



Age-Friendly Cities Project
Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, Canada
A Report Prepared for the City of Portage la Prairie

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BACKGROUND

The City of Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, is one of the participants in the World Health Organization Global Age-Friendly Cities Project that was launched in 2006. The Centre on Aging at the University of Manitoba was asked by the Manitoba Seniors and Healthy Aging Secretariat to conduct the research component of the initiative in that city. This report highlights key findings and presents recommendations arising from the research.

RESEARCH METHODS USED

Focus groups were conducted in Portage la Prairie in October and November of 2006 to identify specific features of what makes the city age-friendly. With the assistance of Jennifer Sarna, Manager of Community Development of the City of Portage la Prairie, and an Advisory Committee participants were recruited for the study. Four focus groups were held with seniors (37 individuals participated in total), who ranged in age from 61 to 92 years old. One focus group (involving seven individuals) was conducted with caregivers of seniors, and three focus groups were held with professional staff, business people, and representatives of volunteer organizations, respectively (each with seven individuals).

Focus groups questions addressed eight domains. The questions asked in the older adults and caregiver groups are listed below. Questions in the service provider groups were virtually identical, except that they were asked from the perspective of older adults.

1. Outdoor spaces and buildings

- What is it like to step outside of your home to go for a walk to get fresh air, run errands or visit?
- What is it like to go into buildings, such as public offices or stores?

2. Transportation

- What is the public transportation system like in your community?
- What is it like to drive in your community?

3. Housing

- Tell me about the house or the apartment where you live.
- If your needs change, what are your choices for housing in the community?

4. Respect and Inclusion

- In what ways does your community show, or not show, respect for you as an older person?
- In what ways does your community include, or not include you as an older person in activities and events?

5. Social Participation

- How easily can you socialize in your community?
- Tell me about your participation in other activities, like education, culture, recreation, or spiritual activities.

6. Communication and Information

- What is your experience getting the information you need in your community, for example, about services or events? This can be information you get by telephone, radio, TV, in print, or in person.

7. Civic Participation and Employment

- Tell me about your participation in volunteer work.
- Tell me about your participation in paid work, if you are employed now or if you are looking for paid work.
- Tell me about your participation in public community affairs, like community associations or municipal councils.

8. Health and Social Services

- What is your experience with the services in the community to help older persons?

For each domain, participants were asked to comment on the positive and negative aspects, as well as provide suggestions for improvements. Focus group discussions were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed to identify emerging themes.

FINDINGS

“Portage is large enough to be interesting and small enough to be friendly”

(Seniors Focus Groups)

We present here findings for each of the eight “age-friendly” domains, focusing on key age-friendly features as well as age-friendly barriers that were identified by participants. Where applicable we also highlight some of the discrepancies in perceptions across the focus groups (e.g., seniors versus service providers). Recommendations reflect, in part, the suggestions of focus group participants and, in part, the authors’ interpretation of participants’ comments. At the beginning of each section, we provide a few direct quotes from focus groups participants.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

“We’ve got great new paths all around the lake, which they’ve just completed. The lights aren’t hooked up yet, but it’s a marvelous place to walk.” (Senior Focus Group)

“That walkway is very well. But with a scooter, to get onto it, you can get on at 8th and then you have to go down to, I don’t know how far that way.” (Senior Focus Group)

“Any time a place moves or builds in the city, they should do a real good study on, I call it wheelchair accessibility, but I realize that walkers and canes and everything else fits right in there” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Participants commented very positively on the new walking path that was recently built. They also pointed out its age-friendly features, such as good lighting and benches.
- Various crime prevention efforts were also commented on positively, such as the efforts of the RCMP and Age & Opportunity to improve home safety.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Although participants were very positive regarding the new walking path, they also noted that access to it was difficult, particularly for those with mobility impairments. Crossing the road to get to the path was identified as a real challenge.
- A recurring theme was the lack of, broken, or brick side walks that makes it difficult for older adults to walk and/or use scooters. Snow and ice on sidewalks were also identified as barriers.
- Safety concerns were raised, particularly by seniors. This included comments regarding crime, vandalism, feeling afraid of going outside in the dark, and feeling threatened by youth, especially when there are groups of young people. Noteworthy in this respect was the discrepancy in how seniors discussed safety concerns relative to professional staff. While professional staff acknowledged that seniors experience safety concerns, there was also a perception that this was an overreaction, given the low crime rate in Portage la Prairie.
- In terms of access to buildings, a number of barriers were mentioned, particularly by those with mobility impairments, including: steps and stairs into buildings and inaccessible or poorly designed washrooms (e.g., small stalls). Heavy (not “senior-friendly” doors) and lack of automatic doors were identified as another major barrier by older adults.

Recommendations:

- Walking paths and parks should be fully accessible by all individuals, including those who use wheelchairs or scooters. This includes attention to: provision of even surfaces (e.g., pavement rather than interlocking stones or gravel); proper lighting; benches; and, importantly, these areas must be readily accessible through the provision of crosswalks to allow crossing of streets, and ramps and steps with railings.

- Sidewalks should be built in key areas of the city. This may include areas in which there are high concentrations of older adults, as well streets that connect to key business areas. Existing sidewalks should be properly maintained. Decorative bricks (e.g. cobblestone) should be avoided for sidewalks. Replacing existing cobble stone (all or in part) with a more even surface should be considered.
- Sidewalks should be cleared of ice and snow as soon as possible after snow fall.
- Even though the crime rate in Portage la Prairie may be low, older adults' safety concerns are real and should be addressed. This may require a multi-faceted approach including, for example: ensuring that streets are well lit, expanding RCMP and citizen patrol presence, continuing and expanding home safety programs, and creating an on-going communication campaign to inform residents of crime statistics.
- Older adults' needs must be considered when constructing new buildings or renovating old ones (e.g., no steps, ramps, elevators, wheelchair accessible washrooms, automatic doors). Ideally, older adults should be consulted before building or renovating.
- Older buildings, particularly those that are commonly used by older adults (e.g., post office, medical clinic) should be accessible; for example, elevators must be accessible and functioning at all times, and buildings should be retrofitted with automatic doors.
- Services currently provided in older buildings that cannot be retrofitted to be wheelchair accessible might usefully be provided (e.g., on a monthly basis) in buildings that are accessible by all (e.g., senior centre).

Transportation

“My only complaint that I can put towards the transportation here in Portage, is for somebody like myself in a wheelchair, life stops at five o’clock in the afternoon” (Seniors Focus Group)

“Well there is no public transportation. So you have to rely on a taxi or the Handi-van or whatever. And it’s my understanding, from older folks who need the Handi-van, that if they wish to go anywhere in the evening, it is a very expensive proposition. Because you have to book it especially, and it’s after hours.” (Caregiver Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Focus group participants commented on the many transportation options available in Portage la Prairie, including Handi-van, volunteer driver services, and shuttle buses provided by grocery stores.
- Transportation options were perceived as affordable.
- The small size of Portage la Prairie was considered an advantage for driving.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Concerns were raised by older adults over the lack of flexibility in Handi-van and other transportation services, including: limited or no service in the evening, increased cost for evening services, and having to wait a long time for shuttle bus.
- Poorly designed loading zones (e.g., where traffic is blocked when unloading) and parking spots that are too narrow to allow unloading of wheelchairs were also identified as barriers.
- The fact that handicap parking spots were sometimes used by non-handicapped individuals was also raised as a concern by older adults.

Recommendations:

- The various transportation options that exist should continue to be provided and funding allocated accordingly.
- Greater flexibility should be built into current transportation services; for example, a route based system for shuttle buses could be considered
- Costs for Handi-van services in the evening should be reduced.
- Loading areas, particularly for buildings that are frequently used by older adults (e.g., medical clinic) must be designed to accommodate larger vehicles, such as Handi-van.
- Ways to make existing loading zones that are poorly designed more user-friendly should be explored.
- Regular users (e.g., Handi-van drivers, volunteer drivers) should be involved in the design (or re-design) of loading zones.
- More handicap parking spots should be made available. Parking rules must be enforced so that their use is restricted to those with a valid handicap parking pass only.

Housing

“I’m very lucky, I live in a strictly senior type home, it’s an individual home. It was designed especially for seniors. There is no basement, there are no stairs. All the hallways are wide, all of the doorways are wide” (Seniors Focus Group)

“Subsidized housing for seniors is, there are very few here and the units are very small. You have to give up an awful lot when you move in there. And you get in there and there’s nothing there... And you know, for what’s there it’s not worth going into, but you just have no choice” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Participants commented favorably on some of the housing options available in Portage la Prairie (e.g., seniors’ apartments, homes designed for seniors (one level, wide hallways, etc.).
- The availability of seniors housing with congregate meals and activities was identified as a particular asset.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Participants were very vocal in voicing their concern with the limited housing options available to meet the diverse needs of seniors. The need for more assisted living was perceived as particularly important.
- Concern was raised about the shortage of housing for low-income seniors.
- Existing subsidized housing was perceived as inadequate in variety of domains, including: small size of units; lack of caretaker, which was perceived as particularly problematic in emergency situations; the Manitoba tax credit being added to income, which thereby impacts the (income-based) rent; and lack of involvement of residents in decisions regarding the building. Having older adults mixed with individuals with social/mental health problems in the same housing unit was raised as an additional concern by service providers.

Recommendations:

- Eliminate the “claw back” for individuals in subsidized housing, such that the Manitoba tax credit does not affect the rent residents pay.
- Address the problems in some subsidized housing units by, for example: ensuring that a caretaker and/or 24 hour 7-day a week emergency contact is available that residents can call; forming tenants associations to ensure that residents are involved in decision about their housing unit; providing oversight over the integration of older adults with individuals with social/mental health problems; creating larger units by reconfiguring existing space.
- Develop (and update on an on-going basis) an inventory of housing options that are available in Portage la Prairie. Such an inventory might usefully be prepared by a senior organization, such as the Herman Prior Senior Centre.

- Create additional, affordable housing options such as assisted living, homes designed for seniors, and housing for low-income seniors.
- Ensure that new housing (be it targeted at older adults or not) incorporates universal design features (e.g., wide doors and hallways).
- Ensure that the location of new housing, particularly housing targeted at older adults is carefully studied. It is critical that housing that is built at a distance from businesses incorporates plans for transportation.
- Consult with older adults in the design of new housing developments.

Respect and Social Inclusion

“You know, people know one another, it’s not a big city. And this is it, when you know one another you help one another” (Seniors Focus Group)

“What you run into is the attitude towards seniors that needs to be adjusted. I find that’s the biggest problem. And that’s the human problem, and I don’t know how you educate younger people to respect seniors” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Participants were generally in agreement that people in Portage la Prairie are typically helpful and friendly. The relatively small size of Portage was, in this respect, perceived to be an asset, as many people know each other by name.
- Participants commented on the fact that seniors are typically included in community activities.
- Many intergenerational programs were mentioned (e.g. school children visiting senior homes, older adults reading to children in schools).

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Although participants were generally in agreement that people are helpful and friendly, there was a sense that there is a certain disrespect of older adults in general.
- Both older adults and service providers felt that younger people are impatient with seniors.
- There was a sense that children and younger adults are not sufficiently exposed to older adults.
- It is noteworthy that the focus group with representatives of volunteer organizations provided a unique perspective in regards to respect and social isolation. Participants highlighted not only the issue of elder abuse, but also the challenges in integrating able-bodied and less able-bodied seniors in housing units, with the suggestion to separate these two groups.

Recommendations:

- Continue with and expand intergenerational activities/programs that encourage interaction between youth and seniors (e.g., programs in schools). Having children interact with a diverse range of older adults is critical in this respect. Thus, while having school children visit senior apartments and nursing homes is important, other opportunities could also be explored, e.g., joint sports activities, walking programs, etc.
- Elder abuse – the extreme of disrespect – continues to be an issue that needs to be addressed. Ensuring that RHA staff, municipal staff and local seniors organizations are aware of elder abuse supports available in the province is, therefore, important.
- The question of how to and whether to integrate able-bodied and less able-bodied older adults in housing units should be addressed. Consultations with older adults residing in housing units that have such mixed populations would be useful.

Social Participation

“Well I think there’s many opportunities for seniors to socialize through places like the Herman Prior, and senior organizations through Cozy Corner, through the curling club, through, we have senior ball system. I mean our recreation network is well represented by the senior population here.” (Service Provider Focus Group)

“Lots of things going on out there that we should be taking advantage of and that’s what we need to do, is make those things more accessible to people with transportation.” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Focus group participants commented very positively on the wide variety of activities available for older adults in Portage la Prairie, ranging from church-related activities to sports to dancing to card games, to name just a few.
- The Herman Prior Senior Centre was consistently identified as a focal point for activities for older adults.
- Activities for older adults were deemed affordable.
- The importance of congregate meal programs as a means to allow socializing was also highlighted.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Lack of transportation was identified as a barrier to social participation, especially for evening activities.
- Losing one’s social support network (e.g. friends dying) was mentioned as a barrier to social participation by older adults.
- Focus group participants further commented on problems with building access (e.g. stairs) as a barrier to participating in social activities.

Recommendations:

- Continue the provision of a wide range of activities for older adults.
- The Herman Prior Senior Centre plays a critical role for older adults living in and around Portage la Prairie. Expansion of its programs and services should be considered. For example, the possibility of offering programs on weekends should be explored.
- Transportation needs to be available to allow participation in activities. Transportation should be available in the evening and weekends at a reasonable cost.
- Building accessibility (e.g. availability of wheelchair ramp) must be taken into account when planning activities for older adults.
- Events should be modified to accommodate the more frail seniors. For instance, some events and services (e.g., church services) may need to be shortened.

Communication and Information

“There’s plenty of ways to get information. I guess like we were saying here, you’ve got to want to go out” (Seniors Focus Group)

“It’s hard to get information from some of these automatic things” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Focus group participants commented on information being available in a variety of formats (e.g. newspaper, radio, booklets, local TV).
- Positive comments were also made over the accommodations made for older adults with specific issues, such as the availability of large print or audio books, and personalized service at banks or stores.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Older adults expressed their frustration with automated systems and their preference to talk to or see a “real” person.
- Information is at times provided in a way that is not sufficiently adapted to the needs of older adults. For example, information on local TV may be provided too fast, and seniors with hearing or mobility problems may have difficulty accessing information (e.g. using ATMs from a wheelchair).
- Providing information or making available forms via internet may be problematic as not all older adults have (or wish to use) a computer.
- Caregivers provided a unique perspective by raising concerns about the Privacy Act, which can present a barrier to obtaining information (e.g., not being able to access information if it is in the spouse’s name).

Recommendations:

- Continue to use a variety of ways to provide information, as there is not one single mechanism that will reach all older adults.
- Decisions about how information is provided should take into account the specific population that is being targeted. For example, frail elderly (or socially isolated) individuals might usefully be informed about events or services through direct contact (e.g., a door-to-door approach or through an individual who delivers meals on wheels for instance).
- Information, particularly information directly relevant to older adults, should be provided in a way that accommodates the needs of all seniors (e.g., large print).
- Automated systems should take into account older adults’ needs (e.g., lower ATMS with large print) or alternate approaches should be available (e.g., in-person bank service).
- Information relevant to seniors could usefully be targeted at younger individuals, so that they can then bring it to the attention of an aging parent, family member, or friend.

Civic Participation and Employment

“The seniors in Portage la Prairie do a tremendous amount of volunteer work and I think it’s recognized and appreciated” (Seniors Focus Group)

“I don’t think people realize how much it costs to be a volunteer. I’m not talking just about your time, but the running around, people lose the cost of transportation. And there are so many little things that add up” (Seniors Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- There was a strong sense throughout all the focus groups that there is an excellent senior volunteer base in Portage la Prairie and that there are many volunteer opportunities.
- Participants also commented on the many employment opportunities available and seniors’ involvement in municipal/community affairs.

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- Although participants commented on volunteers being recognized for their contribution by organizations, there was also a sense that the contribution of older adults may not be recognized by the community in general.
- Older adults commented on the financial cost of volunteering (e.g. having to pay for gas) and paid employment (e.g., having to pay income tax).
- Building accessibility (e.g. stairs) was also identified as a barrier to volunteering. Hence the concern was raised that one needs to be physically able to volunteer.
- Volunteers getting tired (burnt out) and difficulties getting volunteers to commit for the long-term were identified as problems in retaining and recruiting volunteers.

Recommendations:

- Volunteers should be formally recognized by the City of Portage la Prairie (for example, by hosting a formal volunteer recognition event or providing parking passes to some volunteers).
- Volunteers’ expenses (e.g., gas costs) should either be reimbursed in full by organizations or, in part, through an income tax deduction system (analogous to the charitable donation deduction).
- The volunteer base should be strengthened by promoting volunteering in the community and by targeting younger individuals.
- Being able to contribute is important at any stage in life and any type of residence (including nursing homes). Efforts to have older adults of all abilities (e.g., mobility impaired, cognitively impaired) contribute in any way they can should be encouraged.

Community Support and Health Services

“Well I, I’m just totally impressed with the number of, of services for seniors in this, you know it, it’s really quite amazing. I have no problem with lack of services for seniors.” (Seniors Focus Group)

“We also have an excellent Home Care system here, that enables people to live in their homes or apartments a lot longer than they would had it not been here.” (Service Provider Focus Group)

Key Age-Friendly Features:

- Focus group participants commented very positively on the wide range of health care services and community supports available in Portage la Prairie.
- The fact that many medical services (e.g., dialysis, ultrasound) are available in Portage la Prairie, rather than requiring travel to Winnipeg, was identified as a particular asset.
- Homecare was also identified as a particularly important asset, as were the services provided through Portage Service for Seniors (e.g., volunteer drivers, congregate meal programs).
- The Herman Prior Senior Centre was also recognized as providing important supports (e.g., foot clinics).

Key Age-Friendly Barriers:

- A general barrier identified was the shortage of health care workers (including homecare workers and physicians).
- Participants further commented on the long waiting times to see physicians.
- Although homecare was generally identified as a tremendous asset, participants also noted that some homecare workers may not be suited for and/or sufficiently trained for their job.
- Having to go to Winnipeg for some services was identified as an additional issue, particularly when appointments were late in the day or required paying for transportation costs.
- Difficulties dealing with the health care system (e.g. filling out forms, how to access services) was also identified as a barrier.

Recommendations:

- There is a need to attract more individuals into homecare positions. Providing better training, requiring homecare workers to be certified, and making such positions more financially attractive may address some of concerns raised by participants around the qualifications of homecare workers.
- An advocate should be available for seniors who have difficulty accessing services, or to speak for them when services are not acceptable.
- Assistance with completing forms and otherwise navigating the health care system should also be available.
- An inventory of health and community services should be readily available for older adults.

- A mechanism should be put into place that allows the various organizations that provide services or programs for older adults to exchange information, form partnerships and, potentially, consolidate activities.

Additional Issues

Apart from the eight domains that were the focus of the Age-Friendly Cities project, an additional issue that surfaced in the focus groups warrants mentioning, namely the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Although the topic was not explored in detail in the focus groups, there was a sense that this is an important issue that needs to be addressed. Almost a fifth of the population of the City of Portage la Prairie is Aboriginal and the City provides services for nearby First Nations communities. It is therefore recommended that a dialogue is initiated between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal residents, as well as individuals from First Nations communities who use Portage la Prairie for services.