 1, three implementation pathways emerged from our data, in which programs were viewed by participants as having the potential to be sustainable (or unsustainable). Embedded within the pathways are the emergent challenges and opportunities associated with sustainability; namely, volunteer burnout and limited committee capacity (likely to be unsustainable), and forces that may result in sustaining age-
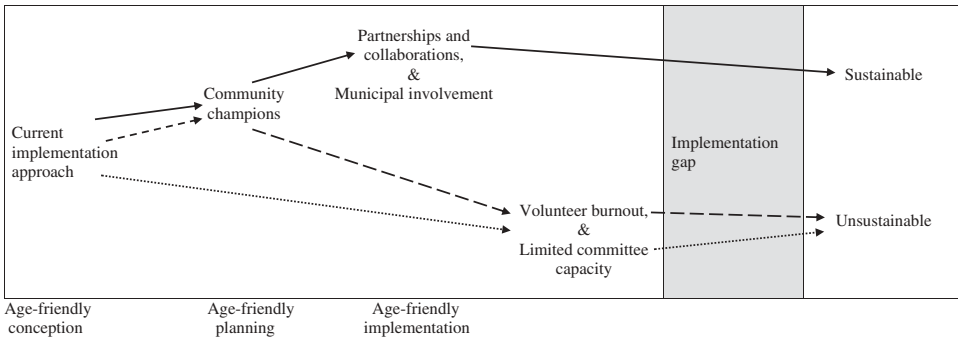
Typical age-friendly implementation pathways:

———————▶ = 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

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

friendly efforts, including community champions, partnerships and collaborations, and municipal involvement (likely to be sustainable). These themes are explored below in relation to the implementation gap, with a broader discussion of the pathways to sustainability following in the next section.

The implementation gap: challenges to sustaining age-friendly initiatives

Volunteer burnout

Although the funder did not raise expectations for additional resources, program leaders expressed frustration that the ambitious and vague goals typified by age-friendly were expected from a one-off, limited term, and modest-size fund, mostly executed by volunteers or by employees taking on age-friendly responsibilities additional to their current duties. Age-friendly work in each community was initiated by this fund, and so without follow-up funding, participants expressed that moving past the needs assessment stage was made all the more challenging. Further, population outmigration challenged stakeholders' and committees' abilities to develop sustainable programing, maximizing volunteer burnout. Declining, aging populations meant that volunteers were needed to create programing and to help facilitate aging in place for older residents, as families relocated and services closed. In the case of more rural locations, participants described communities losing 40 to 50 children in only a few years, remote communities with no children at all, and isolated older people left without family nearby: "Families are pulled apart because one or both parents have to spend most of the year out of province working. Less children for our schools, less recreation due to lack of young people, more seniors with no one to care for them." *(Volunteer, Coldbank)*. However, in all study sites, ongoing, permanent departures

of families, the gradual withdrawal of goods and services, and centralization of government and health services left a void felt by those remaining. To satisfy roles left by withdrawn services, fewer volunteers were called upon to do more. Consequentially, volunteer dependence challenged program sustainability, creating individual and committee burnout. Volunteers became more difficult to find and were stretched by involvement in multiple activities: "It's hard to get people to our meetings. Everyone is volunteered out." *(Volunteer, Mizzle Cove)*. Committee members were typically also actively involved in, for example as reported in Morganville, Shell Beach, and St. Peter's, churches, municipalities, and service groups. Paid participants likewise encountered these challenges, as it comprised only one of their job's many components. They described the stress behind age-friendly work: applying for funding, forming a committee, recruiting volunteers, conducting needs assessments, and executing programing and infrastructure development, noting that these barriers were by degree greater for volunteer committees: "Lots of communities don't pay someone to work in my position. How do you get volunteers to be motivated?" *(Municipal employee, Jagged Cove)*. Generally, volunteerism was active and traditional sources of informal social support for older people remained, but despite people's interests in being involved in small ways, finding the commitment required to complement a committee or to complete a major task was more challenging. Exclusively relying on volunteers to complete work previously executed both formally and informally was burdensome: "There is a significant volunteer base here in this town. However, like elsewhere, it's the same few people who do all the big, boring, hard work. But it's no trouble to get everyone to come together to help in their own way, serve food for an hour." *(Volunteer, Rhubarb Point)*.

Limited committee capacity

Participants also described capacity-based limits to becoming sustainable age-friendly committees. They typically were able to obtain government funding, form a small committee, and conduct a needs assessment. This initial groundwork (e.g., the needs assessment) often took several years given almost complete volunteer reliance, regularly depleting external funding. Sometimes, small pieces of programing or infrastructure were developed, such as fitness and computer classes, social events, or walkways and benches. Larger challenges such as transportation and affordable housing were identified by committees, but far exceeded their capacity. Even with an emphasis on smaller projects, once external funding was depleted, accomplishments often became one-off projects, and committees met infrequently or had been disbanded. Alternatively, funding was exhausted by paying a consultant to conduct a needs assessment, and no further action took place; indeed, six of the initial 29 were defunct at the time of data collection. Or, concerns were raised about continuing momentum or executing planned next steps, given volunteer dependence and fiscal resource depletion.

Closing the implementation gap: opportunities for sustaining age-friendly initiatives

Despite these challenges, some participants described unique ways that they were able to lay the groundwork for sustainability; indeed, four communities who participated in our study considered themselves to be sustainable and were still productively working on their age-friendly goals. Inclusion of champions, partnerships and collaborations, and municipal involvement from very early stages, according to participants, allowed them to overcome the challenges described above, growing and expanding their work.

Community champions

Of critical importance was having one person – a community champion – to shoulder the workload. Champions – typically volunteers or sometimes municipal employees – led grant applications, organized committee formation and structure, and when possible, transformed needs assessment recommendations into action: "Rob is what's keeping us together. You've got to have that person, you know, keeping the group together." *(Municipal councillor, Whelan's Bridge)*. Champions were especially important in obtaining funding and sustaining momentum during the first and second year: "The success of our committee is leadership. We have a chairperson who is a volunteer, willing to give up his time, getting other valuable people around him to work for the cause that then creates a positive attitude to do something for the community." *(Municipal employee, Inland Bay)*.

Our results show that following early activity, communities often reported volunteer burnout, including that of champions, typically the sole leader. In some cases, they were paid or were elected; however, this did not guarantee the momentum that self-motivated champions provided. Instead, committee coordination was simply added to their varied job descriptions, and not being their primary responsibility, created burnout amongst paid employees or councillors as among volunteers: "This program was driven by community champions – it floundered when a council member implemented it … it was on the side of her desk." *(Volunteer, Inland Bay)*. Furthermore, given this level of responsibility, unanticipated departures of individual champions likely would be a death knell for age-friendly work. Champions and volunteers were an important resource in building age-friendly capacity, but they were not enough to ensure that planning and programing became sustainable. To address this issue, collaborations and partnerships were critical in distributing the longer-term workload beyond champions or small dedicated groups of volunteers, and in supporting success and sustainability.

Partnerships and collaborations

Fostering and drawing upon external community partnerships – going beyond simply applying for and using external funding – was essential.

Specifically, this included partnering with municipalities, businesses, schools, health care services and organizations, media, and other committees and volunteer groups, seeking out in-kind sponsorships, shared space, student volunteers, and marketing and promotion assistance. Whereas participants whose committees had floundered observed that external funding reliance was a precursor to their limits, fostering partnerships appears intrinsically tied to initiatives described as successful. For some, partnering with external groups was key to delaying the need for additional funds – helpful during a fiscally-limited economy. Others were unable to seek out partnerships, feeling that their committee was perceived as competition for scarce resources, often by pre-existing groups. They described "competing" seniors' organizations as feeling threatened; that the grant money should have been allocated to their established group. Committees that did not sustain beyond the planning phases often described acrimony and lack of partnerships having severely hindered their success, before sustainable was possible. This perceived resource competition did not always dissipate, however most resolved animosity over time, in some cases forming productive, friendly relationships.

Municipal involvement

Permanently embedding age-friendly capacity within local governments was an important sustainability requirement. Although symbolic municipal involvement is typically a component of age-friendly grants, more direct connections between municipalities and age-friendly committees appears to be critical to long-term sustainability. In this case, funding was formally administered to the municipality by the province, however this was often where municipal-age-friendly partnerships ended, with programs being entirely volunteer-driven: "No council would turn down funding, but it can't be seen that way … as just money that the government wants to inject. They aren't seeing it as an ongoing integral part of community development. The municipality has to be genuinely concerned about a long-term strategy for becoming age-friendly. It has to integrate it into their ongoing activities … budgets, municipal plan, projects, development approvals, etc." *(Volunteer, St. Christopher's)*. In other cases, committees actively partnered with their municipality: elected representatives or bureaucrats sat on committees, municipalities provided space and equipment, and programing and goals sometimes became integrated within municipal policies, plans, and procedures: "It's not all about money either, it's about support. Our mayor gave his time to come as mayor to be a part of something that we were doing for seniors. Recognizing your efforts, plus spending time with seniors. So it's not all about money." *(Volunteer, Crane Cove)*.

According to participants, active, ongoing municipal support was important in practice, rather than simply in name. Conversely, municipalities who

viewed age-friendly as a fiscal opportunity typically produced limited outcomes. Although important, grants did not ensure sustainability: "I think for success, you just got to be excited about it. If you're just doing it just because, 'Oh well, here's a chance for some money,' it's never going to work. I think you have to be really on board with wanting to see these things happen in your community, and then, just do what you have to do to make it work." *(Volunteer, Mizzle Cove)*. Without active municipal support and intrinsic motivation, committees were challenged to bring members together effectively and in the long-term: Researcher: "What would you recommend to make this program better for your community or for communities that receive this funding in the future?" Participant: "Well, get more people involved. And money's not going to do that, really." *(Volunteer, Crane Cove)*. Our results do not argue the importance of seed funding to initiate development, but they demonstrate that sustainable committees sought also to include community champions and partnerships, and to build municipal capacity into their efforts, to some extent minimizing the effects of volunteer burnout and limited committee capacity.

Discussion: toward age-friendly sustainability

Following from these findings, we propose that age-friendly sustainability may be conceptualized as an implementation gap between early development stages and long-term viability. As shown in Figure 1, three pathways to sustainable (or unsustainable) age-friendly initiatives emerged in relation to this implementation gap. As an outcome of these pathways, we ask whether an age-friendly burden is created by a policy agenda that implies that health and wellness benefits stem from age-friendly initiatives. Paradoxically, organizations that developed to support and sustain older residents wishing to age in place may be, themselves, challenged by the limited scope of funding. Faced with the downloading of government and social services policy onto community, volunteers may be relied on to execute, from the bottom up, genuine and enduring age-friendly change (Menec & Brown, 2018). This volunteer-driven approach is in keeping with the worldwide, grass-roots intent of age-friendliness (e.g., Plouffe et al., 2013); however, the absence of parallel top-down support delegates a portion of state responsibility back to the community itself (e.g., Winterton & Hulme Chambers, 2017), often impeding sustainability. Our research shows that committees may apply for funding and work through earlier stages (i.e., committee formation, needs assessment), and that one-off projects are sometimes completed (e.g., fitness and computer classes, and trails and benches). However, consistent overdependence on volunteers and on committees' limited capacity may together produce burnout and an inability to tackle overarching, multi-year goals such as affordable housing, transportation, and social isolation (e.g., Menec et al.,

2014), limiting sustainability and the extent to which communities can truly become "age-friendly". Despite the negativity inherent to these statements, there are examples of successful, sustainable initiatives that have been able to face these challenges in creative, innovative, collaborative, and, importantly, sustainable ways. To close this implementation gap and minimize burnout, our analysis suggests that sustainable initiatives should include community champions, multi-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations, and systemic municipal involvement (Pathway 1).

Generating an additional component of a growing age-friendly agenda, our research indicates the importance of champions to tackle the initial workload, as noted in other studies (e.g., Menec & Brown, 2018). For example, in a rural context, Farmer and Kilpatrick (2009) suggested that health professionals often act as social entrepreneurs, making connections across policy and community sectors as effective resources in supporting rural communities' resilience. Plouffe et al. (2013) observed that a dedicated municipal staff person is important to age-friendly work; further, we found that intrinsically-motivated champions along with sustained municipal support most effectively and efficiently drove the initiative forward. Grantmakers in Aging (2015) suggested that champions (or "influencers") are helpful in generating general public support, especially important as age-friendly work may produce limited interest from older residents, resistance from taxpayers (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018; Scharlach, 2016), and may not be a municipal priority (Spina & Menec, 2015). Though reliance on individual champions may precariously and unrealistically place responsibility on one person or a small group of people who are often retired (i.e., are themselves older), it appears to be critical in the early stages of age-friendly work, especially in rural areas, increasing the likelihood of the initiative becoming sustainable. Given this risk, the challenge lies in seeking out new champions, helpful in anticipating and buffering turnover (Grantmakers in Aging, 2015). We suggest that initiatives may build in sustainability at the outset by drawing on individuals' leadership, but that following Pathway 1, multi-disciplinary partnerships and cross-sector collaborations, is critical to avoiding burnout and engendering program sustainability (Winterton, 2016). Initiatives in our data that did not supplement champion reliance with partnerships, collaborations, and municipal involvement (Pathway 2) or that excluded the champion component entirely (Pathway 3) were less likely to be sustainable in the longer term.

Overcoming initial reliance on one individual champion and limited capacity occurred among initiatives that valued partnerships with other organizations, services, and institutions. Partnerships facilitated resource sharing, delaying the need for additional funds or reducing the amount required, and better equipped committees to exceed short-term or one-off projects. However, primary among the concerns of committees working in isolation were the lack of funds and the need for an additional grant. Although subsequent funding is important in sustaining all age-friendly

work (Spina & Menec, 2015), Buffel and Phillipson (2018) suggest collaboration as critical; and indeed, this is dominant in the literature (e.g., Menec & Brown, 2018; Winterton, 2016). Beyond developing age-friendliness within communities, sustainability appears related to financial and non-financial support; indeed, sustainability was found to be more likely when only a portion of program costs are covered by the funder (rather than the full balance), linking non-financial factors (e.g., collaboration) to sustainability (Savaya & Spiro, 2012).

Collaboration and partnerships appear foundational to all age-friendly work, particularly across sectors and disciplines, including those whose mandates do not directly include supporting older people. Our implementation gap concept articulates these insights, demonstrating the importance of overcoming perceptions of scarce resource competition and animosity when mandates overlap. We suggest that collaboration is not only important to encourage as a component of age-friendly work, but that it is instead foundational to sustainability at the outset and should be prominently embedded in age-friendly guidelines. Further, local governments are ideally positioned to support age-friendly efforts, and direct municipal involvement may mediate the downloading of responsibility onto community organizations given inadequate higher-level government resources (Winterton, 2016). Our findings indicate that although funding is typically administered to municipalities (Greenfield, 2012), there is in reality a spectrum of age-friendly–municipal connectivity, including community-level operations isolated from the municipality, at an arm's length from the municipality, or embedded within municipal policy – and this was not typically a time-based trajectory. Political champions were to be found, however committees had to re-advocate their position following elections, challenging capacity and holding back sustainable development. Growing and maintaining municipal connectivity was essential, as it emerged as directly related to the success and sustainability of initiatives. Municipal involvement is intrinsically embedded within the age-friendly framework, however our data show that municipalities often played only the fiscal role of grant administrator and were not further involved. We wish to highlight the singular value of explicit, ongoing, and integrated municipal–age-friendly involvement, suggesting that it is autonomously key to age-friendly success and sustainability. Inherent to the emergent implementation gap is that municipal involvement must not be simply symbolic, instead permanently integrating age-friendly concepts into policy, planning, and mandates.

We may further extend this analysis by situating it within a critical political economy context, questioning the community caretaking role increasingly placed on volunteers and local governments following the devolution of federal-level funding and community services (e.g., Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Menec, Means, Keating, & Parkhurst, 2011). Age-friendly

programing may place pressure on volunteers – often older adults themselves – to "help take up the slack" (Martinson & Minkler, 2006, p. 320) for this devolution and consequential need for older people to relocate or, potentially, to become "stuck in place" (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012). The implementation gap concept described in this paper provides a foundation for questioning the sustainability of rural age-friendly planning and programing. Reliance on the work of volunteers and local governments may in turn reinforce the effectiveness of community devolution and as a by-product, place the responsibility for transformative age-friendly change upon those in relative positions of power (e.g., pre-existing organizations and leaders; Menec & Brown, 2018). This may occur at the risk of over-looking the needs of older adults in more vulnerable social and economic positions (Greenfield et al., 2015). Drawing upon champions, partnerships, and municipal involvement – non-financial forms of capital (e.g., human, social, and cultural) – as opportunities for sustaining initiatives may reinforce federal-level devolution. As argued by Putnam (2000), communities that function at a higher social and political level tend to have residents engaged in public issues who are trusting of one another and of community leaders, and who engage in equal, horizontal social and political networks. This non-financial capital tends to be effectively drawn upon in times of social or economic crisis and relates to more positive community and health outcomes. However, this process appears primarily active only among communities with strong non-financial capital (Fowler & Etchegary, 2008).

Our results reinforce this point; that age-friendly initiatives were more sustainable in communities in which participants discussed drawing upon pre-existing non-financial resources. However, our conclusions may also generate new questions about the effectiveness of initiatives in communities weaker in non-financial capital, limiting the extent to which vulnerable older adults may benefit from living in sustainable age-friendly communities, and by extension, questioning the role of communities in addressing population aging.

Limitations

This research reflects only 11 rural communities and small towns within a provincial funding program in Atlantic Canada, and as such, it cannot be considered representative of the complexity of issues facing aging communities internationally. To counterbalance this limitation and maximize dependability (Schoenberg et al., 2011), we involved an external panel of experts, separately piloted the interview protocol, undertook a multiple collaborator coding process, and observed and cross-validated consultations between age-friendly committees, policy makers, and civil servants. Further revision of results based on consultation with the panel and with participants has strengthened credibility. Confirmability of results was considered through both our two-phase sampling

approach based on geographic representativeness and secondary systematic case selection, and through our detailed code development and analysis procedure. In this way, both steps ensure our results can be attributed to the individual research setting (Schoenberg et al., 2011). Through engaging in methodological consistency by standardizing sampling and recruitment, following a stable interview protocol (while still allowing the richness of qualitative data to emerge), and collecting our data in naturalistic settings, we have sought to minimize validity threats and enhance confirmability.

Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to examine the emerging finding that, in many jurisdictions, the limited-term scope of age-friendly funding programs hinders the extent to which initiatives can become sustainable. Findings based upon interviews with age-friendly committees funded by a Canadian provincial program reinforce and problematize the "implementation gap" between early stages of age-friendly work and sustainable programing. Underlying this implementation gap is a burden of age-friendliness placed upon volunteers, communities, and committees with limited capacity, revealing the paradox of age-friendly programs and questioning whose responsibility it is to facilitate aging in place and age-friendly change (Winterton, 2016). Given the limited numbers of committees in our study who identified themselves as sustainable (only one-third), we do not question the age-friendly movement's theoretical ability to initiate beneficial change, but instead the responsibility of external (e.g., state-level) agents in providing only modest, start-up funding to communities with limited financial resources. By expecting that communities take on long-term, demanding projects without additional sources of financing pending the accomplishment of certain milestones (e.g., completing a needs assessment), age-friendly committees may either rapidly become defunct or may lack the capability to address or implement wide-reaching, multi-year goals. This may superficially lead to a critique of the value of age-friendly initiatives, rather than highlighting the inherently under-resourced nature of the program. However, not all initiatives in our study were unsustainable – one-third were able to expand and implement large-scale community change – and our research demonstrates that fostering community champions, partnerships, and municipal integration as a pathway towards sustainability (as illustrated in Figure 1) may help overcome this implementation gap.

Additional attention to this research area is important for policy and, especially, for communities aspiring to become age-friendly. Following from Golant (2014, p. 12), apprehensions that we may be "asking too much" of age-friendly initiatives to facilitate systemic community change that reaches "older people with the greatest unmet needs" combine with emerging findings that rural programs in particular often do not sustain

beyond a brief initial period (e.g., Russell, 2015a). The latter is consistent with longer-standing concerns about the rural limits of policy design and program implementation in an era of population aging (Skinner & Rosenberg, 2006), which further reinforces the need to better understand how to support sustainable age-friendly initiatives. We suggest that further interrogating the implementation gap, conceptually and empirically as it relates to evaluating age-friendly sustainability may address this limitation. Indeed, bringing sustainability to the forefront of the broader age-friendly agenda articulated by Buffel and Phillipson (2018), among others, is a particularly important and transferrable research contribution. Future research into age-friendly sustainability and the emergent implementation gap will contribute to the growing recognition of the need for diverse perspectives within the global age-friendly movement (Scharf, Walsh, & O'Shea, 2016).

Potentially fruitful avenues for furthering this work may involve case studies across the spectrum of age-friendly programs, systematically examining programs both funded and not funded under the age-friendly umbrella, representing a variety of geographic contexts (e.g., metropolitan, urban, suburban, urban adjacent, rural, remote), governance structures (municipal-led, volunteer-led, municipal-volunteer partnership-led), trajectories (needs assessment phases, planning phases, implementation phases), and varied funding package sizes. Outcomes of subsequent case study approaches, including retrospective studies of post-age-friendly perspectives, would expand our understanding of the implementation gap, allowing policy decision makers, community leaders, and volunteers to consider practical approaches to building sustainability into new and existing initiatives.

Furthermore, for rural communities that are not centres of population or employment, putting age-friendly programs in place tends to be complex and at times unrealistic and unsustainable (Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011; Menec et al., 2015; Neville et al., 2016), and so we suggest that examining the implementation gap in rural environments may enhance contextualized understanding of this phenomena. Indeed, rural age-friendly research is already at the forefront of the sustainability question, with Spina and Menec (2015), for instance, calling for a shift away from studying short-term outcomes and toward sustainability factors, thereby minimizing programing decline and maximizing public investment. Regardless of the age-friendly context, jurisdiction, or trajectory under future investigation, and given the calls in the literature for discussion of the barriers and facilitators to becoming age-friendly (Menec & Brown, 2018), recognizing the challenges of burnout and limited capacity as a burden of age-friendliness, but also the value of fostering champions, partnerships, and municipal integration, will contribute to the development of age-friendly communities by supporting sustainable programs that will endure into a post-age-friendly era.

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