

OACAO

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

Community Compass

*Identifying Informal Community Supports and
Networks Accessed by Older Adults*



Informal support, Italian style!

July, 2026

‘Strong communities are built on more than formal systems of care. Informal networks of neighbours, families, volunteers, and community members create the everyday connections that help everyone, including older adults, remain independent, reduce social isolation, and maintain a sense of purpose and belonging. Investing in these relationships is not simply a compassionate choice—it is an essential component of healthy, age-friendly communities.’

- Ghislaine Boulianne, Founder, Women on Wilson (WOW), Tillsonburg, Ontario

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

One of the most pervasive and continuing challenges facing older adults in Canada (and beyond) is the risk of loneliness and social isolation and the negative health and social impacts that can result. Despite well over a decade of research about ways to keep older adults meaningfully connected with their friends, families and communities, this challenge persists.

AN EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS

A lack of social connection poses a significant risk to Americans’ health and longevity, according to a recent U.S. surgeon general report that examined numerous studies on loneliness and social isolation. It found that lacking social connection:

- Can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day.
- Is associated with a greater risk of disease—including a 29 percent increased risk of heart disease and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke.
- Is associated with increased risk of anxiety, depression and dementia.
- May increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.

SOURCE: 2023 U.S. SURGEON GENERAL ADVISORY

Loneliness and social isolation are increasingly identified as social determinants of health – generally, those older adults who have social connections enjoy better health outcomes and live longer. As Dr. Mark Hyman wrote in 2022, *‘We are more strongly impacted by our peers and social networks than our genetics when it comes to changing our health’.*

In addition, in its 85 years and counting, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has found that **personal connections are the most important factor in long-term health and happiness**. When people are integrated in their communities, they are more likely to practice

positive health behaviours such as exercising and eating well.

It is against this societal backdrop that the Older Adult Centres’ Association of Ontario (OACAO) Links2Wellbeing: Social Prescribing for Older Adults project team began conversations about the role that informal networks play in supporting older adults and the ways in which they complement the work of formal organizations.

While acknowledging the importance of both professional service providers and more organic social infrastructure, the team members discussed the need to better understand how older adults actually navigate their everyday lives.

To frame our thinking about the current project, the team considered informal supports to be organic hubs of relationships and mutual aid that emerge within a local or interest-based community. In addition, we thought of them as voluntary, self-organized and representing grassroots initiatives. Formal organizations/service providers were characterized as those having paid staff, regulated service agreements and possibly transfer payments from the province.

PROJECT GOAL

The overarching goal of the Community Compass project was to identify and describe a small sample of informal, community-based supports accessed by older adults (50+) living in three different population centres. The centres were chosen based on size¹ and represented communities in which there are participating Links2Wellbeing social prescribing programs.

Our objective was to explore how informal community supports and networks can ‘fill the gaps’, complementing services offered by formal organizations. Identifying those deep, often-invisible informal networks is key to making social prescribing truly effective and sustainable. It allows the formal system to leverage existing community strengths and assets rather than always having to create new programs.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection methods

1. **Key informant interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform, and one was conducted by telephone. The interviews were intended to include community leaders, formal service providers, older adults in general and, specifically, older adults who had a relationship with their local Seniors' Centres.
2. **Focus groups:** Older adults were to be invited to engage in a conversation about sources of informal support for older adults in their community, both ones that they personally accessed and ones of which they were aware.

¹ Size as determined by Statistics Canada definitions.

Four core questions served as a framework for the project. These were:

- What self-organized groups, mutual aid initiatives, neighbourhood connections, or faith-based clusters provide vital social support to older adults at risk of loneliness and/or social isolation outside of registered not-for-profits or government agencies?
- How do these informal supports align with and/or collaborate with more formal social prescribing pathways?
- What are the mechanisms (e.g., local businesses, gathering spots, shared hobbies) that facilitate the formation and maintenance of these informal networks?
- What are some of the distinct differences in these informal networks of support in three different population centres?

In addition, potential guiding questions (Appendix A) were developed to support the key informant interviews.

The following population centres were included in the Community Compass Project. After the population centres were confirmed, a project orientation session (virtual) was convened with project representatives on February 9th, 2026.

Population centre	Population size	Centre chosen
Small population centre	1,000 to 29,999	Tillsonburg
Medium population Centre	30,000 – 99,999	St. Thomas
Large urban population centre	100,000 or more	Guelph

In each population centre, the focus was on neighbourhood-level ‘third places’² (e.g., specific coffee shops, community gardens, churches). We also explored key community connections known to project participants. It is important to note that, in addition to the aforementioned population centres, one key informant interview was held with a Links2Wellbeing partner in Cambridge, also a larger population centre.

² Third places are anchors or hubs of community life that aren't home (the first place) or work (the second place).

RESULTS

A total of 28 individuals participated in two, in person focus groups – Tillsonburg (12) and St. Thomas (7) – and individual key informant interviews (9). The Executive Director of the St. Thomas Seniors' Centre joined the focus group convened there as an observer but has not been included in the participant count.

The majority of participants in the interviews and focus groups were older adults affiliated with the Seniors' Centres. Formal organizations represented in the interviews include community paramedics, a pharmacy and the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON).

The results of the key informant interviews and focus groups will be presented in this report in two ways. Themes that emerged through the interviews and groups will be documented and three case examples will be highlighted.

This section will begin with three case examples from key informant interviews, two that profile the perspectives of older adults and one that highlights the observations of a formal service provider.

In identifying common themes, please note that, while recognizing some duplication and overlap, common themes are reported in **three** ways: individually for focus groups and case examples and as themes that cut across all data collection methods.

CASE EXAMPLES

It takes a village!

Case example #1: The interconnected support systems of T

T³ is an older adult who lives in a small community and has been a widower since 2023. He is a retired industrial professional who, with his (deceased) wife, has been a long-time motorcycle enthusiast. He told the story of a time when his wife willingly gave up her dream of renovating their kitchen for them to buy an upgraded motorcycle! They relocated from an urban centre to a small town two decades ago to raise their family.

T's resilience, after the passing of his spouse, is demonstrated through three separate informal hubs that provided him emotional support.

- **Service-based kinship (Lions Club):** Having served in leadership roles (District Governor), T describes the club as his second family. Club members provided

³ Individual respondent names are not included in the report. Individuals are identified by a letter only.

immediate support when his wife passed away, with hundreds of them attending the visitation. T continues to receive support from his Lions Club friends.

- **Third-place socialization (the local diner):** T visits a local family-run restaurant for lunch almost daily. This serves as a critical "check-in" system. The regulars (mainly other older adults) provide a form of support, and the lunch is a way to check in on one another. If T misses a day, both the group and diner employees notice and ask about him. This creates a sense of being seen and valued.
- **Mutual aid (the neighbourhood):** On his street of approximately 30 houses, T engages in reciprocal support with three neighbouring widows. He offers physical help (e.g. snow shovelling), while they provide supports such as sharing their baking with him. This peer support reduces isolation and maintains property safety.

The intersection of formal and informal supports

T's story shows how professional intervention and community support complement one another rather than operating in silos:

- Following his wife's death, T felt that he was disappointing her by not keeping up with the housework in the way she might have done. By working with a professional grief counsellor, he was able to address the root cause of his guilt regarding household maintenance. Once the psychological barrier was addressed through therapy, T's guilt about housework eased and his informal networks (friends at the Senior Centre and in his neighbourhood, the diner, the barber shop and the service club) provided ongoing informal support, friendship and encouragement. The informal support offered by their friendship complemented the formal support of the grief counsellor.
- While T attends a Senior Centre (formal organization) for exercise classes, he identifies the pre-class social hour (drinking coffee and "shooting the breeze") as a primary motivator for attendance.

Safety and infrastructure in a rural context

- **Use of technology:** Living alone and with his children living far away (Western Canada and elsewhere in the province), T uses a wearable medical alert device. This \$67/month investment provides 'peace of mind' for both T and his distant family, acting as a digital bridge when families live apart from one another.
- **The transportation link:** Living in a small, largely rural community, T's ability to drive to the nearest service hub is key to maintaining his independence. His support network - the 'guys' at the barber shop, the service club, the diner, and the senior centre - depends, to a large extent, on continuing to be able to drive.

As an aside, T's mention of the barber shop is a classic example of a third place specifically tailored to older men. The barber shop provides a low-pressure environment for support through casual conversation.

T's story demonstrates that, for rural older adults, 'aging in community' is not just about the home itself, but about the ecosystem surrounding it. T's informal supports (the diner and neighbours) provide the daily monitoring that formal systems often lack, while his formal supports (grief counselling and alert devices) provide the specialized care that friends cannot.

Case example #2: Organic neighbourhood networks – Women on Wilson (WOW)

WOW is an excellent example of how informal networks organically form and sustain themselves over time.

Context and origin: In the fall of 2021, during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new subdivision on Wilson Street in Tillsonburg, Ontario, became the catalyst for an innovative informal support network. The neighbourhood was comprised of residents who were entirely new to the area, representing diverse ages, life stages and cultural backgrounds. Recognizing a collective need for baseline local information (such as sourcing trusted local services) and social connection, resident Ghislaine Boulianne⁴ leveraged her 30-year background in municipal government in York Region to organize neighbourhood residents. Ghislaine had previously established a successful women's empowerment and education group during her public service career.

Mobilization and structure: To assess local interest, Boulianne distributed an introductory flyer to 69 households on her street. The response was immediate, with 38 women expressing interest. Five years later, the network continues to maintain a dedicated core membership of 31 active participants.

The inaugural meeting was held informally in a neighbourhood park, with residents bringing lawn chairs. To ensure the network was community-driven, the initial gathering utilized four distinct breakout sessions to co-design the group's framework:

- **Purpose:** Defining the core mission of neighbourhood connection.
- **Logistics:** Establishing a manageable quarterly meeting, operating with zero fees and rotating local venues.
- **Rules of engagement:** Agreeing upon an informal, safe, and entirely judgment-free environment.

⁴ In the case of a group such as WOW, Ghislaine Boulianne is comfortable with being identified.

- **Philanthropy:** Identifying community "give-back" priorities, which ultimately focused on youth, seniors, the environment, and animal welfare.

Outcomes and intergenerational impact: At its second meeting, the group mapped individual social assets and needs by asking members to complete the prompt: *"I would like a friend to..."* (e.g. walk with, travel with, cook with). Based on these responses, the network split into specialized, self-managing subgroups, including a book club, walking groups, craft circles, card games (e.g. euchre) and shared golf outings.

Spanning ages from the 30s to 85, WOW serves as an example of an intergenerational informal network. The model's success ultimately inspired the creation of a parallel men's group, "Boys on Wilson" (BOW). Celebrating its fifth anniversary in fall of 2026, the initiative demonstrates how local, informal networks can mitigate social isolation, foster mutual aid and build resilient community infrastructure from the ground up.

Further, the success of WOW shows that effective informal networks do not require heavy administrative funding. By focusing purely on *connection* and using simple asset-mapping ("I want a friend to walk with"), neighbourhoods can build self-sustaining, intergenerational support systems that naturally look out for older residents.



WOW collecting books for a library fundraiser



WOW helping at a food bank

Case example #3: Community pharmacist: bridging the gap

The interview with a community pharmacist is important because his work sits right at the intersection of **formal healthcare, civic service, and organic community gathering spaces**.

D's perspective was highly valuable to this project because he bridges the gap. As a formal provider, D uses informal spaces (mall gathering spots, service clubs) to integrate himself into the community.

Third place and organic checking (the mall walkers)

D notes that groups of older men typically gather at third places like the Tim Hortons in the Tillsonburg Town Centre.

The observation of older men consistently gathering at the Tillsonburg Town Centre highlights the critical role of commercial third places in the daily routines of older adults. For mall walkers and coffee groups, these spaces offer more than physical exercise or socialization; they serve as informal peer-support and wellness-checking networks. As men are historically more difficult to engage in formal programming for older adults, these organic, routine-based gatherings in commercial spaces represent important touchpoints where informal peer support naturally occurs.

Author's note⁵: The practice of gathering in shopping malls for informal walking and/or connecting over coffee transcends this community and is found in shopping malls everywhere. Malls offer an opportunity for informal connections within a formal, commercial structure. They may be particularly important for walking groups during our Canadian winters when many older adults are hesitant to walk for fear of falling. As such, they can help to keep older adults connected and active during winter months.

Service clubs: the hybrid network (Kinsmen Club)

Service clubs like the Kinsmen are **hybrids** (often classified as 'semi-formal' or "mediating structures"). They have formal structures (bylaws, dues, meetings), but they operate on an informal, relationship-driven level within the community to mobilize support quickly without the potential challenge of bureaucratic red tape.

Service clubs like the Kinsmen Club occupy a unique, semi-formal bridging position between formal institutional support and entirely grassroots networks. While structured as an organization, their local impact is deeply relational and driven by civic volunteerism. D's note that the membership skews towards older adults and illustrates how service clubs pull double duty: they simultaneously act as an informal peer support group for their older members (providing purpose, social connection and

⁵ The author of this report is Pat Spadafora, Kaleidoscope Consulting.

intergenerational contact with younger members like D) while actively fundraising to support the broader community's formal and informal needs.

Cultural and grassroots peer support (the Dutch community and disease groups)

Tillsonburg has a historically large Dutch population. D also notes the presence of informal disease-specific support groups (e.g. Parkinson's, Alzheimer's) that focus heavily on supporting family care partners.

The intersection of a distinct cultural demographic (the large Dutch community) and grass-roots, informal 'disease groups' highlights how care partner support naturally organizes outside of clinical settings. These informal circles, particularly for progressive conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, function as essential knowledge-sharing and emotional coping networks for family care partners. They help to fill the gaps left by formal healthcare systems by providing culturally relevant, lived-experience empathy that formal providers may not have the time or capacity to deliver.

The pharmacist as a bridge (Medical Minute)

D notes that doing the Medical Minute at the Senior Centre helps to promote his new business. This is a good example of a mutually beneficial relationship where formal providers use informal/community settings to build trust.

D's monthly Medical Minute at the centre demonstrates how formal health professionals can successfully lower the barrier to healthcare access by stepping out of the clinic and into community spaces. While serving a marketing purpose for a new local business, it also demystifies the pharmacist's role, shifting pharmacists from transactional service providers to familiar community allies. This intersection creates an informal pathway for older adults to seek advice before a health issue escalates to a formal, acute care intervention.

Author's note: One, perhaps unintended, benefit of offering the Medical Minute at the Senior Centre is that it offers D an opportunity to get to know the members and programs. This positions D to write appropriate social prescribing referrals for older adults he meets in the pharmacy whom he thinks would benefit from a referral to the centre.

FOCUS GROUPS⁶

Two focus groups were held, one in Tillsonburg and one in St. Thomas. All the older adult participants were associated with the Seniors' Centres in those two communities. A summary of each group will be presented, beginning with Tillsonburg.

Focus group #1: Tillsonburg Senior Centre

In Tillsonburg, informal networks for older adults rarely exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are nurtured through a relationship with formal spaces—such as the Senior Centre, local churches, libraries and service clubs. These formal entities act as incubators, planting the seeds for organic, enduring friendships, peer-led support systems, and wellness checks that ultimately move outside more formal organizational walls.

Key themes and ways of connecting

Shared passions as social glue

Older adults naturally gravitate toward one another and build deep connections through shared activities and interests. These act as low-barrier entry points for socialization. Examples that were shared by older participants in the Tillsonburg group include:

- **Hobbies and other spaces:** Gardening (sharing plants, leaning on shovels, and hosting spontaneous garden parties), car shows, book clubs, community choirs, scrapbooking, and swimming laps.
- **Commercial and retail ties:** Regular interactions with staff and volunteers at local garden centres or thrift stores build a sense of recognition. Participants noted that simply being known and greeted by name creates a powerful sense of belonging and visibility.
- **Historical and cultural bonds:** Shared history, such as the local legacy of tobacco farming, has historically united diverse immigrant groups. Similarly, veteran-focused spaces (like the Military History Club and Legion coffee hours) provide a safe community for peer connection.

Food and routine as wellness checks

Food serves as a common denominator for gathering.

- **Where one regularly sits:** In faith communities, older adults often sit in the same spots. If a seat is empty, it triggers an immediate, informal wellness check.

⁶ A special thank you goes to Jenn Wiebe, OACAO Links2Wellbeing Project and Sustainability Manager, for supporting the focus groups and for her excellent note taking and photography skills!

- **Spontaneous mutual aid:** When someone is flagged as missing or sick, informal networks naturally rally—initiating prayer chains, preparing/dropping off meals, or sending cards.
- **Routine meet-ups:** Regular breakfast, lunch, and coffee groups at local establishments (e.g., Daksh, Tim Hortons) often formalize over time. One group even established a physical ‘call sheet’ with names and phone numbers to keep tabs on and support members.

The power of word of mouth

Word of mouth remains the most popular way of connecting and navigating both informal and formal support systems. It often starts with a group of people who meet in a more formal setting (e.g. a Seniors’ Centre) and evolves from there.

- Older adults actively pull isolated peers into their circle. For instance, one focus group participant recounted overhearing a man talking at a restaurant. She sensed that he needed support and she invited him to the Senior Centre, fundamentally changing his life.
- These informal networks frequently act as a bridge, successfully drawing isolated individuals into broader, formal community resources.

Intergenerational mentorship and volunteering

Informal support flows both ways. Older adults find purpose, important social interaction and connection with staff, patients, and younger generations by volunteering at local hospitals, museums (e.g., Annandale - House National Historic Site and Museum), and within churches through organic, non-structured mentorship.

The challenges and benefits of small communities

The Tillsonburg focus group highlighted a distinct tension inherent within a town of 20,000 people.

The Blessing

It is easier to keep a finger on the pulse of the community. People notice who is present, who is missing, and who might be getting left out.

The Challenge

Small-town dynamics can breed insularity. Long-time residents (from Tillsonburg) may view newcomers as outsiders, making these informal networks difficult to break into for recent arrivals.

Mapping the support ecosystem

At the beginning of the focus group, participants were provided with a stack of index cards and invited to write down the places where they find and build support. They

could comment on as many index cards as they wanted. The participants listed a blend of specific local supports and organic spaces.

- **Formal organizational spaces:** Tillsonburg Senior Centre, public library, multi-service centre, VON, Meals on Wheels.
- **Faith and service spaces:** Local churches, Royal Canadian Legion, Rotary Club, Salvation Army and Onwards Thrift Store.
- **Lifestyle and residential hubs:** Hickory Hills and Baldwin Place Associations (retirement communities), local walking trails and the community pool, dog parks.
- **Hospitality and gathering spots:** Daksh Restaurant, local coffee shops, and community breakfasts.

Author's note: In order to optimize support for older adults in small communities, municipal and social planners may want to consider focusing not only on funding formal programs. Instead, they might want to think about investing in accessible public spaces, local businesses and community clubs that allow these vital, organic 'shovels-and-gardens' networks to take root and flourish.



Focus group #2: St. Thomas Seniors' Centre

In a process similar to the Tillsonburg focus group, participants were provided with a stack of index cards and invited to write down the places where they find and build support. They were invited to comment on as many index cards as they wanted

The St. Thomas focus group conversation yielded rich insights into how older adults form, sustain and rely on informal networks. While formal services provide a safety net,

it is these organic, informal connections that provide the substance or, foundation, of a meaningful life.

Key themes

Activity as a basis or, beginning point, for care

One of the strongest findings is that the stated activity of a group (whether it is a book club, an investment group, art, sports) often serves as a "hook" or a beginning point. Over time, the activity becomes secondary to the mutual support it facilitates.

- **Life transitions:** Groups like the **Art Tarts** (meeting since the 1970s) or book clubs can become lifelong supports or anchors for people. Over time, members navigate shared experiences of geographic relocation, career retirement and the profound impacts of grief, loss, and celebration together.



The Art Tarts

- **Organic evolution:** Formal interventions often spark permanent, informal networks. For example, a formal bereavement group got on so well that they spun off an independent, weekly coffee club (Kate's Cafe) to maintain their lifeline. This group has endured over time, getting together for many years.

The power of incubators and structural anchors

While these networks are informal, they rarely appear out of thin air. Rather, they require physical or structural anchors.

- **The connector asset:** Networks frequently depend on a distinct 'connector'-an individual who builds trust, organizes communication or takes administrative

responsibility (e.g., monitoring a Facebook page, or the business owner who started the ladies-only mini-putt).

- **Physical and spatial challenges:** Groups require accessible, affordable spaces to thrive. The widows' support group's migration from Tim Hortons to Coffee Culture and finally to Kate's Cafe highlights a constant search for accommodating, low-cost physical environments. Changes in weather or business closures pose threats to group longevity.

The digital leap and hybrid spaces

The conversation in this focus group revealed the need for or, interest in, the integration of digital tools to coordinate real-world connections.

- **Digital inclusion:** Facebook groups like the St. Thomas 55 plus senior connections (with 3,000 members) have a role in connecting people. They allow users to gauge interest, promote vital local information (road closures, events), and spin off micro-groups for niche activities like euchre, golf, and pickleball.
- **The 'small group' benefits:** Participants noted that while, the digital reach is significant, deep connection happens in the smaller in person groups (e.g., the 4 -15 women who meet at the Elgin Mall).

Gender-specific and demographic dynamics

Organizing patterns heavily reflected gender dynamics and localized history.

- **Gender segregation:** In this focus group, there was a distinct preference for gender-segregated spaces. Women use walking, art, and investment clubs as safe spaces for emotional vulnerability and financial empowerment. Men utilize targeted spaces like the WWW (Wings Without Women) club; originally formed as a casual time-killer while spouses were out, it has endured for over a decade as a crucial space where older men 'end up caring for each other'.
- **The chosen family:** For geographic transplants (such as the original wives of secondary school teachers in Aylmer), informal networks replace distant biological families, stepping in to help ensure they are 'never missing an important event'.

COMMON THEMES ACROSS ALL DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Several major themes consistently emerged across both focus groups (Tillsonburg and St. Thomas) and all three case examples, illustrating how informal networks operate alongside with and complement formal organizations.

Shared activities and hobbies as a hub for support

Across the board, older adults naturally gravitate toward one another through a specific activity, which often transitions into a network of informal support.

- **Focus groups:** St. Thomas participants explicitly noted that the primary activity (e.g. art, books, sports) often becomes secondary over time to the mutual support and life-transition navigation it facilitates. Similarly, Tillsonburg highlighted shared passions like gardening, community choirs, and book clubs as the social glue that binds individuals together.
- **Case studies:** The Women on Wilson (WOW) network formed organically by asking members what activities they wanted a friend for, which then evolved into self-managing, common interest subgroups (e.g., euchre, golf, walking) under the WOW umbrella. For T, while his initial reason for visiting the Senior Centre was exercise, the informal pre-class social hour became his primary motivator.

Author's note: Not every key informant interview was documented in this report, with the author choosing to focus on three interviews as examples. However, it should be noted that the theme of shared activities and hobbies was prevalent with all informants.

Author's note: One activity that didn't emerge as a theme as often as anticipated but is important to note was discussed in a key informant interview not specifically reported in this report. An older man in Guelph shared a story about how he started going to the cafeteria in his local Seniors' Centre in 2023. It was there that he learned about bingo that is scheduled every Wednesday, and he has been participating ever since.

After joining bingo, J started to volunteer for a colouring group – Colouring for Calm – that meets every Friday. With the exception of WOW and their charitable activity, not many participants in the project talked specifically about volunteering. However, it is important to note the role of volunteering in making community connections.

Third places and routines serving as informal wellness checks

- **Focus groups:** In Tillsonburg, routines around food and faith create natural check ins; sitting in the same church pews or meeting for morning coffee means missing members are instantly flagged for informal outreach and support (meals, phone calls). The St. Thomas group detailed an ongoing search to find affordable, welcoming physical hubs like local cafes.
- **Case studies:** The community pharmacist highlighted how mall walkers and older men gathering daily at Tim Hortons serve as an organic wellness-checking infrastructure. Likewise, T's daily lunch visits to a family-run diner mean that if he

misses a single day, the employees and fellow ‘regulars’ immediately step in to ask about him.

Formal systems acting as Incubators or hubs for informal networks

Formal service providers and informal grassroots networks do not operate in silos; instead, formal frameworks such as Seniors’ Centres, routinely spark or foster organic relationships.

- **Focus groups:** Tillsonburg participants noted that formal organizations (e.g. Seniors’ Centres), libraries, churches) act as physical incubators where friendships are seeded before moving entirely outside organizational walls. In St. Thomas, a formal bereavement group got along so well that they spun off into an independent, self-managed weekly coffee club (Kate’s Cafe).
- **Case studies:** T’s story perfectly displays this ecosystem: a professional grief counsellor resolved the root causes of his psychological distress, which subsequently allowed his informal networks (neighbours, friends, and service club connections) to successfully ‘pick up the slack’ to provide ongoing support. Additionally, the pharmacist used a formal setting (the Senior Centre Medical Minute) to integrate himself into the community’s informal network.

Gender-specific dynamics and engaging older men

As older men are historically more resistant to engage in traditional, structured programming, they often rely on routine-based, low-pressure commercial spaces to build camaraderie.

- **Focus groups:** St. Thomas highlighted distinct gender segregation patterns, pointing to the decade-long survival of the Wings Without Women (WWW) club—an informal space where older men gather and quietly end up taking care of each other. Tillsonburg noted similar communities for men, such as the Military History Club and Legion coffee hours.
- **Case studies:** Both the community pharmacist’s observation of the Tim Hortons mall groups and T’s relationship with the local barber shop underscore how older men utilize casual, low-vulnerability environments to naturally foster peer connection. Furthermore, the organic success of the WOW women’s group directly inspired a parallel neighbourhood network for men, the ‘Boys on Wilson’ (BOW).

PROJECT LIMITATIONS

One significant limitation in this project was the size and scope. As a result of limited resources, we chose to work with a ‘convenient’ sample of communities. While similar themes were reported from all locations in the results, one cannot generalize to other communities in Ontario. This report is a snapshot in time, perhaps best conceptualized as a pilot project, the results of which could potentially inform a larger funded study.

An additional limitation was the capacity of participating population centres. It is hard to know exactly where the problem lay – possibly staff capacity – but centre leads had difficulty recruiting participants for the key informant interviews. They recruited primarily older interviewees who attended their centres; only three service providers were recruited (one from Tillsonburg and two from St. Thomas). Guelph recruited only one key informant, an older man, prior to opting out of the project.

Tillsonburg and St. Thomas fared better with recruiting participants for the focus groups but defaulted to only older adults who attended their centre. That restriction was not part of the original project intent. The focus group conversations were rich and informative but shaped by older adults who were already connected to others.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights from this report, several broad strategic recommendations emerge for municipal planners, social policymakers, healthcare organizations and local business owners to better support the intersection of formal and informal networks:

Protect and invest in commercial third places

The research highlights the reality that everyday commercial settings — such as local diners, shopping malls, and coffee shops—serve as critical, low-cost wellness-checking networks for older adults.

- **Provide incentives for age-friendly businesses:** Municipalities can create local recognition programs or tax incentives for small businesses (e.g., family-run diners, neighbourhood cafes) that intentionally welcome older adults and act as informal community hubs.
- **Maintain shopping malls as winter walking infrastructure:** Recognizing that shopping malls offer safe, climate-controlled spaces for mall walkers during Canadian winters, municipal planners could collaborate with commercial property

owners to ensure these spaces remain accessible, feature adequate seating, and maintain clear walking paths.

Integrate informal networks into healthcare and social prescribing pathways

The report demonstrates that formal interventions (like professional grief counseling) and informal peer support systems work best when they operate in tandem as a complementary ecosystem rather than in silos.

- **Provide healthcare practitioners with asset maps:** Formal healthcare professionals, such as family doctors, community paramedics, and pharmacists, could be provided with local informal asset maps. This would allow them to socially prescribe and refer clients not just to formal nonprofit programs such as those offered by Seniors Centres, but also connect isolated patients/customers to organic neighbourhood networks or local gathering spots.
- **Leverage pharmacists as trust bridges:** Healthcare systems could fund and support initiatives where providers step out of the pharmacy or clinic to deliver short, casual educational sessions (like the Medical Minute) in the community, building a bridge of trust that lowers barriers to care before acute issues arise.

Support neighbourhood-level mobilization and micro-grants

The example of the Women on Wilson (WOW) group illustrates that highly resilient, self-sustaining, intergenerational mutual aid networks can be built from the ground up with zero administrative fees.

- **Fund micro-grants for resident-led initiatives:** Rather than focusing community funding on large, established non-profits, municipal grant structures could allocate small, low-barrier micro-grants directly to neighbourhood residents. This funding could cover minimal baseline costs—such as printing introductory flyers or renting community spaces—to help organic networks form.
- **Promote grassroots asset mapping templates:** Local governments can publish and distribute simple, open-source toolkits based on the WOW model (using simple prompts like *"I would like a friend to..."*) to help new subdivisions or apartment buildings self-organize their own informal subgroups.

Recognize and resource semi-formal hybrid structures

Service clubs (e.g., Lions Club or Kinsmen Club) occupy an important bridging position, offering the flexibility of informal, relationship-driven support without bureaucratic red tape, while skewing toward an older membership that supports one another.

- **Partner with service clubs for rapid response:** Municipal emergency and social planners could actively maintain communication lines with local service clubs. These groups can be quickly mobilized to handle informal community needs-like neighbourhood snow shovelling, food bank volunteering, or localized fundraising—far faster than formal government agencies.

Prioritize rural infrastructure: transportation and digital bridges

For older adults living alone or in smaller communities, maintaining independence relies heavily on specific physical and digital lifelines.

- **Protect rural driving and alternative transit:** As informal networks in small towns depend heavily on an older adult's ability to physically get to a central service hub or diner, rural communities must invest in accessible volunteer driving programs or localized transportation options to prevent sudden isolation when driving ceases to be an option.
- **Subsidize digital safety infrastructure:** For older adults whose families live far away, standalone wearable medical alert devices offer essential peace of mind. Municipalities or provincial health plans could consider subsidizing the monthly subscription costs of these devices for low-income solo-dwelling older adults.

Other:

- **Protect third places:** Older adults often rely heavily on commercial or community spaces (cafes, malls, arenas) that cost little to no money. When these places close or change policies, vital networks are disrupted.
- **Word of mouth is important for connecting:** Those most at risk of falling through the cracks do not always find services via formal avenues; they find them via word of mouth. Empowering existing informal connectors with information is the best way to reach isolated seniors.
- **Fund digital infrastructure, not just physical:** Digital hubs (such as the 55+ Facebook group) act as the frontline for organizing physical meetups, ensuring older adults have broad Wi-Fi access and digital literacy to mitigate against isolation.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SENIORS' CENTRES

Based on the results of the key informant interviews and focus groups as described in this report, Seniors' Centres are in a powerful and unique position. They are not just service providers; they are **incubators** or **hubs** where formal programming creates the safety and structure for self-sustaining informal networks to take root and evolve.

What follows are strategic recommendations designed to help Seniors' Centres leverage, support, and integrate informal networks to maximize their community impact.

Optimize the physical environment for informally connecting

As the first case example showed, for people like T, the pre-class social hour (drinking coffee and "shooting the breeze") is often the primary motivator for attendance.

- **Designate "soft" social spaces:** Where space permits, Seniors' Centres could intentionally design or preserve physical spaces — such as casual lounge areas, café corners, or other seating areas — where older adults can gather informally before and after structured classes. What this report demonstrated is that while the formal setting facilitates the informal gathering, the informal gathering may evolve into connections outside of the centre (e.g. the diner in Tillsonburg)
- **Build cushion time into programming:** Rather than scheduling classes back-to-back in the same room, build in 15–20-minute buffer times. This enables participants to linger, chat and transition from a structured activity into an organic social connection.

Empower and mobilize organic connectors

The report highlighted that isolated older adults are not always reached through formal marketing; instead, they are drawn in by peers via word-of-mouth.

- **Create an informal ambassador or peer-led outreach program:** Identify natural connectors within the Seniors' Centre membership - individuals who naturally welcome newcomers or notice when someone is missing. Provide them with low-cost tools (e.g., info cards or "bring-a-friend" coffee vouchers) to help them pull isolated peers in their wider networks into the Seniors' Centre space.
- **Acknowledge and support spin-off groups:** When formal Seniors' Centre groups or bereavement programs evolve into independent coffee clubs (like Kate's Cafe), centre staff can support these spin-offs by occasionally checking in with the group's informal leader to provide them with updated community resources, health information or information about Seniors' Centre activities.

Implement low-barrier asset mapping

The demonstrated success of the Women on Wilson (WOW) network relied, in the formative stages, on a simple prompt: *"I would like a friend to..."*

- **Adopt simple interest-matching tools:** Seniors' Centres can introduce a low-pressure connection board or simple intake sheet using WOW's model. Instead of only asking older adults what services they need, ask them what *activities* they want a partner for (e.g., walking, playing euchre, going to car shows).
- **Facilitate micro-groups:** Use this information to help older adults organically form self-managing micro-subgroups. This reduces the administrative burden on Seniors' Centre staff while fostering high engagement peer networks.

Bridge the gender and demographic gaps

While this project was arguably not a large sample and we cannot generalize to other communities, nonetheless it did demonstrate clear gender preferences, such as older men gathering at commercial third places (like the mall or local diners) and preferring spaces like the Wings Without Women club.

- **Take the Seniors' Centre into commercial third places:** Since older men can be harder to engage in formal programming, centre staff could take a cue from the community pharmacist's Medical Minute. If staff capacity permits, consider hosting casual, low-barrier pop-up events, workshops, or 'barber shop talk' circles inside commercial spaces (malls, local diners) where men already gather.
- **Design targeted, low pressure environments for men:** Some Seniors' Centres already offer Men's Sheds. Consider creating activities centred around physical labour, mechanics, or hobbies (e.g., a Military History Club or a repair/woodworking hobby circle) that naturally facilitate peer support.

Support digital and hybrid gateways

With Facebook groups like *St. Thomas 55+ Senior connections* boasting 3,000 members, digital spaces cannot be overlooked for their potential in coordination and connection.

- **Moderate or partner with local digital hubs:** Seniors' Centre staff and volunteers could actively collaborate with the administrators of these digital hubs to seamlessly cross-promote events and capture the older adults who use digital platforms. Having said this, we cannot ignore the reality that not all older adults use social media and platforms like Facebook. Indeed, we observed, through this project, the continued importance of word-of-mouth and in person connection.
- **Expand technology literacy with a social focus:** Frame digital literacy programs not just as a technical skill, but as a direct tool for social connection - specifically teaching older adults how to safely navigate local digital neighbourhoods to find groups that match their interests.

SUMMARY

When we first launched this project, the author of this report naively conceptualized informal and formal networks in specific ways as referenced in the Background and Context section. It wasn't long before a 'wrinkle' turned up during key informant interviews with older adults. The 'wrinkle' came when the conversation with T turned to examples like service clubs. That conversation shifted and broadened the thinking of the OACAO team. Service clubs aren't informal in the way we hadn't thought of as they do have a formal structure (e.g. Board of Directors, terms of reference et cetera), they are usually not funded, nor do they generally have paid staff. Rather, they typically engage in fundraising as they give back to the community. Even an informal neighbourhood group like WOW has guidelines and, each year, decides on which charity they will support.

In the end, then, supporting older adults isn't an either/or option - meaning that you are providing either "informal" or a "formal" support. It is much more nuanced than that, with different types and degrees of support operating along a continuum. Perhaps the most informal group is the one that gathers for coffee at Tim Horton's, McDonald's, or another local coffee shop.

By way of another very informal example, one woman in Tillsonburg shared a story of a group of friends, all quilters (representing a community of interest), who gather every Tuesday evening at her home at 7:00 p.m. to play dominoes. It almost equals Tim Horton's in terms of informality! S said that they don't serve food, so there is no expectation or pressure on anyone. She just provides herbal tea and people just show up – no RSVPs required. The dominoes group has been meeting for years and, during that time, they have supported one another through many life transitions.

Informal networks among older adults, then, can serve as a critical buffer against social isolation and loneliness. Rather than being merely transactional or activity based, these groups often evolve into vital networks offering emotional support. They operate on a continuum that stretches from highly organic friendship circles to digital hubs and hybrid spaces (like service clubs or formal centres acting as incubators). Where do Seniors' Centres fit into this support ecosystem? In short, they serve a critical role. The centres are in a unique position to 'toggle' between their role as formal service providers to being recognized as vital community hubs that nurture, protect and sustain the informal networks older adults often rely on for long-term health and happiness.



APPENDIX A

Community Compass project – guiding questions for key informant interviews (February 3, 2026)

1. Where do older adults in your community naturally gravitate to for mutual support (e.g. neighbourhood groups, neighbourhood gathering places like coffee shops)?

What is it about these places/spaces that supports older adults at risk of social isolation and/or loneliness?

Is there a person (leader) who is the glue that holds these groups together?

Who are the ‘quiet’ leaders helping older adults behind the scene?

2. Do these informal supports interact with or collaborate with more formal senior serving organizations that support older adults? If so, how do they do this?

3. Are you aware of local Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats or other informal online forums where neighbours check in on and support one another?

4. How do these informal groups share information (e.g. word-of-mouth, posting information on bulletin boards in public places like grocery stores, shopping malls)

5. Are there local business owners/employees – maybe a barber, pharmacist, restaurant staff – who seem to know what everyone is up to and who look out for the ‘regulars’?

6. What are the opportunities and/or barriers that help or hinder informal groups from connecting with informal groups?

How do these informal groups view your municipality’s formal senior serving organizations?

How might they complement and support one another?

Do these informal networks fill gaps in the formal service delivery system?

7. What are some of the mechanisms (e.g. local businesses, gathering spots, shared hobbies) that facilitate the formation and maintenance of these informal networks

Thank you!

On behalf of the OACAO and, as project lead and author of this report, I would like to extend a huge thank you and acknowledgment to the many individuals who contributed to this project. I learned so much from each one of you; your experiences have forever shaped how I will view the ways in which informal community supports and networks shape the ways in which older adults experience and navigate their everyday lives.

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To the OACAO team

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WALTONS
TRUST

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