

Introduction

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, information related to the science behind the virus, how it spread, and what measures were necessary to prevent infection emerged and evolved. It soon became clear that COVID-19 posed the biggest risk for those with underlying health conditions and people over the age of 70. It was soon apparent that providing supports for seniors in Edmonton while navigating this pandemic was a pressing concern.

As a result, the **Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council (ESCC)**, the **City of Edmonton**, and **SAGE Seniors Association** set up a Coordinated Pandemic Response (CPR) Model to address seniors' needs and respond in a quick and agile manner as the situation evolved.

For this *fACT* Sheet, we will summarize the major initiatives of the CPR model throughout 2020.

Coordinated Pandemic Response (CPR) Model

The CPR model is centred around the senior. The guiding priorities established during its development aimed to ensure that Edmonton seniors were not isolated, that they had their basic needs met, had access to health care, and were able to access information and resources to keep themselves safe.

The agencies identified a number of deliverables to complement these priorities. These included identifying existing services and resources that must be created or expanded to respond to the pandemic, supporting the development and expansion of services required, creating referral pathways within and between services, and creating tools and protocols to triage needs and distribution of resources.

To coordinate the initiatives and programs designed to respond to the pandemic, three task groups were formed to focus on critical services: Food/Transportation, Outreach/Friendly Check Ins, and Psychosocial Programming. Each group consisted of a lead seniors serving agency, an ESCC representative, a provincial or municipal government representative, and topic experts.

Government Funding to Support Seniors During the Pandemic

An influx of additional funding from the provincial and federal governments helped meet the needs of seniors during this unprecedented time. Seniors serving organizations within Edmonton received over \$1.8 million in funding for enhanced or expanded services between March and November 2020. The funding addressed initiatives focused on food security and transportation (\$645,778), social and emotional supports

(\$418,690), and navigation and outreach (\$795,141). These emergency funds were generally accessed independently by each organization.

Transportation

Drive Happiness, a non-profit organization that provides seniors with access to transportation, was invaluable in providing supports to seniors during the pandemic. As of November 2020, they had delivered 7,740 rides—of which nearly one third (2,536) were used for pick ups and deliveries, running errands for seniors who were unable or uncomfortable leaving their homes, as well as the delivery of food hampers. The organization also provided 371 rides for essential/frontline workers from Edmonton and Beaumont who could not safely get to work due to public transit restrictions.

Information and Referrals

In the age of the internet, social media, and a rapid news cycle, access to quality and timely information is important—especially for vulnerable populations who may have difficulty navigating complex systems. The **Seniors Information Phone Line** (accessible by dialing 211) had contact with 4,501 seniors, or those supporting seniors, between March and September 2020. Of those calls, 1,200 were specifically related to COVID-19. This represents a 61% increase in contact compared to 2019 data for the same time period.

The majority of these calls were related to inquiries for outreach referrals, help with taxes, and support to access financial assistance. The most common unmet needs reported included medical equipment/supplies, tax preparation, and residential housing options. Seniors outreach programs that received the most referrals were **SAGE Seniors Association**, **Edmonton Seniors Centre**, **Westend Seniors Activity Centre**, **SCONA**, and **North Edmonton Seniors Association**.

Notably, pressing issues changed and evolved as the situation developed. At the start of the pandemic, requests for emergency food were at a high, and by May there was an increase in calls focused on public awareness and education. On top of that, between March and May 2020, the most common concerns were related to tax preparation, which coincided with tax season and the initial postponement or cancellation of community tax clinics.

Distribution of Masks and Hygiene Packages

Public health measures to slow the spread of the virus included physical distancing, proper hygiene such as handwashing or hand sanitization, and personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face masks. In order to keep seniors and others safe, the

distribution of masks and sanitization products was an important component of the pandemic response.

The CPR model collected and distributed activity, hygiene, and PPE packages to those in need. Between March and September 2020, 550 activity packages, 400 hygiene packages, and 700 PPE kits were distributed. Close to 1,000 seniors received these kits. In addition, **Edmonton Meals on Wheels** distributed 700 hygiene kits as part of an early response to the pandemic. **Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council** also received 90,000 masks from the province which were distributed to seniors serving organizations and centres.

These kits were used by seniors who had not otherwise been connected to resources, and helped build relationships and trust within the community.

Successes of the CPR Model

While there were a number of challenges faced by seniors and seniors serving organizations, the CPR model was considered a success in that it facilitated increased collaboration and partnership between groups, and increased engagement with seniors (both in reach and scope) after program delivery shifted to a virtual platform. These initiatives helped to reduce senior isolation, helped agencies feel more connected to other agencies, and helped seniors better understand the existing resources and services available to them as circumstances changed.

Challenges of the CPR Model

Developing and coordinating a pandemic response for a situation that was rapidly changing was not without its challenges. These included a lack of resources and funding from some organizations to contribute to the coordinated efforts, the need for clarification of the model and its purpose, virtual meeting burnout, and the need to simultaneously incorporate and apply equity and anti-oppressive frameworks into ongoing work.

As the pandemic continued throughout the summer and fall of 2020, there were ongoing concerns of increased social isolation, elder abuse, worsened mental health, and continued challenges in meeting basic needs. Seniors living in intergenerational households were at increased risk of contracting the virus and caregiver burnout and staff shortages were also identified as contributing to, and exacerbating, these risk factors.

Final Reflections

The ability for seniors serving organizations to adapt, be flexible, innovate, and work creatively together as a result of the CPR model is a commendable effort and a testament to the resilience of community organizations when faced with unprecedented challenges.

With the approval of a number of vaccines against COVID-19 and their rollout across Canada, a post-pandemic future is on the horizon. Senior populations have been among the first to be vaccinated—transmission of the virus among this demographic has slowed and the situation is greatly improving for many.

While the CPR model was designed to address an emergency situation, the hope is that the work undertaken and lessons learned will encourage strengthened coordination and collaboration among social agencies and all orders of government.

The Coordinated Pandemic Response (CPR) Model facilitated increased collaboration and partnerships between groups as well as increased engagement with seniors both in reach and scope since program delivery shifted to a virtual platform.

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is an independent, non-profit, charitable organization focused on social research.

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