

Seniors Resource Centre Association of Newfoundland & Labrador
Building On Our Strengths: “Knowing What’s Good For Me”

Project # 6791-01-2001/3460044

Final Report - April 30, 2004

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Project sponsored by the Seniors Resource Centre Association of Newfoundland & Labrador and
funded by the Canadian Diabetes Strategy, Health Canada

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1.0 Introduction

Type 2 diabetes is on the rise and is reaching near epidemic proportions in Canada. Over two million Canadians have diabetes, and this number is expected to increase to three million by 2010. This increase in diabetes is due largely to increases in obesity and inactivity as well as our aging population. As our population ages, the number of individuals with diabetes is expected to continue to increase dramatically.

Obviously there is a great need for programs that will help Canadians to prevent the onset of this disease and/or its complications. While much is being done in diabetes prevention education generally, there appears to be a deficit in aiming that effort toward older adults as a target group. Despite the fact that older adults are at greater risk of developing diabetes, they are seriously under-represented in diabetes initiatives and strategies. There is a lack of information and programs that are designed specifically for our aging population.

This rise in type 2 diabetes and lack of programs for older adults is a significant health concern in Newfoundland and Labrador as the population is aging at a faster rate than any other province in the country. Also, many seniors live in small rural or outport communities with limited health services. There is a definite need for more diabetes education programs for older adults, especially for those living in the more geographically isolated communities and for those who have low literacy skills. Almost 45 percent of the older adult population is estimated to be illiterate in terms of low level reading skills, due to little formal education.

The Seniors Resource Centre Association of Newfoundland and Labrador attempted to meet this need for diabetes education with its project, “Building On Our Strengths: Knowing What’s Good For Me”. This project worked to raise awareness among older adults about type 2 diabetes and diabetes prevention and supported volunteers as they created supportive recreation opportunities and promoted healthy active living in their communities.

2.0 Goals and Objectives of the Project

Goal 1: To formalize the project leadership and infrastructure to address the issue of type 2 diabetes among older adults.

Objective 1: To establish a project advisory committee to oversee the development, implementation and delivery of activities designed to achieve project goals.

Objective 2: To meet with the representatives of the “volunteer” seniors’ groups, that is, Peer Advocates, Strong Face of Age and Medication Awareness Gap groups, to discuss their project-related strategies.

Objective 3: To contact representatives of town councils, recreation, health care services and local seniors organizations or groups to apprise them of the project and to invite their participation.

Goal 2: To deliver a workshop about type 2 diabetes for representatives of the “volunteer seniors”, that is, the Peer Advocate Groups, and from the Strong Face of Age and Medication Awareness Projects.

Objective 1: To provide knowledge and information about type 2 diabetes, its symptoms and means of prevention; and to outline ways to promote this information and knowledge to community groups and seniors.

Objective 2: To reinforce the volunteers as agents of change among their peers by outlining their individual and specific activities in the delivery of different aspects of the project.

Goal 3: To raise awareness within the older adult population and within civic and service agencies about the incidence and risks for type 2 diabetes, in six or more communities in each of the province’s Health and Community Services regions.

Objective 1: To arrange a number of workshops/meetings led by the “volunteer seniors”, in at least six communities in each of the province’s six Health and Community Services regions to create interest in the prevention of and ways to decrease incidence of type 2 diabetes.

Objective 2: To create linkages among seniors and community service agencies to facilitate their working cooperatively to develop opportunities to prevent type 2 diabetes.

Goal 4: To identify older adults with low-level literacy to provide them with information about type 2 diabetes.

Objective 1: To develop and employ strategies to identify those older adults to provide them with opportunities to participate in the project, on a one-to-one basis, if preferred.

Objective 2: To ensure that information about type 2 diabetes to made available to isolated older adults and older adults with low level literacy skills, in situations where they can be at ease to facilitate their understanding of the information being presented.

Goal 5: To raise among relevant community agencies and seniors’ organizations the benefits of increased physical activity and healthy diets in the prevention of type 2 diabetes.

- Objective 1: To provide information about the prevalence and incidence of type 2 diabetes which exists among older adults in each of the six Health and Community Services regions, to underpin the need for each to take more responsibility to provide prevention measures accessible to older adults.
- Objective 2: To create a greater, general awareness among all agencies and seniors organizations of the symptoms of type 2 diabetes to enable a wider recognition of the incidence of the disease, especially among older adults.
- Objective 3: To promote to community leaders, agencies, recreation programs, seniors and other interested groups and representatives the kinds of activities, benefits and prevention strategies to develop and support older adults from the onset of type 2 diabetes.
- Goal 6:** To create regional working groups, including representatives of the project’s partners and other community and interest groups, to continue to promote prevention awareness regarding type 2 diabetes.
- Objective 1: To determine the extent of community groups’ interest to support and develop preventive measures for older adults in combating type 2 diabetes.
- Objective 2: To recruit interested community representatives and leaders to initiate more recreation activities for older adults.
- Objective 3: To devise a schedule of follow-up to get response from community organizations in positions to foster promotion and prevention of type 2 diabetes as to the extent they will participate in those initiatives.

The goals and objectives of the project were achieved overall. However, one goal was not achieved to the extent that was originally intended. Goal 3 stated that the project would offer at least six workshops in each of the six Health and Community Services regions. This was not possible due to high travel costs so only twenty-five workshops were offered.

3.0 Main Activities of the Project

3.1 Formalizing Project Infrastructure

The project commenced in October, 2001 and the first coordinator began work on the project on November 30, 2001. By January, 2002, an Advisory Committee had been formed to oversee the development and implementation of the project. The committee consisted of representatives from the provincial government’s Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation and Department of Health and Community Services, a representative from Community Health Promotion Network Atlantic (CHPNA), a dietitian, a diabetes educator, a retired nurse, a retired teacher, a senior fitness leader, and a senior with diabetes.

A database of contacts in each of the six regions of the province was developed to provide the project with needed links to the various communities. The contacts included recreation committees, recreation departments, town councils, seniors organizations, and health care services. The coordinator then communicated with many of these contacts to inform them of the project and ask for their support.

3.2 Volunteer Conference

The next major task of the project was the planning and implementation of a Volunteer Conference. The coordinator made contact with representatives of the three volunteer seniors groups, namely the Peer Advocates, the Strong Face of Age Group and the Medication

Awareness Group, to invite them to become involved with the project. The volunteers were sent an information package containing a summary of the project and an invitation to the Volunteer Conference. Each individual was chosen due to their leadership abilities and their work with the Seniors Resource Centre in the past.

The Volunteer Conference was held on March 20 and 21, 2002. A press conference was held on the first day to officially launch the Diabetes Project in Newfoundland and Labrador. The purpose of this Volunteer Conference was to inform seniors about type 2 diabetes and diabetes prevention and to outline ways that they could bring this information back to their peers and communities. Fifty-four older adults from all regions of the province attended as well as staff from the Seniors Resource Centre, health professionals, and government employees. The agenda from this conference is included in Appendix A.

The conference included several informative sessions where the participants learned about type 2 diabetes and healthy active living. There were presentations on Preventing/Delaying the Onset of Type 2 Diabetes, Active Living for Older Adults, Healthy Eating and Shopping Tips, and Networking and Community Expectation. There was also a panel discussion where three volunteers shared their personal experiences dealing with diabetes and described how the disease has affected their lives. The panel discussion was extremely effective in making the group more aware of the seriousness of the disease and emphasizing the importance of taking care of your health as you grow older.

The conference also included activity sessions which highlighted some of the different types of active living opportunities that exist for older adults. The intention of these sessions was to give delegates the opportunity to view and participate in activities which interested them so that they could bring these ideas back to their seniors groups. Activities that were offered included Tai Chi, line dancing, square dancing, shallow water fitness, indoor walking, chair fitness, and 3F Fitness (Fun, Fitness and Friendship). Offering these activity sessions proved to be an excellent way of generating excitement among the participants.

Delegates were also given the opportunity to participate in several small group discussions. Each group was asked a series of questions to determine what was available in their communities with respect to active living programs, healthy eating programs, and diabetes information. Groups also discussed the needs of their communities in terms of healthy active living programs, the barriers they have to face, and the different strengths of their communities.

Overall, the conference was a tremendous success in terms of generating interest in the project and building momentum. Volunteers were very enthusiastic about bringing the information back to their communities to share with their peers and representatives of community organizations.

3.3 Diabetes Workshops

After the Volunteer Conference, many of these senior volunteers continued to be involved with the project. Many helped organize diabetes workshops in their own communities. The main purpose of these workshops was to raise awareness about type 2 diabetes and the importance of active living and healthy eating in the prevention of this disease. Twenty-five workshops were held throughout the province. A list of the workshops completed is included in Appendix B. Most of these workshops were day-long events that included presentations on type 2 diabetes, healthy eating and active living for older adults. There were also opportunities for participants to take part in group discussions and active living demonstrations such as line dancing, Tai Chi, and chair fitness. Some pictures from the workshops are included in Appendix C.

Feedback from the workshops was extremely positive. Almost all participants reported learning a considerable amount about diabetes, active living, healthy eating, and services to assist them and almost all said the workshop would influence their lifestyle. The seniors were also very appreciative of the fact that the workshops were being offered specifically for them. The participants appeared to be very interested in improving their health and many stated that they would like to have more opportunities to learn about different health issues.

The workshops were not only successful in raising awareness about diabetes prevention but they also resulted in seniors taking action and forming their own exercise groups. The active living demonstrations were especially effective in showing seniors that there are many ways they can get active in their own clubs without needing much money or expensive equipment. In fact, with the support of the project, 15 active living groups were started up after the workshops (11 of these groups are still meeting regularly). Volunteers have also helped seniors in nearby communities start their own active living groups. Four groups have been started in this way. The majority of the groups have started indoor walking programs but some have tried other activities such as line dancing, chair fitness, aquafitness and Tai Chi. A short description of each of these groups is included in Appendix D.

It is important to note that the planning of these workshops did not proceed in the manner outlined in the original work plan. It was intended that the provincial Volunteer Conference be followed by regional events and then by sub-regional events. While some of these regional workshops did occur and were very successful, it became apparent that a more viable approach was to deliver workshops to smaller sub-regions or communities. Most regions are very large and not a functional level to connect with seniors and seniors organizations. The seniors groups tend to be active at the local level, so reaching out to them at a sub-regional or community level was essential in both getting their assistance in planning the workshops and attracting them to participate in the sessions.

There was also a shift from hiring regional facilitators to organize workshops to recruiting seniors groups to help plan them. The original plan was to hire regional facilitators to organize all of the workshops in their regions. Initially, facilitators were hired, however, there were several problems associated with organizing the workshops in this way. It soon became apparent that this was not a practical approach due to the large size of some of the regions and high travel costs. Also, when facilitators were trying to organize workshops outside of their own communities, they faced more difficulties and the attendance was not as high. The benefits of including local people in the planning process was very obvious. For most of the remaining

workshops, seniors groups were approached to help organize the events. This approach proved to be an especially effective strategy in terms of sparking interest, ensuring attendance at the workshops, and enhancing the sustainability of the project. The groups’ investment in the organizing process and their feelings of ownership resulted in them working very hard at promoting the workshop and getting their members to come out to it. There was also the added benefit of having an existing group for follow-up after the workshop.

Overall, the workshops were found to be an excellent starting point for making contact with the seniors and seniors groups and for promoting healthy active living. They were also seen as being an excellent means to motivating individual change and inspiring community efforts. The next step was to support these seniors as they incorporated their learnings into their daily lives and worked towards creating healthier communities.

3.4 Supporting Volunteers

The need for ongoing coordination and for the workshops to be further connected to other activities was recognized as being of paramount importance. While volunteers are quite capable of doing very valuable work in their communities, they do require some ongoing support and encouragement. Support to volunteers was provided in a number of different ways in this project, including phone calls, follow-up meetings, project newsletters and linking to resources in their communities.

After the workshops, the coordinator kept in regular contact with those seniors who had started active living groups and/or were giving presentations on diabetes prevention to offer them support, assistance and resources. Seniors groups were also contacted to see if they would be interested in having a follow-up meeting to the workshop. The purpose of these meetings was to create local working groups that would continue to promote diabetes prevention and healthy active living.

Follow-up meetings were held in ten communities across the province. These meetings were open to the public and all were invited to come and discuss how they could work together to improve their health and the health of their communities. Participants discussed things they could do together to become more active, ways they could promote healthy active living in their community and how they could keep people interested. Groups then identified things they were interested in doing and identified people or resources in their area that could support them. The coordinator also let them know about available resources that they might find helpful. In each of these meetings, the importance of working together and forming partnerships was emphasized. While there are many things individuals can do on their own to improve their health, working together definitely has its advantages. The social interaction and sense of belonging can help people stay motivated and strong partnerships are essential to building healthier communities.

While these meetings did not result in the creation of working groups in the way that was intended, these seniors did create supportive recreation opportunities for older adults and promote healthy active living in their communities. Many groups did not feel it was necessary to include health or recreation professionals in their efforts and in some small communities these professionals were simply not available. However, all groups were aware of the resources available in their communities to help them, if needed in the future.

These follow-up meetings did demonstrate the need for ongoing support for volunteers. Some active living groups that had started after the workshops had stopped meeting over the summer months and had not started up again in the fall. The meetings encouraged many groups to start up their exercise program again and many even started doing new activities. Sometimes a simple reminder and a little encouragement is all that is needed to get a group back on track..

A project newsletter was also developed to link the efforts of the various groups involved and to provide encouragement and support. The newsletter informed seniors about available resources and opportunities for them to get more involved in the project. The newsletter also highlighted some of the success stories of the project and included articles on diabetes, healthy eating and

active living. The newsletters are included in Appendix E.

3.5 Development of a Diabetes Resource Package

One of the goals of the project was to bring the information to individuals with low level literacy skills. One of the ways the project attempted to reach these individuals was through the development and distribution of a diabetes resource package. This package includes fact sheets explaining the different types of diabetes, the complications, the risk factors, the symptoms, how it can be prevented, tips for healthy eating and tips for active living. A video titled, “You’ve Just Been Diagnosed with Diabetes... Now What?” was also included with the resource package. The package was tested by an adult learners program and approved by the Seniors Resource Centre’s Literacy Committee. A copy of the resource package is included in Appendix F.

The resource package was given to public health nurses throughout the province, volunteers of the Seniors Resource Centre’s Friendly Visiting Program, and foot care specialists so that they could bring the information to older adults in their own homes. Seniors were also asked to bring this resource package to individuals in their communities who were not able to come to the workshops. The original intent was to offer seniors the option of having one-on-one home visits but we could not find volunteers who were willing to distribute the package in this capacity. However, many seniors did take the package to give to family and friends. All of the seniors clubs visited also received a package and video to keep at the club for their members to use and lend out to others in the community.

The needs of individuals with low literacy skills were considered at the workshops as well. Some workshop participants had difficulty reading and/or understanding the workshop evaluation questionnaires. As a result of concerns about the suitability of the questionnaires for individuals with low-level literacy skills, the evaluator hired individuals to conduct telephone interviews after the workshops.

3.6 Promotion of the Project

There were many ways, besides the workshops, that the project worked to increase awareness about type 2 diabetes and the importance of healthy eating and active living in preventing diabetes. The project took advantage of many opportunities to bring this message to a wide variety of people including older adults, health professionals, recreation professionals, government employees, town councils and community organizations. For example, articles about the project were printed in several newspapers and newsletters around the province and radio interviews were conducted, including an appearance on CBC radio Cross Talk, a one hour provincial call in show. Presentations were given to seniors groups, church groups, caregivers, health professionals, government employees, recreation students and recreation professionals.

The project has also been raising awareness among relevant community agencies about the importance of seniors being included in wellness initiatives. The main way the project has been doing this is through involvement with the Provincial Wellness Advisory Council and by forming partnerships with the regional Wellness Coalitions. A Provincial Wellness Advisory Council was appointed to provide advice to the Minister of Health on the development and implementation of a Provincial Wellness Strategy. Unfortunately there was not a seniors representative on this Advisory Council initially. The Seniors Resource Centre requested that a seniors representative be included. The minister responded to this request with an invitation for the Seniors Resource Centre to join the council. The Executive Director of the Seniors Resource Centre now sits on this Advisory Council, the Project Coordinator sits on the Chronic Disease Prevention Working Group, and the coordinator of Project UPRIGHT (the centre’s falls prevention project) sits on the Injury Prevention Working Group.

Wellness Coalitions are being formed in each region to implement the Provincial Wellness Strategy. One of the areas the Wellness Strategy will be focusing on is promoting healthy active

living, however, the Advisory Council recommended that the focus be on healthy living for children and youth, at least in the initial stages. To address this challenge, the project, in partnership with Project UPRIGHT, approached each of the regional Wellness Coalitions to stress the importance of including seniors and to discuss forming partnerships. All of the coalitions stated that they were open to working with seniors and each one invited the Seniors Resource Centre to their initial planning meetings. In addition to attending these meetings when possible, the project has also recruited senior volunteers to become involved with their coalitions. This will help ensure that seniors issues remain on the agendas of these coalitions.

3.7 Provincial Meeting

In the last month of the project, two volunteers from each action group were invited to a two-day provincial meeting to share their success stories and make plans for the future. The objectives of this meeting were:

- § To share success stories of the project.
- § To enable volunteers to connect with other volunteers and learn from each other.
- § To assist volunteers in further developing leadership and fitness skills.
- § To inform volunteers about available resources and supports.
- § To make plans for the future.

At this meeting volunteers were given the opportunity to share what they had done in their communities so that they could learn from each others experiences. Some basic leadership training and fitness training were offered to assist volunteers in sustaining their efforts and speakers training was offered to those who were interested in giving presentations on diabetes prevention. There were presentations about the regional Wellness Coalitions and the Peer Advocate Program at the Seniors Resource Centre to let the volunteers know about these very important sources of support. There were also small group discussions to help groups outline their future plans and identify potential sources of support. The agenda from the provincial meeting, as well as some pictures, are included in Appendix G.

Unfortunately, there was a severe winter storm which caused some of volunteers to miss some of the meeting. However, despite the many problems volunteers faced in getting to St. John’s, the meeting was a tremendous success. The volunteers made new connections, obtained new ideas, and increased their knowledge about fitness and leadership. Volunteers left feeling proud of themselves and their accomplishments and inspired to continue to promote healthy active living through their active living groups and through presentations to community groups. This meeting definitely demonstrated the value in affirming and celebrating the work of volunteers and showed that it is an essential part of building community capacity.

4.0 Project Management

This project was administered by a project coordinator and supervised by the Seniors Resource Centre’s Executive Director, with direction provided by the project advisory committee. A member of the Board of Directors acted as chair of the advisory committee and provided regular project updates to the Board.

The original Project Coordinator resigned as of August 2002 and a new Coordinator was hired in September. There were some minor delays with this staff change but it did not affect the project overall. The transition period was relatively smooth in terms of maintaining the key objectives of the project.

With respect to building partnerships, there were some challenges in finding partners who recognized the value in offering this type of prevention initiative to older adults. Throughout the life of the project, we strived to inform health and recreation professionals that it is not too late to reach seniors and that many are interested in improving their health and making changes in their behaviour.

In the last year of the project, a successful partnership was formed with Project UPRIGHT: Newfoundland and Labrador Falls Prevention. This was another project of the Seniors Resource Centre that was funded by Health Canada and Veterans Affairs and that also promoted healthy active living. This partnership enabled both projects to share resources, contacts and volunteers and was especially beneficial in linking the projects with the regional Wellness Coalitions.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, this project demonstrates the value in offering prevention initiatives such as this one to older adults. Seniors have been very eager to learn about how they can improve their health and quite willing to make changes in their behaviour. The degree of learning that has taken place and the extent to which individuals have changed their lifestyles indicate that it is not too late to reach seniors and there is an ongoing need for education on these health issues. This project also demonstrates the importance of including seniors in all stages of the planning and implementation of such community development projects. In fact, the success of this project can be attributed in large part to the senior volunteers. They did an exceptional job of organizing workshops and meetings in their communities. With minimal support, they created supportive recreation opportunities for older adults and raised awareness about the importance of healthy active living. They are wonderful role models who are leading by example and making a significant difference in the lives of seniors in their communities.

The following are the main conclusions from this project:

- § Bringing volunteers and interested parties together, especially at the beginning of the project, is an effective way of generating interest and building momentum.
- § Diabetes workshops which combine presentations, demonstrations and group discussions in a one day format appear to be a successful strategy in attracting seniors to participate and also motivating individual change and inspiring community efforts.

- § Recruiting local groups to help organize workshops and meetings is an effective strategy in terms of sparking interest, ensuring attendance at the workshops, and enhancing the sustainability of the project.
- § Ongoing support and networking opportunities for volunteers is essential and helps to build on learnings and sustain enthusiasm.
- § Affirming and celebrating volunteer’s accomplishments is an important part of building community capacity that should not be overlooked.

The results of this project will be disseminated through sponsorship of an issue of the CHPNA newsletter, “Health Promotion Atlantic”. This final report will be posted on the Seniors Resource Centre’s website and given to project partners and government officials, including:

- § members of the Seniors Resource Centre’s Board of Directors
- § the Minister of Health and Community Services
- § the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation
- § the Newfoundland and Labrador Members of Parliament
- § the regional Health Boards
- § the Chairs of the regional Wellness Coalitions
- § the Health Care Corporation of St. John’s
- § the Canadian Diabetes Association
- § the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Municipalities

Promoting diabetes prevention and healthy active living will remain a priority of the Seniors Resource Centre. The Centre plans to provide ongoing support to the project volunteers through its Peer Advocate Program and toll-free information line. The Centre will also be applying for additional funding to continue raising awareness about diabetes prevention and assisting older adults as they build healthier communities throughout the province.