

The Impact of Physical Distancing on Older Volunteers in Rural Communities

June 17, 2020

Trent researchers partner with Selwyn Township to explore the needs of senior volunteers during the pandemic



A team of researchers from Trent is looking at how older people and volunteers in rural communities are coping with the impacts of physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. It's part of the University's investment in research projects that are aimed at understanding how to reduce the impact of the virus.

Dr. Elizabeth McCrillis, director of the Trent Centre for Aging and Society and co-investigator on the study, says that while infection rates are higher in urban centres, physical and social distancing is also part of life now in rural areas, where populations are typically older.

"Given the particular susceptibility of older people to COVID-19, the day-to-day impacts of distancing may be more keenly felt," says Prof. McCrillis. "Transportation, housing and social isolation may have already been challenging for some older adults in rural areas. Often those people would have been supported by volunteers, however the pandemic has significantly limited the ability of volunteers to support older community members."

Older volunteerism is a challenge for rural communities

Dr. Mark Skinner, Trent's dean of Social Sciences and Humanities, Canada research chair (CRC) in Rural Aging, Health and Social Care, is principal investigator on the study. He says a lack of health services and infrastructure in rural areas makes volunteer-based programs essential for older people in those communities. However, the pandemic has created difficulties specific to rural-based volunteers.

"The problem is that most volunteers in rural areas are older people themselves, a phenomenon we call 'older volunteerism,'" says Prof. Skinner. "These are people who already bear a burden of care in the households and communities, and the risk of burn-out."

Community involvement combats feelings of isolation

Volunteers for the study will be recruited from the public library, fire service, and the Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield in Selwyn Township, which has close to a decade-long history of working with Trent on research on aging. To date, the collaboration has helped build a knowledge base to improve rural health care facilities and volunteer-based programs, and has brought attention to the marginalized voices of rural aging, including LGBTQ seniors. As well, Trent's expertise in aging studies helped form and support the Age-Friendly Peterborough Community Action Plan.

Research coordinator Amber Colibaba, notes that older people in rural areas are at higher risk of feelings of isolation than

elsewhere, and isolation may lead to loneliness — a known contributor to decline in health and cognition among older adults. And, as Trent is housed in Peterborough, which is in the unique demographic position of having both one of Canada's largest ratios of seniors, as well as a rapidly growing cohort of 18-34 year olds, the University is well situated to embark on this project.

"In an era of global pandemic, we thought it would be increasingly important to understand how these volunteer-based programs are able to continue to provide services," says Ms. Colibaba. "We hope to gain an understanding of the experiences of rural older adults who volunteer, because many of them rely on volunteering as a way to combat feelings of isolation."

[Contact](#) [Directions](#) [Site Map](#) [Accessibility](#) [@ Copyright 2020 Trent University](#)

[COVID-19 Updates](#) [LEARN MORE](#)

