



# Information and Referral Services (411 Seniors Centre Society)

<http://411seniors.bc.ca/>

## PROGRAM PROFILE: OVERVIEW

June 2017

<b>Type of Program</b>	Information, Referral and Advocacy
<b>Organization</b>	411 Seniors Centre Society
<b>Community Served</b>	Vancouver
<b>Program Goal</b>	Support seniors in accessing benefits and navigating systems
<b>Services Provided</b>	Information and referral, Assistance with filling out forms to apply for benefits, Income taxes
<b>Target Population:</b>	Seniors 55+ and anyone collecting disability benefits
<b>Staffing</b>	Operations and Information and Referral Manager, Volunteer and Membership Services Coordinator, 9 volunteers
<b>Program Strengths</b>	Service available in multiple languages, Comprehensive volunteer training program, Also offer training to volunteers from other organizations/communities

## Program Description

The Information and Referral (I&R) Service at 411 Seniors Centre Society (411) started in the late 1970s, and is a flagship service of the organization. The I&R Service helps seniors (55+) and those receiving disability benefits to navigate government, health and other systems, and to access a range of benefits. It is well used by low-income seniors, in part due to the 411's location near Main St. Skytrain station in the eastside of Vancouver.

The service provides support for seniors who are facing challenges in a variety of areas including housing, transportation, health, income benefits, pensions/benefits, income tax, future planning, legal, financial, safety/security, emotional support and employment. Participants can drop-in or make an appointment during the regular hours, which are Monday to Friday from 9am to 4pm. For participants with mobility issues, volunteers (when available) travel to their home to provide support. The service also does presentations for the public on information and referral topics relevant to seniors (e.g., currently they have a partnership to do presentations at some branches of the Vancouver Public Library).

Two staff people are responsible for the I&R Service. The Operations and Information and Referral Manager takes care of training and mentoring, and provides debriefing support for volunteers with challenging cases. The Volunteer and Membership Services Coordinator manages the scheduling of volunteers and booking appointments. The actual information and referral services are delivered by nine trained volunteers, the majority of whom are seniors. The volunteers are able to deliver information and referral services in several different languages including Punjabi, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Swedish and Dutch. The program is funded as a core operation of the 411 Seniors Centre Society, which receives funding from the City of Vancouver, United Way and Community Gaming Grants.

In order to become a volunteer with the service, people must go through an application process and an interview. Once accepted, they attend a comprehensive training program that covers a variety of topics including federal and provincial benefits, housing, navigating the internet, and ageism and communication. New volunteers are mentored by an experienced volunteer until they are comfortable with their role and can work on their own. Additional training is offered to volunteers through meetings (held every other month), which usually include guest speakers from various organizations and government services (e.g., from the Tenant Resource & Advisory Committee). A few of the volunteers have also received their Commissioner of Affidavits certification, which allows them to administer oaths and affirmations, and are able to provide this service to seniors as part of their work at 411.

## Impact

The I&R Service assists seniors to access benefits and resources that they are entitled to, but may not be accessing for a variety of reasons. This means lower-income and other vulnerable seniors are able to receive more money and access more services to support a higher standard of living and improve their overall well-being. Volunteers help seniors to navigate challenging systems and situations that they may not be able to handle without support. In some cases, volunteers work with a participant over multiple appointments to solve a complex problem. Volunteers also benefit from the experience as it provides them with social connections and a sense of wellbeing.

*A gentleman was experiencing financial difficulties as he had not filed his income taxes while he was living out of country, and as a result was unable to apply for government income benefits. A volunteer assisted him with filing his taxes for the years he had been out of country, and he received a tax refund of approximately \$7,000. The gentleman had been living in a homeless shelter at the time, and with this money was now able to afford housing. After his taxes had been filed, the volunteer was able to assist him to apply for the income benefits he was entitled to.*

Staff recounting a story of someone who accessed 411 Information and Referral Services

In 2016-2017, the program served approximately 1,880 people (~35/week) in-person, by phone or via e-mail. 55% of these contacts were related to income benefits (e.g., OAS, GIS, CPP). Properly filing income taxes is necessary to be eligible to apply for most benefits, and supporting seniors with income taxes (including having income tax clinics during tax season) is one of the important initiatives offered by the I&R Service's volunteers.

## Strengths and Challenges

Information and referral is a core service of 411 Seniors Centre Society and they have developed a comprehensive service and training program. Because of this 411 is known as a leader in information and referral services.

The I&R service is able to reach a very diverse group of participants due to the central location of the centre in East Vancouver, their ability to offer service in multiple languages, and their ability to offer (when a volunteer is available) home visits for homebound seniors.

Well-trained and dedicated volunteers are essential for running the information and referral service and the organization does an effective job of recruiting and training volunteers. 411 aims to offer their four-week I&R training program for new volunteers three times a year. In addition to training their own volunteers, the training is also open to external volunteers from other organizations or communities (such as the West End Seniors Network

and South Granville Seniors Centre) as a fee for service (at a cost of \$100 a person). The training offered is quite comprehensive, however, it would be impossible to cover every potential type of information and referral request, and as a result one of the skills they emphasize in the training is how to search and find information.

Information and referral programs cover a very broad range of potential topics and needs, but sometimes seniors utilizing the programs can present with very complex situations that the programs lack the resources and time to fully address. In the past, 411 received funding (from the City of Vancouver and United Way) to coordinate the BC Seniors Advocacy Network, which trained seniors from across the province as advocates. These advocates would provide one-on-one ongoing support to seniors with complex needs who required additional help beyond what a typical information and referral program can handle. Unfortunately, the funding for the BC Seniors Advocacy Network ended in 2011, but if resources were available this would be a natural complement to information and referral programs.