

## Social Prescribing, SALCs and Health Promotion

By Pat Spadafora, Kaleidoscope Consulting



The health and well-being benefits of older adults who have been referred to have been well documented over the last four years of the project, both by staff and volunteers in participating Seniors Active Living Centres (SALCs) and other OACAO member centres as well as by individuals who have been referred to the project. Throughout the project, participants have consistently self-reported feeling less lonely and isolated and more connected to their communities.

Quite simply, social prescribing works.

The documented benefits of social prescribing have tended to skew more towards social inclusion factors rather than the physical benefits it provides. Yet, we know that SALCs contribute to health promotion and illness prevention in a variety of ways.

Is it time to more explicitly frame and market the work of SALCs through a health promotion lens – and why? I would argue “yes” on both accounts.

Research suggests that approximately 60% of adults 65+ are living with at least two chronic conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. The specific percentage varies somewhat depending on the data source. Using these two conditions as examples, there is compelling evidence that physical activity can benefit people experiencing them. It is reasonable to assume that physical activity may similarly benefit individuals experiencing other chronic conditions.

Social prescribing clients involved in SALCs have reported that participating in activities and exercise programs improved their physical well-being. The motivation and encouragement they received within the SALC enabled them to stay more active than in their former, more sedentary lifestyles (adapted from the Links2Wellbeing client stories report, 2024).

Relatedly, in the United Kingdom, the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) reports that social prescribing can help to prevent chronic conditions from either developing or progressing and can support their management by offering people more choice of activities in which they can become involved (does this sound like the great options offered by SALCs?!). Source: <https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/resources/how-does-social-prescribing-support-people-with-long-term-conditions/>.

Further, social prescribing benefits not only the recipients but also the healthcare system. As one example, NASP cites the “Ways to Wellness Program” for long-term conditions (what, in Canada, we refer to as chronic conditions) in Newcastle as one that, since 2015, has supported thousands of people with a variety of conditions through social prescribing. Their analysis indicated that 86% of their clients improved their well-being after participating in the program.

Why is this important to us in Canada? We have an aging population and we know that that chronic health conditions are more prevalent as we age. We also recognize that we have a healthcare system under stress.

If we can amplify the role that SALCs play in health promotion through social prescriptions, we will be able to contribute to the evidence for integrating social prescribing into health and social policy and to advocate for it to be appropriately funded.

***SALCs – helping people to stay healthier longer***