



HOW COVID-19 HAS SHAPED SERVICE DELIVERY FOR SENIORS SERVICES SOCIETY OF BC

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected seniors both in the community and in long-term care facilities. Adults over the age of 60 are at increased risk of contracting the virus and are more likely to face serious health challenges as a result of the disease.¹ Indeed, seniors have much higher mortality rates from COVID-19 than younger people.¹ While much attention has rightfully been shone on the challenges of the long-term care system, seniors living in the community have also been greatly impacted by the pandemic.

Beyond immediate health impacts, COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented economic and social changes, including limits on social gatherings, restrictions on events and activities, and disruptions to supply chains. Indeed, many of the services low-income community-based seniors rely on for day-to-day life have been interrupted or significantly altered. For seniors facing housing insecurity, the new COVID-19 reality places significant strain on their ability to maintain independence, stay physically active, and on their mental health and wellness. In response, community-based organizations that

serve low-income seniors have had to adapt their service and program delivery to meet the needs of their client base.

Seniors Services Society of BC (SSSBC) is a non-profit organization located in New Westminster, BC, that connects adults age 60 and older living in BC communities to housing navigation services and supports that help them age well and thrive. With over 30 years experience in the community-based service sector, and with an extensive network of partnerships across the province, SSSBC is on the leading edge of the response to population aging in British Columbia.

A core element of SSSBC is the focus on providing equitable support to the most vulnerable seniors across the province, including those who are homeless or at-risk. To address the housing concerns of culturally diverse seniors who may otherwise fall through the cracks, SSSBC combines housing navigation and support services in an approach that is one-of-a-kind in BC.



As a leader in the seniors services sector, SSSBC has successfully partnered with other housing and social services providers to develop several innovative programs in response to the diverse needs of low-income seniors. SSSBC provides:

1. **Information & referral** for seniors housing and services available in the province;
2. **Housing navigation services** to seniors and their families that guide them through the complex seniors housing system;
3. **Navigator Training for Seniors Housing and Support**, which provides education to empower seniors and those working in the sector with knowledge of the seniors housing system and resources for advocacy and navigation support;
4. **Housing outreach** for homeless or at-risk seniors in the Lower Mainland to help find and secure permanent housing;
5. A one-of-a-kind **Temporary Housing Program**, located in Burnaby and New Westminster, that provides short-term accommodation for seniors facing immediate housing crisis, in partnership with BC Housing;
6. The **Homelessness Prevention Program** funded by BC Housing that provides rent subsidies to seniors in the Lower Mainland who meet one of the following criteria: identify as Indigenous, are being released from hospital or a correctional institution, and/or identify as a woman and fleeing violence or abuse;
7. The **Better at Home** program, in partnership with United Way of the Lower Mainland, which supports seniors living in New Westminster to maintain independence by providing light housekeeping, grocery shopping, medical transportation, and support calls;
8. The **Meals on Wheels** program, where meals prepared by local restaurants are delivered to New Westminster seniors;
9. A **16-seat wheelchair lift-equipped Community Bus** to assist with local transportation;
10. A **Seniors Mental Health and Addictions Service Directory**, housed on SSSBC's website;

11. Connection to a Virtual Addiction Recovery Program for senior women in New Westminster, delivered by Westminster House Society;
12. A local **Community Response Network**, in partnership with the BC Community Response Network (BCCRN), which works to educate the public on seniors' issues and reduce elder abuse and neglect; and
13. The **SHINE Program** (Seniors Housing Information and Navigation Ease), which aims to connect and develop seniors housing and mental health and wellness supports across the province through partnerships.

SSSBC also partners with policy-level and academic partners in research and knowledge mobilization initiatives that aim to reduce seniors' poverty in BC and across Canada.

COVID-19 has required SSSBC to adapt their service delivery model to meet the needs of seniors in a constantly changing social and economic reality. Increased challenges regarding social and physical distancing require innovative community-based methods to bridge the gaps in in-person services. Virtual supports for seniors are needed in order to offset the impact of social isolation and often co-occurring issues of depression, loneliness, and anxiety. And yet, despite these demands, the health and safety of staff and clients must remain paramount. As such, SSSBC has quickly and effectively engaged in a rethinking and reshaping of program and service delivery to meet the challenge of the times.

THE OFFICE

Throughout the pandemic, the SSSBC office remained open to ensure operations were able to continue to support vulnerable seniors in the community. Following guidelines from WorkSafe BC,² SSSBC's office space has been rearranged and reimagined to ensure the safety of all staff and visitors. In-person meetings are incredibly valuable

to the low-income senior clients who access SSSBC's services, so a meeting room has been set up with allotted time slots for in-person visits. Meeting and break rooms have designated occupancy limits.

Contact tracing documentation has been put in place at reception, and all staff and visitors are required to wear personal protective equipment (PPE) on site. Sticker decals have been placed on the floors to indicate safe distancing guidelines and direct staff and guests through the office space. Strict cleaning and sanitation regimens have been put in place in all shared spaces. And, finally, staff members have been provided with personal laptop computers through which they can access files and programs housed on SSSBC's cloud storage, enabling staff to work remotely when needed.

Specific supports for staff were also implemented. First, staff were provided with training around digital literacy and using online software to conduct tasks, as well as training around how best to safely support seniors during this public health crisis. Staff have also been provided with mental health supports, including time off for wellness, regular wellness checks, and staff huddles once a week to allow space for sharing and support. In addition, staff who were required to take leave due to personal or family-related sickness due to COVID-19 were offered 95% of their salary during extended leave.

HOUSING SERVICES

SSSBC's housing services, including housing navigation, housing outreach, the Temporary Housing Program, and the Homelessness Prevention Program, have been re-shaped in a number of ways to respond to the pandemic. Housing navigation and outreach are provided over the phone, and outreach workers have adapted to ensure regular and meaningful connection with clients is maintained virtually. When essential visits are needed, clients are invited to meet at the SSSBC office in the safe meeting room where staff can help with form filling and provide additional one-on-one assistance. While workers can no longer transport clients in personal vehicles, extensive efforts have been made to meet clients at safe neutral sites, such as outside of a coffee shop, as long as PPE is worn and safe distancing protocols are followed. In addition, SSSBC's community van has been fitted with plexiglass barriers to protect both the client and the worker, making the transportation of clients on a limited and controlled basis possible. Through these adaptations, SSSBC has continued to provide essential housing services to vulnerable seniors in the community in a safe manner.

SUPPORT SERVICES

The support services offered by SSSBC, including light housekeeping, grocery shopping, support calls, transportation to medical appointments, and meal delivery, are essential services for many clients. Food security, in particular, is an issue that the pandemic has underscored. Throughout the height of the pandemic, volunteers wearing PPE and following safe hygiene practices carried out grocery shopping and meal delivery for senior clients. SSSBC also delivered food hampers during the height of the pandemic. Partnerships with local businesses have allowed the Meals on Wheels program to continue; currently, a contracted company delivers frozen meals to seniors. Such services are invaluable to the clients who use them, and disruptions would have caused significant crises for many.

More recently, light housekeeping and medical transportation have been restarted with the help of contractors and private business sector partners who follow proper safety protocols. For example, drivers transporting seniors to medical appointments ensure all parties wear PPE, that the vehicle is clean and sanitized, and ask that senior clients sit in the back seats while the driver is up front. By developing and tailoring services in this way, senior clients' health and psychosocial needs can continue to be met through the services SSSBC provides.

THE SHINE PROGRAM

In order to address isolation and social distancing during the pandemic, the SHINE program pivoted to providing virtual mental wellness services to ensure the safety of clients and staff. Virtual digital literacy classes were implemented to teach isolated seniors basic computer skills, provide cyber safety tips, and enhance clients' ability to remain connected with their social networks. In addition, new partnerships were formed to reconfigure services to focus on virtual supports. For example, SSSBC partnered with the BC Community Response Network to form a New Westminster chapter to address elder abuse. SSSBC has also partnered with the Active Aging Society to deliver the Choose to Move virtual group exercise program and Westminster House Recovery Society to support the pilot of a web-based interactive addiction recovery program for senior women. And finally, the Navigator Training for Seniors Housing and Support Staff was offered online for the first time in Fall 2020.

CHALLENGES

While the adaptations brought in to SSSBC's office space and service delivery model have been largely successful to date, such rearrangement of entrenched activities does not come without challenges. Working from home can be a challenge for some. Personal spaces need to be rearranged; perhaps a home office needs to be devised or strict work/break times need to be implemented so employees can keep themselves focused. When working from home, family can become a distraction, or work time can bleed into personal time, making it difficult to strike the all-important work-life balance. As a result, employees may feel stressed in their personal lives, work lives, or both.

Challenges have also been experienced when engaging seniors on the front lines. Workers are challenged to build rapport with clients over the phone and when even the most basic personal contact, such as a handshake or a hand on a shoulder, is prohibited. Some seniors are challenged to connect virtually due to limited digital literacy. The new world of Zoom meetings and Microsoft Teams can be impenetrable to the low-income senior living alone who does not own a computer. And, while SSSBC has persevered to deliver services in an adapted way, life still is not "normal," as anyone can recognize when greeting another person six feet away wearing a mask covering all but their eyes.

BEING FLEXIBLE

Despite complex challenges, the common theme running through all SSSBC's multiple service responses to the pandemic is simple: be flexible. This is what the "new normal" demands of community-based seniors services providers. Being flexible to connect with seniors in a way that they feel comfortable with. Being flexible when updating protocols to match the current public health context as the pandemic continues to unfold. Being flexible to allow employees to negotiate a new work-life balance as office spaces shift. Being flexible when reimagining how services for vulnerable seniors can be delivered.

SSSBC's flexible support to program and service delivery has been supported by the organizations' many dedicated partners in the community-based sector, as well as funders. Without these partnerships, many of the initiatives developed to respond to the pandemic would not have been possible. The timely response of the sector as a whole to understand, engage with, and meet the needs of community-based seniors has been remarkable considering the significance of the challenge faced and underscores the importance of intra- and intersectoral capacity-building through partnerships.

COVID-19 has shown us how unpredictable the world can be. But it has also revealed the resilience of seniors and of the community-based sector that serves them when faced with adversity. While COVID-19 may have challenged us to change the way we do things, both temporarily and for the long-term, the response of the sector has been resolute. Reframing the disruptions caused by COVID-19 as opportunities to rethink and reshape housing-related programs and services for seniors can result in improvements in the field. By staying flexible, SSSBC is prepared to identify these opportunities and run with them.

REFERENCES

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