

INDEPENDENCE THROUGH INFORMATION

PEER ADVOCACY FOR SENIORS

FINAL REPORT

FOR

CANADIAN RURAL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

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Introduction

While the majority of seniors rate their health as good, many seniors face aging changes such as hearing or vision loss, or mobility problems which affect their everyday life. Many also face aging challenges, such as decreased income, and coping with chronic diseases - their own or that of a spouse. In addition, aging often brings with it the emotional challenge of coping with multiple bereavements or losses. Very often, seniors have little or no information available to them on how to cope, or where to seek help. In addition, seniors in Newfoundland and Labrador, especially those in rural areas, have the added problem that many of their family members have had to move away in order to seek work, leaving the seniors without family support.

The Peer Advocate program attempts to meet the information needs of these and other seniors and also to provide support, by recruiting and training volunteer seniors who reach out to and assist seniors in their own communities across the province.

The community Peer Advocates are an extension of the Seniors Resource Centre's toll-free Information Line. This line is answered by Peer Advocates who rise to the challenge of answering questions and addressing the concerns of seniors and others who call in from all over the province. Their excellent listening skills assist callers to sort out their problems and find solutions suitable to their individual needs.

The Peer Advocate program combines health promotion, self-help, community development and advocacy. The program has to be very flexible in order to respond to the needs of seniors and to accommodate the time tables, health, and other commitments of the volunteer seniors.

A major part of the Peer Advocate program is the presentation of a series of Information Sharing Sessions. These sessions enable the volunteer seniors to discuss the aging changes and challenges they, and others, face. They discover that there are services and resources available to help them, and they share information on coping. They also take part in discussions concerning communication skills and especially the importance of active

listening. They also review the problem solving process.

Seniors are always amazed to find that there is more help available than they thought. They find there is much information that is useful to themselves, or their own family members, and thus benefit from the self-help component of the program. Having benefitted in this way, they have more understanding of the needs of others and they realize they have useful information that they can pass on to others.

The success of the Peer Advocate program depends on the dedication of the volunteer seniors. Their commitment can be seen from their on-going participation in the program.

Attrition

Attrition is one of the problems that has to be faced in any program but especially in one relying on older adults as volunteers. Major illnesses and a decline in health have forced some Peer Advocates to leave the program. Also, sadly, two Peer Advocates have passed away in the past month. However, the commitment of the remaining volunteer seniors taking part in the program is evident by the fact that many of the groups have recruited new members for their own group, as well as encouraging seniors in other communities to take part in the program and set up their own Peer Advocate groups. This commitment enhances the sustainability of the program.

Weather Problems

Since the current 15 month project commenced in January, it has covered two winters. Travel in winter can be a challenge, both for the program manager trying to reach rural communities, and for the seniors in those communities having to contend with piled up snow and ice. During the last three months of the project, the plans were for the Executive Director to accompany the program manager on visits to all the groups in order to meet the Peer Advocates and to carry out the evaluation. On two of these trips, they encountered white-out conditions which made travel hazardous. On the third trip, they returned to St. John's during a blizzard and reached the city with about fifteen minutes to spare before the Trans Canada Highway was impassable. A fourth trip was canceled due to a forecast blizzard.

Advisory Committee

An advisory committee has been guiding the program since it started in 1994 and the committee meets at regular intervals four to six times a year. The present committee consists of two Information Line Peer Advocates; one community Peer Advocate; three community representatives including one from the Parkinson Society, one representative from Health and Community Services on the west coast of the island part of the province; the Executive Director of the Seniors Resource Centre, and the Peer Advocate Program Manager.

Evaluation Process

One member of the Advisory Committee, Dr. Doreen Neville, agreed to oversee the evaluation as there was insufficient funding to hire an outside evaluator. At the beginning of the project, Dr. Neville met with the Executive Director of the Seniors Resource Centre and the program manager to discuss how the program should be evaluated. It was decided to revise evaluation forms used previously and to evaluate the Information Sharing Sessions as they were presented, and then to do follow up evaluations with the groups, the people they serve, and local resource people where possible.

The program manager gave evaluation forms to each Peer Advocate at the end of each Information Sharing Session. This data has been collated and will be presented in the final Evaluation Report. Very positive feedback was received from all those who participated in the sessions.

The plan for the follow-up evaluation was for the Executive Director to accompany the program manager on visits to all the groups in order to meet the Peer Advocates and to carry out the evaluation. However, as stated above, the winter weather made for some hazardous trips and some visits had to be canceled. Therefore, this part of the evaluation is not yet complete.

Recruitment

During the lifetime of this current project, thirty seven new Peer Advocates have been recruited and have taken part in the series of Information Sharing Sessions. Of these, ten have enhanced existing groups in Burin, Grand Falls-Windsor and Trepassey. The other new Peer Advocates are part of three new groups formed in Botwood, Bonavista and Bishop's Falls respectively.

These groups are in three different areas of the province. Grand Falls-Windsor, Bishop's Falls and Botwood are in central region. Burin and Bonavista are in eastern region and Trepassey is in the Avalon region.

There are now a total of thirteen Peer Advocate groups in the province. Six of the groups consist of seniors all of whom are members of their local seniors' clubs. Five of the groups consist of members none of whom belong to their local seniors' club. Two groups consist of seniors some of whom belong to clubs while others do not.

One of the new groups is on hold at the present time. Of the three volunteer seniors from that community who took part in the Information Sharing sessions last April, two were a married couple and were very keen to get things going in their community. However, soon after the sessions were finished the lady was diagnosed with cancer and, sadly, she died this past week.

There is the possibility that two other groups will be formed. Sessions for potential recruits in Fortune, which is in eastern region, had to be postponed due to the illness of the lead couple. They have requested that the sessions go ahead in late May.

It is also possible that another group may be formed following a presentation requested for late April in Burgeo, which is an isolated community on the southwest coast of the island.

Activities

The basic expectation of all Peer Advocates is that they pass on information to

other seniors with whom they come into contact through their regular activities. The reason this is so important is that, without information, seniors cannot make informed decisions about things that affect their life and health. Several Peer Advocates have reported about the benefits to others of the information they have passed on. For example, several seniors found help and support for their hearing and vision problems because the Peer Advocates told them what help was available and who to contact,

In addition to passing on information one-on-one, several of the groups have organized meetings for the seniors in their communities to which they have invited guest speakers. Where the Peer Advocates belong to a club, these sessions are often in conjunction with the club meeting but open to all members of the community. Topics have included information about the services provided by Health and Community Services, coping with arthritis, Alzheimer disease, and the Emergency Alert system.

The Peer Advocates have taken advantage of some of the Seniors Resource Centre's other programs to provide information to seniors in their communities. The new group at Botwood has organized a Diabetes Awareness and Prevention Workshop, as have existing groups with new members, Trepassey and Grand Falls-Windsor, and several other established groups. The Trepassey group is also involved in a Falls Prevention Workshop as are some members of the existing Clareville group.

The new group in Bonavista is planning its first session for seniors in the community for the end of April and will be featuring the ABCs of Fraud. One member of this group is also trying to start an exercise group in her community as have two Peer Advocates in other communities. One member of the new Peer Advocate group in Botwood is taking the leadership training for the Arthritis Self-Management Program. Three other Peer Advocates in two other communities have also taken this training and offered the program in their communities. Without the Peer Advocate program, they would not have know about the program.

Yet another way that the Peer Advocates can help others is by advertising the toll-free Seniors Information Line number. This has certainly been done as there are a noticeable increase in calls from areas where there are now Peer Advocates. This information may be through posting flyers, verbal information or posting the information on the local cable television station.

Through their association with the Seniors Resource Centre, Peer Advocates are often invited to take part in workshops and focus groups since they are knowledgeable about seniors' issues and concerns and are in a position to pass on what they learn to others in their community. Over the past fifteen months, Peer Advocates have been invited to take part in focus groups and workshops on alcohol use, elder abuse, homelessness, literacy, diabetes awareness and falls prevention.

Support, Linkages and Resources

The program manager provides on-going support to all groups. This involves frequent visits until the group is established and is confident about the program it wishes to undertake. This is especially true of those groups not associated with clubs. The groups associated with clubs tend to blend their activities in with the clubs' program. Once a group is established, the program manager makes regular follow up visits approximately twice a year.

In addition to meetings, the program manager is available through the toll free line to the Seniors Resource Centre. All Peer Advocates have been given a copy of the ***Seniors Guide to Services and Programs in Newfoundland and Labrador***. The Guide contains information about many services but does not have local numbers. Therefore, each Peer Advocate has also been provided with a local **Resource Manual for Peer Advocates** prepared by the program manager. Pamphlets and resource material from other organizations has also been provided. New material is forwarded to the Peer Advocates as it becomes available.

In order to compile information and to build community links for the new groups, the program manager made contact with the local community health nurses and social workers. They were informed about the Peer Advocate program and its purpose. They were also told which seniors in their communities were taking part. Printed information about the program was also mailed to them. The nurses provided the program manager with contact names and phone numbers of other resource people providing services in their communities which would be helpful for the Peer Advocates to know. In the case of existing groups, contact information which had been obtained when a manual was originally developed was checked and revised as needed

and updated sheets were provided to the original Peer Advocates.

The program manager also contacted regional service providers such as the nutritionists and dietitians with Health and Community Services, the health promotion staff, mental health workers and an audiologist.

In addition to making resource people aware of the program and the role of the Peer Advocates, the program manager also tried to build support for local Peer Advocates. She also asked whether the resource people would be willing to speak to the Peer Advocates as a group and if they would speak to groups of seniors if the Peer Advocates decided to organize such sessions. This information was included in the manuals.

In Bonavista, the program manager was able to build on contacts made during the Seniors Resource Centre's involvement in the Aging Well in Rural Places project. That program held focus groups to determine the mental health concerns of seniors in that area. The local Bonavista Community Liaison Committee felt that the Peer Advocate program would be the ideal program to meet the needs identified and so have been very supportive of the volunteer seniors there.

Dissemination of Information about the Peer Advocate Program

Each Peer Advocate group has been provided with a display board for use in their community. The display explains the role of the Seniors Resource Centre, what Peer Advocates do, who the local Peer Advocates are, and how they are prepared for their role. While most groups use the display when they organize their sessions with guest speakers, the new Bonavista group has been putting up their display in the hospital waiting room and the local pharmacy. In this way people are given the opportunity to find out who the Peer Advocates are in advance of the first session they are organizing at the end of April.

Where the Peer Advocates are willing, the program manager has also provided the groups with flyers for their communities. These flyers tell seniors that if they have a question or do not know where to turn for help, they can call the Seniors Resource Centre's toll free phone number or talk to a local Peer Advocate whose names and phone numbers are listed. This gives the local

seniors a choice of contacting someone they know in the community or calling the toll free line.

Other ways in which information about the Peer Advocate program is disseminated is through the press. Last April, the Advertiser, the local paper in Grand Falls- Windsor, printed a photo and article about the Peer Advocates there. In addition, the leader of the Bonavista group has submitted an article for publication in their local paper, the Packet.

In order to raise awareness about the program, the program manager attended the annual convention of the Newfoundland and Labrador Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation held in St. John's last October. The federation is a province-wide umbrella organization which represents seniors' clubs across the province and lobbies government on seniors' issues. While some federation members are also Peer Advocates, others are unaware of the program. A display highlighting all the provincial programs of the Seniors Resource Centre was set up at the convention and pamphlets were available. Approximately 500 seniors attended the meeting including 19 Peer Advocates who belong to clubs in six different communities.

The Health Information Fair organized by the Port au Port Peer Advocates was another opportunity to inform resource people as well as seniors from different communities on the west coast of the island, about the Peer Advocate program.

Presentations given to the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees Women's Conference and to three groups of Salvation Army volunteers provided an opportunity to inform people from across the whole province about the needs and concerns of seniors and how the Peer Advocate program addresses those needs. Several participants stated that they would tell people in their home communities about the program.

Copies of the executive summary of the Evaluation Report will be sent to project participants and to the provincial government. In addition, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation will be highlighting seniors during programs in May. Input has been requested from the Peer Advocate program so this will be yet another way to share information about the program.

Conclusion

Much progress has been made during the fifteen months of this project. In spite of problems with the weather and the illness of some of the volunteers, thirty seven new Peer Advocates in three regions of the province have been recruited and have completed the series of Information Sharing Sessions. Three new groups have been formed and three existing groups have increased their numbers by recruiting new members.

In addition to providing information to seniors in their communities on a one-on-one basis, all these groups have organized sessions and/or workshops for seniors in their communities. An additional outcome has been the start up of several exercise groups promoting healthy active living.

Community development takes time and these seniors will need much support and encouragement to continue with, and build, the program in their communities. On-going support is being provided by the Seniors Resource Centre and the seniors have stated, during the evaluation process, that this is very important to them. Local support networks are also being developed. Information about the program is being disseminated via word of mouth, meetings, presentations and the media.