



The Age of Wisdom:

Giving Voice to Edmonton's Immigrant Seniors and Identifying Their Needs

Summary Report
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1. Project Background and Objectives

1.1. Background

Edmonton, together with many other cities in Canada and across the world, is trying to anticipate the challenges and opportunities associated with a rapidly aging population. In 2011, Age Friendly Edmonton (AFE), a collaborative initiative between the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council (ESCC), Edmonton senior serving organizations and other stakeholders, developed an action plan to respond to these changing demographics and to the needs of seniors. The *Vision for an Age-Friendly Edmonton Action Plan* (ESCC, 2011) is a framework that can be used to develop goals and actions that address challenges faced by seniors, support their well-being and promote age-friendly communities.

Research shows that immigrant and refugee seniors (IRS) in particular have had different life experiences and face unique challenges to their good health and well-being (City of Calgary, 2009, D'Elia, L.A. & ESCC, 2008). These include issues related to income security, housing, transportation, mental health and social isolation. IRS also have reduced access to appropriate seniors' programs and services because of language and other barriers. These challenges may be exacerbated by recent policy changes at municipal, provincial and federal levels. Examples of these are changes to the Alberta Seniors Benefit program, amendments to immigration policies such as the moratorium on the sponsorship of parents and grandparents, and changes to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). As demographics and external contexts constantly shift, it is essential that service providers have sufficient and current information about the experiences, needs and challenges of newcomer and immigrant seniors, and/or the capacity to address these needs.

1.2. Objectives

In January of 2015, Zenev and Associates was contracted by the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council to conduct a Needs Assessment, with funds provided by Age Friendly Edmonton. The purpose of the Needs Assessment was to:

- Provide an understanding of the size and characteristics of the IRS population in Edmonton.
- Review current literature on the needs of IRS, and information on existing programs and services for IRS In Edmonton.
- Consult with IRS, service providers and stakeholders to determine how well existing programs and services meet the needs of IRS, and identify any gaps that need to be addressed.
- Make recommendations for enhancing existing services.

2. Demographic and Profile Review

The objective of this phase of the project was to identify the size and characteristics of the IRS population in Edmonton. The demographic review on the numbers of IRS in Edmonton revealed that although there is a considerable amount of data on immigrants in general and some good local, provincial and national demographic information on seniors in general, there is very little recent data specifically on IRS.

The available data indicates that immigrant seniors form a significant proportion of the total senior population. 2006 information shows that while 20% of the overall Canadian population were immigrants, 30% of seniors are immigrants (Ng et. al., 2012).

Most immigrant seniors came to Canada at a relatively young age and have been living in Canada for several decades. Recently arrived immigrant seniors are more likely to have low incomes than long-term immigrant seniors and much less likely to live alone than long-term immigrants and Canadian-born seniors (Lai, 2010). Immigrant seniors are slightly less likely (22%) to have post-secondary education than Canadian-born seniors (24%).

The most recent data reveals that almost 6,000 (or 7% of) seniors in Edmonton do not speak English or French (Statistics Canada, 2011).

There is no data on the numbers of IRS currently visiting Edmonton on Super Visas. We do know that Canada wide, approximately 1200 Super Visas are issued every month and over 50,000 Super Visas have been issued since the inception of the program in December 2011 (Government of Canada, 2015).

3. Environmental Scan of Services/Programs for IRS

Website/directories for approximately 77 organizations were scanned for information about programs and services for IRS. 42 of these organizations serve specific ethnocultural, linguistic or faith based communities (including 8 that specifically serve seniors), 24 are senior serving organizations, and 11 serve immigrants and refugees.

From this scan, we found 18 organizations that provide programs and services for IRS. Of these 18 9 are organizations that serve ethnocultural, linguistic or faith based communities, 6 are immigrant and refugee serving organizations, and only 3 are specifically senior serving organizations. The resulting list of programs and services is by no means exhaustive, but has

been used to paint an initial picture of the types of programs and services that are available to and accessed by IRS.

The types of programs and services offered by these organizations includes educational, social and recreational programs, language programs, health and wellness programs, programs that assist seniors with assistance with navigating systems, programs to address issues of elder abuse and community support/cultural broker programs

The environmental scan was conducted at the beginning of the project and was based on information available at the time from the sources consulted. However, it became clear from data collected in the interviews and focus groups that this information is dynamic and constantly shifting as organizations continuously tailor their programs and services to meet the needs of their members and target groups. Lists of current programs found on websites or in printed directories are frequently incomplete, as maintaining updated information can be resource intensive.

In addition, there is very little information available about programs offered by small, informal community-based organizations. These programs frequently have limited resources for the development and promotion of programs. The target groups for these programs are typically small ethnocultural communities, and program information is often disseminated by word of mouth rather than online or through printed program guides.

There is no single consolidated source of information about programs and services that target or serve the needs of IRS. This makes it challenging for IRS themselves, as well as for families, caregivers and community support/outreach workers who work with IRS to identify programs that would be of interest to or meet the needs of IRS. However, because of the continuously changing nature of this information, a consolidated and accurate information source would be challenging to create as well as to maintain.

4. Literature Review

The objective of the literature review was to examine and summarize current knowledge about the needs of IRS and the ways in which these needs are being met or might be met.

IRS present with complex needs for programs and services they require, and face some correspondingly unique barriers in accessing these (Calgary, 2009; Ng et al., 2004). Existing research, although scant, shows that IRS have needs relating to social isolation, complex health issues and elder abuse, which are often corollary effects of poverty or financial precariousness.

4.1. Barriers to accessing programs and services

In the review of literature, we identified a number of factors that act as barriers to service access for IRS. These include: language barriers, lack of information about programs and services, cultural barriers to seeking support, fear of being a burden (including the cost of programs and services), transportation issues, lack of culturally appropriate programs and services, and systemic barriers.

4.2. Systemic issues affecting access to programs and services

Systemic issues that affect IRS access to services include government policies and policy changes such as Bill C-31, and changes in the eligibility requirements for the Alberta Seniors Benefit. Poverty and income insecurity also affect IRS' ability to access the programs and services required to successfully integrate into Canadian life (Bernhard et al., 2010; Chui et al., 2009; Elgersma, 2010; Luhtanen, 2009; Stewart et al., 2011) as well as their health status (Lai, 2010). Housing is critical for the health and well-being of IRS. However, suitability and affordability are key issues for IRS (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2014).

4.3. Promising and suggested practices for access improvement

The following are promising practices that could improve the provision of programs and services for IRS:

- Provision of linguistically appropriate and culturally sensitive programs
- Increased and better promotion of programs for IRS
- Intersectional understanding of the issues
- Coordinated approaches amongst service providers
- Improving government policies on immigrant seniors
- Education and training
- Building social/political community
- Additional research

5. Data Collection

All aspects of the data collection phase were planned in collaboration with the Project Advisory Group for the Project. Project Consultants worked closely with members of the Advisory Group to develop key research areas, review interview and focus group questions and select participants.

The following research questions were used as a guide for data collection:

1. What are the experiences of IRS? What challenges do they face and what kinds of programs and services do they need?
2. What kinds of programs and services are currently available?
3. What are the barriers to access and provision of programs and services and how can these be addressed?
4. What are the strengths of current programs and services and what are some recommendations for enhancing services?

Data was collected using the following methods:

- 3 Focus groups with a total of 45 IRS from diverse communities, including one focus group primarily with refugee seniors
- 2 Focus groups with a total of 20 people from organizations that provide services to IRS
- 4 Interviews with key stakeholders

Participants for the IRS' focus groups were selected to represent diverse ethnocultural and linguistic communities and to reflect other differences within this population such as immigration status, country of origin, length of time in Canada and first language.

The list of organizations generated in the environmental scan was used to select participants for the first organizational focus group, and 12 participants attended on behalf of their organizations. A second focus group was conducted with community support workers/cultural brokers who assist IRS, and with representatives from organizations that support this community-based work.

6. Discussion of Findings

This section provides a summary and discussion of the findings of the Needs Assessment. The findings have been categorized into two areas: experiences of IRS and barriers to service access and provision.

6.1. Experiences of IRS

While many seniors, regardless of their histories or life trajectories, face similar issues relating to health, income and housing, the experience of being an immigrant or refugee adds another layer of challenges to those faced by the aging. In this section, we paint an overall picture of the experiences of IRS as they navigate the waters of aging in their new or adopted country.

6.1.1. Key challenges faced by IRS

The needs of immigrant and refugee seniors are complex, with multiple needs that often compound one another. In this section, we discuss the three main challenges that IRS deal with in their daily lives, as identified by IRS and service provider participants: language, housing, and income.

Language

The ability to speak English and have some confidence to speak it was viewed by many seniors as being important to their general well-being, in that it contributes to a sense of independence and empowerment. Without capacity in English, seniors expressed a diminished ability to fully participate in society, including a limited ability to access services and programs that would enhance their well-being, such as health and recreational programs.

Housing

Like many seniors, IRS face a myriad of housing issues. Safe, affordable housing is essential to a sense of security and overall well-being. For IRS, three factors make housing a key concern: inappropriate housing, a lack of affordable housing, and precarious housing. These three elements are often present at the same time, each compounding the negative effects of the others.

Income

Income insecurity that results in low or unpredictable income is at the root of many issues faced by IRS. Seniors spoke about a lot about income related issues (benefits, income supplements, wages etc.) including financial concerns related to the cost of living, and the cost of accessing programs services that would be helpful to them.

IRS spoke evocatively about how the challenges they face in their day-to-day lives impact them. These included a sense of dependence and feeling like a burden on their families, isolation, a lack of agency and self worth, and being overwhelmed with family responsibilities.

6.2. Barriers to Service Access and Provision

This section presents research findings on the barriers that IRS face in *accessing* programs and services and the challenges that service providers face in *providing* programs and services that meet the specific needs of IRS.

6.2.1. Economic insecurity

Program fees

The economic insecurity and poverty experienced by IRS result in financial barriers to accessing programs and services if user fees are required. Policies shaping economic support systems for

IRS and funding programs for service providers lead to situations where IRS find it difficult to pay fees and service providers find it difficult to offer programs for free.

Inequitable systems

Systems and policies impacting IRS income security and the resulting experiences of poverty are at play in the expressed need for free programming. IRS who are not citizens and who are here as visitors, on Super Visas, or who are refugees have very limited access to financial support.

Lack of funding to deliver free programs

Service providers expressed a desire to respond to the needs of IRS by providing as many free programs as they can, but providing free services is a challenge for them. Almost all service providers who participated in the Needs Assessment talked about a scarcity of funding that restricted their ability to respond to IRS' needs.

Funding policies restrict services to IRS on visitor visas

Some service providers talked about the particular challenges of providing services to seniors on visitor visas. The Super Visa policies presume that families will look after their parents, and they do. However, seniors also have needs for recreation and social activity that families cannot entirely meet.

6.2.2. Access to transportation

Access to programs and services is closely related to IRS mobility and, therefore, is impacted by their access to public transportation. The cost of transportation, the location of programs relative to public transportation stops, and weather concerns were all raised as important factors.

6.2.3. Difficulty assessing needs of IRS

While many IRS noted that they would prefer programs that are not generic but that meet their particular needs and are offered in ethnoculturally and linguistically congruent ways, the specifics of these needs are not well understood by service providers. Almost all service providers included in this study talked about their efforts to determine the needs of IRS. They emphasized their desire to respond to IRS' unique needs, to not just "*cut and paste*" programming. However, they also expressed their difficulty assessing the needs of immigrant and refugee clients in general and further difficulty capturing the specific needs of IRS.

6.2.4. Lack of appropriate language programs

As previously stated, English language skills are seen as a linchpin for ensuring that IRS feel capable, can be independent, and have access to programs and services. However, seniors pointed out that English language courses are often not offered in ways that support their

learning. Service providers agreed and are struggling to find ways to meet the needs of individual seniors while respecting the constraints imposed by funders on language programs and the lack of support for non-employment related language learning. English language training is often not designed for IRS and there is a lack of funding for language training to meet IRS needs

6.2.5. Lack of programs and services tailored for IRS

The design of programs and services can be a significant barrier or enabler for IRS. Study participants noted that many seniors' programs are not designed with IRS in mind and as a result IRS are often reluctant to access these programs. Study participants expressed their preference for a number of programs that are interesting and relevant to their lives and also noted their desire for unstructured spaces for IRS to gather.

6.2.6. Lack of programs that provide help with navigating systems

IRS encounter a variety of systems and structures in Canada that they may be unfamiliar with, yet there are insufficient programs designed to help IRS navigate complex systems. Assistance navigating health systems was of particular importance to IRS.

6.2.7. Need for an inclusive and welcoming environment

An inclusive and welcoming environment emerged in this study as one of the most important factors that enabled IRS participation in programs. Factors that foster such an environment include a respectful and caring environment, staff or volunteers who speak a familiar language, and trusted personal contacts who encourage IRS to participate in a program. Having paid staff or well trained volunteers who have the skills and knowledge to connect with IRS will help to ensure the creation of a comfortable, accepting, and welcoming environment.

6.2.8. Access to information about programs and services

Having information about programs and services is an important first step for access. Through this study we learned that IRS seek and verify information primarily through trusted contacts or family members. The majority of IRS in this study accessed information about services and programs by word of mouth. However, information about services and programs is not always readily available.

6.2.9. Additional systemic issues for service providers

In addition to the specific challenges of providing appropriate programs and services that meet the needs of IRS, service providers are faced with broader issues that constrain their ongoing efforts to both identify the needs of IRS and to meet these needs in any significant way. These include a lack of: ongoing and sustained funding for IRS , funder/funding targets for service

provision for IRS, data that reflects need rather than not population size, and mechanisms to advocate for the needs of IRS.

7. Considerations for Future Action

The considerations for future action fall into three areas: guidelines for the provision of programs and services, promising practices for the provision of programs, and services and organizational/policy recommendations.

7.1. Guidelines for Program/Service Design and Delivery

The following guidelines can be used both by mainstream seniors' organizations and by organizations that specifically target IRS.

1. Increase the availability of free programs for IRS whenever possible. For low-income seniors, even a small fee to participate in a program can be prohibitive, and more free programs would ensure equitable access for all IRS.
2. Ensure that facilities housing programs and services for IRS are easily accessible and on a transit route, preferably very close to a transit stop.
3. Establish guidelines for collecting demographic information on member and participant profiles (e.g. country of birth, language spoken, and ethnicity) as well as information about program needs and interests. Consistent data across service provider organizations can be used to assess specific needs and to determine how these needs might be met.
4. Within each facility, create a welcoming, respectful and inclusive culture. This can be created by:
 - Hiring staff and volunteers who can speak languages other than English, depending on the profile of the membership.
 - Ensuring that staff have the skills to create a respectful and inviting environment.
 - Requesting and encouraging non-immigrant seniors to be inclusive and respectful, and to help create a welcoming environment.
5. Support the provision of more senior-friendly English language programs that are appropriate for seniors' learning pace, recognize literacy challenges in the seniors' first language, and include an opportunity to socialize and engage in conversational English.
6. Focus on providing recreational and other programs that do not require English language skills and that will minimize language barriers to participation (e.g. fitness and dance classes).

7. Offer more programs targeted to specific IRS' ethnocultural/linguistic communities. IRS are most likely to attend programs that mitigate language barriers and provide a means of connecting with others in their own community.
 - Start by offering a program that is targeted to a specific cultural and/or linguistic group to draw them to a facility they are not familiar with.
 - Consider the specific needs and challenges faced by the target group in both the delivery approach and program content.
 - Engage community support workers and cultural brokers who are connected to and have relationships with IRS to assist with program design.
8. Provide more educational programs that address the day-to-day challenges of IRS (e.g. financial literacy, how to use transportation systems, information on seniors' benefits, housing and so forth). These needs may shift and change as new communities of IRS arrive in Edmonton, and ongoing formal and informal needs assessments could be used to determine the most current and significant challenges faced by IRS. Consider offering a series of short-term programs that meet the immediate needs of IRS in addition to long term program offerings to ensure that emergent needs are being met.
9. Offer a mix of structured and unstructured programs to respond to IRS' varying interests and abilities. Food and the opportunity for social time should be available as a separate activity and also as a part of structured programs. Purposefully incorporate relationship-building activities into programs to facilitate the building of social networks between seniors and to help to reduce social isolation.
10. To promote and market programs, allocate resources to cultivate and maintain connections with formal and informal leaders within community spaces such as places of worship and cultural gathering spaces. IRS (like other seniors) value and are more likely to act upon information received from trusted sources.
11. Review promotional materials such as newsletters and program guides for appropriate language. Avoid terminology that might be confusing for those with limited English language skills and use images and pictures to supplement written text. When possible, translate promotional material into the language of the target community.

7.2. Promising Practices for Provision of Services and Programs

The following are promising practices that respond to the needs and challenges identified in this project. Some of these practices currently are, or have been, successfully used by service providers in Edmonton. Others are drawn from the literature review on promising practices for provision of programs and services for IRS, based on their relevance to the findings.

1. Expand the current community support worker/cultural broker programs for IRS within specific ethnocultural communities. Programs based on these models have proven very

effective in reaching out to seniors from specific communities. Community support workers/cultural brokers are especially effective at connecting with the most marginalized seniors (e.g. refugees, seniors living in poverty, seniors with health/mobility issues, etc.) See Appendix IV for a description of the competencies generally shared by these workers.

2. Design and implement ambassador programs that use the seniors-helping-seniors model and are targeted at specific ethnocultural/linguistic communities. Similar programs have been successfully implemented in some Canadian municipalities, where ambassadors from different communities are recruited to provide a point of contact for information and referrals to existing programs and services. A short summary of existing programs has been included in an Appendix IV.
3. Develop a compendium or listing of programs and services for IRS that is accessible to IRS caregivers/service providers. IRS access information about programs primarily by word of mouth; however, families of IRS, caregivers and service providers would benefit from a consolidated source of information.
4. Create a network of organizations that could share promising practices, successes and challenges and that would contribute to a more streamlined and effective approach to providing services to IRS in Edmonton. There is currently very little collaboration between organizations that provide services for IRS, both mainstream and ethnocultural-specific.

7.3. Organizational/Policy Recommendations

The following are recommendations for organizational and policy level changes for funders and service providers that would benefit IRS and address the findings that emerged in this project.

7.3.1. Recommendations for service providers

Income

- Advocate for the Alberta Seniors Benefit not to be linked to federal Old Age Security benefits so that IRS can benefit from this program.

Transportation

- Advocate for subsidies for low-cost transportation options for IRS.

Language

- Support the creation of translated materials that provide information to seniors, based on the major non-English languages spoken in Edmonton.
- Support and Increase availability of interpreters that service providers can access at low/no cost.

Housing

- Advocate for an increase in affordable housing that meets the needs of IRS. Ensure that housing options are linked to services for social support that facilitate independent and dignified living.

Research

- Implement a collaborative baseline study that provides demographic data to determine the scope of issues faced by IRS in Edmonton. Baseline data would facilitate future evaluation processes to assess the effectiveness of programs and services for IRS.

Recruitment and education

- Consider developing staff recruitment and hiring strategies to reach out to different ethnocultural and immigrant communities.
- Strengthen staff capacity to work with IRS with ongoing training for staff and service providers to better understand the needs and challenges faced by IRS and promising practices for addressing these needs.
- Develop a repository of resources (e.g. toolkits, education modules) for service providers that include guidelines for design and delivery of programs and services for IRS.

Seniors' advocacy

- Support the development of an IRS advocacy group and other mechanisms that IRS can participate in, to empower and equip them to advocate for policy change and more effective service provision.
- Consult with and include the voices of IRS in policy-making processes that affect them.

7.3.2. Recommendations for funders

Funding for IRS

- Increase the availability of funding for programs and services specifically for IRS.

Funding models

- Advocate and fund research and action to develop new and sustainable funding models. Allocate more funding for organizations that provide services for specific ethnocultural and linguistic communities.

Mandated targets

- Include mandated targets for service provision to IRS as a condition of funding to drive organizational commitment.

Housing

- Fund development of affordable housing that meets the needs of IRS.

Research

- Support projects that build on current research and provide further insight into the specific needs of IRS. Ensure that marginalized and vulnerable seniors are included, rather than only communities that have a large population of IRS. Focus on key challenges such as income, housing, and transportation, and the systemic changes required to address issues in these sectors.

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