

Issues from the North: A visit with Older Adult Clubs and Centres in Northern Ontario

In early October, 2007, the Building Bridges to Tomorrow project headed to northern Ontario to take a closer look at the issues facing senior clubs and centres. Al Gordon, Training Coordinator, and Bill Krever, Research Coordinator, visited Schreiber, Terrace Bay, Thunder Bay and Ear Falls during their five day tour of northern Ontario. This visit included attending a two day workshop on Seniors' Clubs in Northern Ontario, sponsored by the Ontario Senior Secretariat and OACAO, and conducting training sessions for the Centres of Interest program in Thunder Bay and Ear Falls.

"One of our goals with the "Building Bridges to Tomorrow" project is to capture and highlight the specific issues that are faced by older adult clubs and centres in northern Ontario." according to Bill Krever

"We are all aware of the basic challenges that clubs and centres face in the north due to the vast geography of the region and the relatively small communities that these organizations serve. However, there are many other demographic and economic issues that we need to capture in order to fully understand the nature of senior clubs and centres in northern Ontario."



For many towns and communities, their demographic profile is totally different from the rest of the province. Unlike most communities in southern Ontario, there is not always a large group of "boomers" coming

along behind the current senior population. Due to economic and industrial issues, the younger population in many communities have moved elsewhere in the province creating a much smaller "boomer" population.

Another aspect of the north is the isolation of many communities which has a direct impact on the leisure and community service options that are available to residents. For example, in a community like Ear Falls, the



The Whispering Pines Seniors Club

nearest town is more than 70 kilometres away which implies that the Whispering Pines Seniors Club is the only option for residents to participate in recreation and social programs. The Whispering Pines Seniors Club is also the driving force behind many volunteer run community support services including transportation. From this perspective, despite a very small budget and virtually no government support, the local senior club or centre plays a vital and essential role for seniors in an isolated community.

The economics of the north is also an important concept in understanding the issues faced by senior clubs and centres. Economics can be viewed from two perspectives when looking at northern communities. First, the demographic profile of northern Ontario features many small communities of less than 5,000 residents and in most cases the actual communities are more like 1,500 to 2,500 residents. These small communities have a very small tax base and are unable to provide much support to local clubs either in terms of operating funds or in-kind space and services. Second, the economics of the north requires an understanding of the great shifts that have occurred over the past 20 years within the primary industries in many northern communities. Many communities are reliant on the forestry industry as their major employer. With changes to the pulp and paper industry and the closing of many mills in northern Ontario, the economic health of this region and many of its residents is very weak. Therefore, many seniors are finding it difficult to even participant in leisure activities due to financial constraints and the senior clubs or centres do not have the financial ability to offer any kind of subsidy or support.

At the Seniors' Club Workshop on October 1st in Schreiber, participants developed an inventory of issues that clubs and centres are facing in northern Ontario.

The top five issues were:

1. Capital and Infrastructure

- Location
- Transportation
- Lack of facilities or centre
- Parking
- Upkeep and maintenance

2. Funding

- Government funding
- Exclusion of seniors due to financial constraints

3. Aging Membership

- Older members/lack of younger seniors
- Demographics of community
- Physical limitation of members
- Lack of seniors housing in the community

4. Declining Volunteerism

- Lack of dedication
- Burnt out volunteers
- Lack of support from members

5. Perceptions of Senior Club/Centre

- Lack of innovative programs for younger seniors
- Children do not want to join the club that their parents belong to

“Interestingly, the top five issues identified at this workshop would probably be similar for 90% of the centres across Ontario” stated Bill Krever.

“The key to understanding these issues and their specific relevance to northern Ontario is to overlay these five issues with the unique economic and demographic characteristics of the north. The issues may be similar but the roots of these problems are quite different and the solutions are critical to seniors in Northern Ontario.”

Building Bridges to Tomorrow focus group training sessions



During the visit to northern Ontario, the “Building Bridges to Tomorrow” project conducted a focus group training session at the workshop in Schreiber and also conducted training for the “Centres of Interest” study in Thunder Bay and Ear Falls. “All of the northern communities that we visited were quite excited about this project and were eager to participate in the training sessions” according to Al Gordon, Training Coordinator. “The focus group that was held in Schreiber generated some great discussion about the issues that are faced by senior clubs and centres in this region and our training in Thunder Bay and Ear Falls demonstrated the strong support that exists for conducting our research in centres across the province”.

For further information about the “Building Bridges to Tomorrow” project, visit our website at www.oacao.org or contact Lawrie Bloom, Executive Director lbloom@oacao.org.