

Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario (OACAO) COVID-19 Re-Opening Survey: Perspectives of Centre Participants

Provincial Report

August 2020

OACAO

The Voice of Older Adult Centres
La voix des centres pour aînés

OACAO COVID-19 Re-Opening Survey

Understanding the Needs and Concerns of Centre Participants

This report has been prepared by the OACAO. We are a non-profit charitable provincial organization that is a recognized leader in the development of quality services, resources, and supports for our network of 180+ community-based older adult centres and associate members. We share a strong commitment to ongoing liaison and advocacy with government and other provincial associations in matters which affect older adult centres and Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs).

We recognize that the work of the OACAO and our members takes place on traditional territories of Indigenous people who have lived here and cared for this land for thousands of years. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land, and by doing so, give our respect to its first inhabitants.

We would like to acknowledge the partners that came together to support this work, including the OACAO COVID-19 Survey Sub-Committee, OACAO Re-Opening Working Group, Government of Canada – New Horizons for Seniors Program, Government of Ontario – Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility and the OACAO staff. We thank our language translation team from Better Living Health and Community Services, Centre Pauline-Charron, Rexdale Community Health Centre and The Good Companions Seniors Centre. We would also like to thank the participants, staff, volunteers and board members from Centres across Ontario who participated in this project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Older Adult Centres and SALCs closed their doors in March 2020 to help flatten the curve. As communities across Ontario begin to re-open, Centres are exploring new ways of delivering services so they can continue to support the health and wellbeing of their participants. This report presents the findings from a COVID-19 re-opening survey conducted with 9,800 participants from 90 centres across Ontario.

- Approximately one half of participants felt comfortable returning to their centre, and comfort level did not differ by age groups.
- Participants overwhelmingly indicated they wanted to see physical distancing protocols in place at their centres. Many also requested that everyone wear masks, and that there be ample hand sanitizer available throughout the facility.
- Almost all participants had access to a mask and were able to safely wear one.
- Safe transportation to and from the centre was a key facilitator for feeling safe returning to the centre.
- One third participants used virtual programs during the closure; younger seniors and those who attended 3+ days per week were more likely to try online programs and continue accessing them upon re-opening.
- Many participants reported they did not enjoy virtual programs or lacked access to the needed technology.
- Participants are excited to re-start fitness programs and group games; however, centres may struggle to offer these programs while maintaining physical distancing requirements.
- Centres require additional funding to source required PPE, cleaning and sanitizing supplies, and resources to implement physical distancing protocols.
- Standardized waivers, screening tools and contract tracing policies will support the re-opening process.



METHODS

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led older adult centres across the province to pause their recreation, social and health programming.

As communities across Ontario begin to re-open, Centres have begun exploring how they might resume programs and services to continue supporting the health and wellbeing of their participants while protecting community safety.

The OACAO conducted a province-wide COVID-19 re-opening survey to gather vital information for centres to develop their re-opening plan so that participants can be safe and comfortable participating in programs.

About the Survey:

The survey included 12 questions that examined:

- 1) Usual centre attendance (pre-pandemic)
- 2) Programs to prioritize in re-opening
- 3) Comfort returning to the centre
- 4) Safety measures and access to masks
- 5) Participation in virtual programs
- 6) Impact of the centre closures

The survey was offered through SurveyMonkey in English, French, Chinese and Spanish.

The survey was available on Survey Monkey from July 23, 2020 to August 7, 2020.

About the Participants:

90 of 182 OACAO member centres participated in the survey (49.5% response rate), collecting a total of **9,800 responses** from centre participants.

Many centres elected not to participate in the survey as they were completing their own COVID-19 re-opening survey.

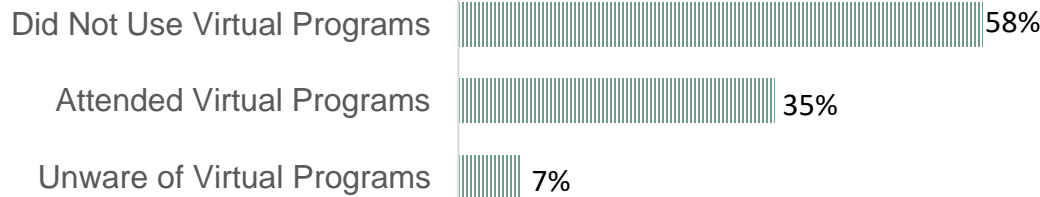
Participants ranged in age from 50 to over 90; however, most were between the ages of 60-69 (33%) or 70-79 (44%). Prior to the pandemic, most participants were attending their centre once (41%) or twice (30%) per week; however, 11% attended four or more times per week.



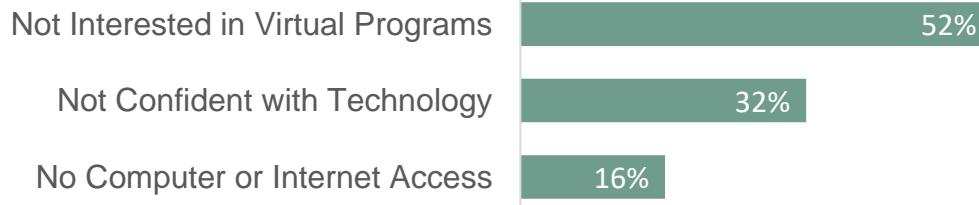
Guiding the Re-Opening Process

Comfort returning to the centre was not related to age or attendance frequency. While online and telephone-based programs are becoming a popular alternative among centre participants, seniors who are younger and attend 3+ days per week were more likely to try them, while seniors who attended once per week were more likely to report they were not aware of any virtual programs. Across all participants, half had not accessed any virtual programs, noting that **they did not like or enjoy online programs, or lack access to the necessary technology.**

During the pandemic, 35% of participants joined virtual recreation programming; however, over half do not want to access virtual programs once the centre re-opens, mostly due to lack of interest



Among those not intending to use virtual programs...



46%

Feel comfortable returning to the centre

98%

Have access to and are able to wear a face mask

43%

Are interested in virtual programs after their centre re-opens



Keeping Seniors Safe

To feel comfortable returning, participants wanted to see multiple safety measures in place

Based on responses from 8791 centre participants

83%

Hand sanitizer available for frequent use

70%

Staff and volunteers wearing masks

69%

Senior participants wearing masks

60%

Small class sizes (<10 people)

60%

Daily screening for COVID-19 symptoms

58%

Reducing building capacity

16%

Bubbling with other centre participants

Social distancing was a commonly noted requirement for safe return to the centre, with some participants proposing attendance time slots to reduce capacity, as well as modifications to their centre's layout to maintain a 6' distance between activity tables/stations.

Other participants requested that their centre have gloves available to ensure that people could safely touch game pieces or program equipment.

Centre participants expressed concerns over how centres would enforce new safety policies and wanted to learn more about new cleaning procedures that would be put in place.

Many participants noted they were comfortable returning to the centre because they had access to a personal vehicle. Among those who relied on public transit (8%), only 37% felt comfortable continuing to use transit to get to and from the centre.

Most participants who were uncomfortable returning to the centre noted they were caregivers for a frail loved one, or were worried about their own health, especially if they had a chronic condition.

Some participants indicated they would not return to the centre under after a 2nd wave or until a vaccine is available.



Re-Starting Centre Programs

Participants want to prioritize a variety of recreation programs upon re-opening

Based on responses from 8,228 centre participants.



61%
Fitness programs



31%
Group Games



25%
Arts and Crafts



23%
Lectures & Seminars



22%
Special Events



15%
Trips & Travel



11%
Computer Programs



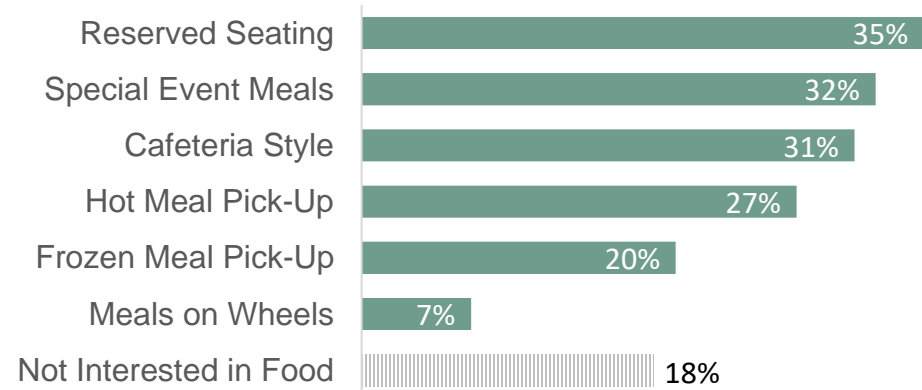
10%
Music Programs

In addition to the programs shown above, many centre participants want to re-open their centre library and to start up other activities like movie nights, dances, and clubs.

While some participants felt social dining programs were non-essential, many were looking forward to re-starting coffee clubs. Others put forward recommendations to continue food programs safely, including serving only pre-wrapped food, and reducing cafeteria capacity; however, some were no longer interested in eating food at the centre.

One quarter of participants usually accessed food at the centre, and most wanted to continue doing so

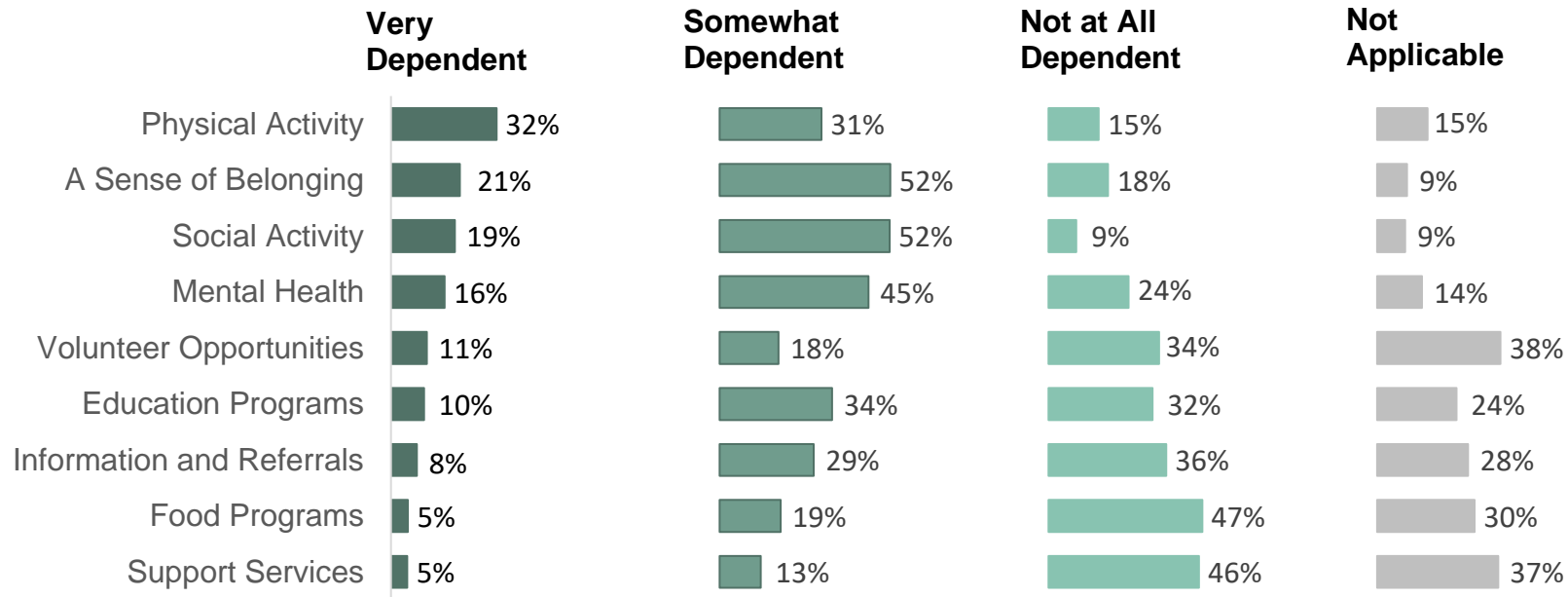
Based on responses from 8,786 centre participants





Centres are Crucial for Social & Physical Activity

Centre closures had a substantial impact on wellbeing, particularly for those who are highly dependent upon the centre for their physical, mental and social wellbeing. **Over two thirds of participants were fully or somewhat reliant on their centre for participating in physical activities, fostering a sense of belonging, forming social connections, and accessing opportunities to promote their mental wellness.** Although those who relied heavily on their centre were more willing to try online programs while their centre was closed, they were less likely to be interested in virtual programs once their centre re-opens. The only exception to this was for physical activity: those who were very dependent on their centre were still interested in joining online exercise and fitness programs once the centre re-opens.





Re-Opening Considerations & Recommendations



Adapt In-Person Programs for Physical Distancing

Participants overwhelmingly requested physical distancing protocols. Centres will need to explore opportunities to offer in-person programs in a physically distanced way, and educate participants on program-specific policies to address shared equipment & physical distancing guidelines.



Develop Best-Practice Guidelines for High-Risk In-Person Programs

Participants are excited to resume in-person programming, but many of the programs they want to prioritize, including fitness programs and group games like scrabble or cards, are *high risk* and will be difficult to adapt to allow for physical distancing. Centres will need to develop best-practices to guide the re-introduction of these *high risk* but highly sought-after activities.



Continue Developing Innovative Virtual Programs

Over half of centre participants have not yet joined virtual programs, and many were not interested in doing so as they did not enjoy them. Centres may need additional consultations with their participants to better understand what types of virtual programs would be of most interest to them. As many popular centre programs cannot be done physically distanced, adapting them for online offerings will be key for re-starting a diversity of programs.



Expand Seniors' Centre Without Walls (SCWW) Programming

Centres across Ontario expanded their programming to include SCWW as a way to reach socially isolated seniors and promote social connections. As they are facilitated entirely through the telephone, expanding these programs may help reach seniors who face barriers to digital access for online programs. The OACAO is working closely with the Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility and The Good Companions Seniors Centre to train, support, and expand the network of SCWW programs across Ontario.



Overcome Accessibility Barriers Preventing Online or Telephone Participation

Some seniors reported accessibility barriers that prevented them from participating in online programs, most notably a hearing or vision impairment. Telephone-based programming will be challenging for those who experience hearing loss. Centres need to consider accessibility barriers when designing and implementing virtual or telephone-based programs to ensure equitable access for all participants.



Overcome Barriers to Digital Access

Several participants who had not yet joined digital programs indicated that they faced barriers accessing the necessary digital technology, including internet, tablets and computers. Others had access to the technology but were not confident using it. Centres will need to explore opportunities for digital literacy training to build comfort accessing online programs, and identify new sources of funding to facilitate digital access.



Identify Safe Transportation Options

Many participants felt safe returning to their centre because they had access to a personal vehicle, while many of those who previously relied on public transit did not feel comfortable travelling to their centre. To resume in-person programs, centres will need to consider potential transportation barriers participants may face and explore partnerships and other opportunities for providing safe and barrier-free transit.



Funds for Personal Protective Equipment, Cleaning, and Centre Modifications

Participants identified many safety measures that needed to be in place to make them feel comfortable returning to the centre. To implement these measures and ensure proper *Infection Prevention And Control (IPAC)* practices, centres will require additional funding to source PPE, hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes, as well as other supplies to implement physical distancing precautions, such as floor stickers, plexiglass barriers, and retrofits to common areas (such as shared offices).



Pandemic Proofing Centre Operations

Centres will need to prepare for new challenges as they adjust to a new way of operating to ensure financial viability. Revenue from annual memberships and activity fees (e.g., instructor-led programs, special events, community group usage) will decline due to reduced in-person programming and lower program capacity, which will represent a substantial loss in income. Furthermore, many online and telephone-based programs have been provided for free during the pandemic. Centres will be required to reconfigure how participants are charged for access to programs and services in new operating models. Centres will also need to develop new ways to conduct fundraising activities, as typical events are not feasible in the current pandemic climate.



Liability, Daily Screening and Contact Tracing Protocols

Many centres, especially non-profits, may face challenges accessing affordable liability insurance protection. In order to follow public health guidelines, centres may be required to have all returning participants sign a waiver and will need to develop a daily screening process for everyone entering the building, as well as contact tracing protocols in the event of an outbreak.

For more information about the OACAO visit www.oacao.org or contact Sue Hesjedahl at sue@oacao.org.