



Seniors Outreach Ambassador Program (Burnaby Neighbourhood House)

<http://burnabynh.ca/>

PROGRAM PROFILE: OVERVIEW

June 2017

Type of Program	Information, Referral and Advocacy
Organization	Burnaby Neighbourhood House
Community Served	Burnaby
Program Goal	Provide outreach services to isolated and vulnerable seniors by sharing relevant information and connecting them to community resources
Services Provided	Information sharing, connections to community resources, home visits, public outreach to agencies and at community events
Target Population	Isolated or vulnerable seniors 75+
Staffing	1 program coordinator, ~35 active volunteers
Program Strengths	Multiple outreach approaches, Proactive outreach to isolated seniors, Leadership role of volunteers, Raising public awareness on seniors isolation

Program Description

The Seniors Outreach Ambassador Program at Burnaby Neighbourhood House trains senior volunteers (aged 40+) to outreach to vulnerable seniors (target age 75+). These volunteer Ambassadors connect with isolated seniors from diverse communities (together they are able to communicate in 15 different languages). Burnaby Neighbourhood House and Voices of Burnaby Seniors (VOBS) partnered to start the program back in 2010. The program is overseen by a Coordinator and seniors who are being reached out to are also connected to the *Seniors Together Program* – an initiative that provides an opportunity for isolated seniors to participate in activities and connect with information and community resources.

Currently, there are about 35 active volunteer Ambassadors who provide outreach services. The Ambassadors participate initially in a four-week training program (totaling 24 hours) that covers effective communication and listening skills, community resources, social isolation issues, outreach skills, and diversity and intercultural communication. As part of their training, Ambassadors go out into the community with the trainer to practice their outreach skills. Periodically supportive training is offered to refresh awareness of previous topics, to address new topics of interest and allow for group sharing and discussion. Monthly ambassadors meetings are also held which provide an opportunity to share outreach experiences and plan new outreach strategies.

The Ambassadors connect seniors with specific information and resources and carry pocket community resource cards to distribute. In order to be identifiable, when volunteering, Ambassadors wear a nametag with their photo on it and introduce themselves as an Ambassador.

Seniors Outreach Ambassadors engage in three different outreach approaches:

- 1) *Personal outreach* to seniors they encounter in their day-to-day activities (e.g., at the grocery store, out walking, in their immediate neighbourhoods, at residential buildings they live in, at place of worship, etc.);

- 2) *Public outreach* at community events and presentations to interested groups;
- 3) *Home visits* to seniors referred to the program by social services, Fraser Health Authority, or through contacts made by the Ambassadors.

Funding for the Seniors Outreach Ambassadors Program is inconsistent, varying from year to year. The Program currently receives funding from a New Horizons Pan-Canadian Grant (Welcoming Spaces Project), Better at Home (ended March 2017) and a BC Senior Housing-Outreach Project (building community capacity at two seniors housing residences). The total annual program budget is approximately \$45,000.

Impact

Since the program first started in 2010, it has provided outreach services to over 2,500 seniors. Most weeks they reach approximately 10-20 seniors through outreach activities, and many more seniors through public events (e.g., community fairs) and personal outreach. The program helps prevent isolation and connects seniors with community resources. The program helps isolated seniors by offering information and referral, assisting seniors in signing-up for Better at Home, income tax assistance, and connecting seniors with community programs and providing other resources and support.

This anecdotal account, which took place during a volunteer training session, shows how the program can impact the life of a senior:

There was an older man drinking quite early in the day outside the mall. The man seemed to be in a state of despair, so one of the Seniors Outreach Ambassadors approached him and they began to talk. The man was distraught and said he was thinking of killing himself because the building he had been living in had been sold and he was worried he would not be able to find affordable housing in the neighbourhood which he had been living in his whole life. The Ambassador offered the man encouragement and provided him with housing information and contacts for housing organizations. Two weeks later the Ambassador saw the man again and found out he had been able to get help from one of the housing organizations and successfully secure new housing.

This emphasizes the importance of proactively getting out into the community to connect with isolated seniors, rather than waiting for them to come to a service.

Empowerment of the volunteers is an important goal of the program. Many Ambassadors say that they volunteer in order to stay connected to the community and prevent social isolation. Some seniors have become Senior Outreach Ambassadors after having been helped by the program themselves.

Strengths and Challenges

Burnaby Neighbourhood House received a three-year [New Horizons Pan-Canadian Grant](#) to reduce the isolation of seniors 75+. The grant provides funding for four different collaborative projects, including the Welcoming Spaces Project, which will expand the Seniors Outreach Ambassador Program to five new non-profit organizations (Burnaby Community Services, SHARE, North Shore Neighbourhood House, Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, and Kiwassa Neighbourhood House).

The Pan-Canadian Project grant provides funding for 10 hours/week for the Seniors Outreach Ambassador Program's Coordinator (for three years), which is currently supplemented by funding from two other partners. The current funding sources are all temporary grants and securing sustainable funding for the program is a challenge. In 2014, the program experienced a major reduction in their budget when they lost funding from the United Way, but luckily, Burnaby Neighbourhood House saw the value of the program and was able to continue to provide support until new funding partners were secured. As a result of the funding instability, the number of hours available for the Program Coordinator has fluctuated from between 20 to 32 hours/week over the past few years, depending on the funding available. Ideally, the program would be staffed with one full-time Coordinator along with part-time administrative help, which is not possible based on the current budget. While the program has a strong volunteer component, it is crucial to have a Program Coordinator available to recruit and train volunteers, coordinate outreach and monthly ambassador meetings, keep program statistics, and provide support to volunteers.

Ambassadors are encouraged to take a leadership role in the program, which is especially crucial given the fluctuations in funding for a Program Coordinator. The Seniors Outreach Ambassadors are responsible for planning six-month outreach strategies and identifying priority activities. For example, recently the Ambassadors identified seniors who are caregivers for grandchildren as a priority group, and hence developed a plan to do morning outreach at elementary schools to reach this group.

The approach used in the Seniors Outreach Ambassadors Program is unique, as the training prepares Ambassadors to use their skills not only when they are formally volunteering, but also in their day-to-day life in the community. The Ambassadors are able to provide outreach in multiple settings, and proactively attempt to reach seniors who are isolated and/or are in need of services, rather than requiring the seniors to reach out. The Program is able to successfully combine outreach with information and referral services to reach isolated seniors.