



Strengthening Community-Based Seniors' Services (CBSS) in British Columbia: An Ideas Exchange & Working Session

In Partnership with United Way British Columbia
November 2024



United Way
British Columbia

We strengthen vital connections
that support people in need in our
local communities.

HelpAge

Canada

Introduction

The Provincial and Territorial Consultations are grounded in a community development approach to include the voices of older people through a participatory, inclusive, and empowering design. The approach builds on the strengths and contributions of older people, is accessible (i.e., in-person and virtual), and values the lived experience of older people in dialogue. This is achieved through the leadership of the Interim Community Leadership Council (ICLC), the nature of invitations, and the facilitation style.

A World Café session was held on November 7th, 2024, at the United Way of BC's Healthy Aging Summit in Richmond, BC. A key objective of the session was to inspire participants to invest time and energy in developing a vision for a national community-based seniors' services (CBSS) sector and to see themselves as part of the national sector. These sessions are also designed to inform a strategic plan/roadmap for the ICLC, identify next steps at the individual, provincial, and national levels, and encourage CBSS staff and volunteers to become engaged members in building a national CBSS movement. This report opens with the World Café discussion findings, followed by the session evaluation findings.

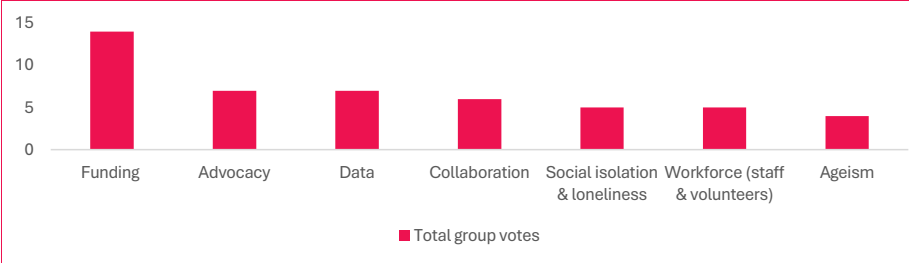
World Café Discussions

The World Café was a 90-minute session hosted by the ICLC and HelpAge Canada, in which participants were guided through a dialogue connecting the experiences and priorities of CBSS organizations in BC to a national sector. There were 11 in-person table groups with approximately 70 participants and two online groups with approximately 30 total participants (n=approximately 100 total participants). Eighteen participants indicated they were from a rural community. Each in-person group had a 'table board' for collecting notes, and Mentimeter was used to vote on priorities. Sharing back at the end of the discussion was facilitated for the in-person participants in a 'popcorn-style' manner.

Priorities

Participants were provided three voting dots and asked to reflect on the priorities identified at the 2024 CBSS sector Summit in Ottawa and select their top three areas where coordinated efforts might bring the most potential impact for BC. Individuals were permitted to place more than one per priority area. During the 'sharing back,' table facilitators entered their table's top priorities using Mentimeter (Figure 1). Funding was ranked as the top priority, followed by a tie for data and advocacy.

Figure 1. Priorities that could be advanced through collective action (n = 13 groups)



While the following priorities arose from the National Summit, the descriptions are nuanced to the BC consultation. Once data saturation is reached throughout additional provincial/territorial consultations, an operational definition of each priority will be developed.

Funding

We heard that many organizations rely on short-term grants for individual projects rather than multi-year core funds, which is unsustainable. A lack of sustainable funding impacts staff recruitment and retention, hindering organizations' ability to maintain a skilled workforce and deliver consistent services. Valuable time and resources are being allocated to grant writing and reporting, taking away from service and program delivery. Further, uncertainty around grant requirement outcomes and waiting to hear back on grant results makes planning difficult and gives little notice for staff layoffs if unsuccessful. Many organizations are also finding insufficient funding for facility maintenance and rent.

Data

The data collection and reporting needed to meet funder demands is often time intensive. The variation in impact and output measurement requested by different funders adds to the burden, as organizations often lack the resources to track and document these differing metrics. Participants emphasized the need to standardize grant requirements to alleviate this challenge. Further, there are often discrepancies in data collection; there is a desire for consistent language/definitions and data collection standards. There is also a need for interoperable systems to streamline data sharing across federal, provincial, and local levels to reduce the administrative load.

Advocacy

Advocacy is crucial for securing sustainable, flexible funds for CBSS organizations and changing policies to improve the lives of older adults. Presenting solutions respectfully, having a collective voice, and sharing authentic, impactful stories from older adults were noted as powerful tools to engage funders and policymakers. Participants also expressed a desire for advocacy training and for influential figures in health care (e.g. doctors) to act as advocacy champions. There is also a need to link advocacy efforts with policy development. Participants noted that long-term policy solutions are essential because sustainable funding and system-wide improvements depend on clear and coordinated policy direction.

Collaboration

Collaboration across organizations, sectors, and various levels of government is essential to share resources, coordinate efforts, and establish best practices. Participants expressed a desire for more effective collaborations with health authorities, specifically. A scarcity mindset and competition for limited funds and resources hinder the ability to support older adults effectively. Coming together with a collective voice and coordinated action plans is beneficial for advocacy work and securing funds. Examples such as the Primary Care Network (PCN) in Burnaby and collective health initiatives were mentioned as effective models for addressing emerging needs collaboratively.

Workforce

The CBSS workforce is facing high levels of overwork and burnout. There is a need for consistent training for staff and volunteers. To ensure well-being and retention, staff should be compensated with livable wages and benefits, including healthcare plans and pensions. Many organizations rely heavily on volunteers, often placing them in roles that ideally should be filled by paid staff. While volunteers provide valuable support, dependency on them without adequate training and resources can create gaps in service delivery.

Coordinated volunteer programs, like collaborative volunteer coordinators across agencies, can help manage and support this workforce more effectively. Training should include grief and bereavement, as dealing with the loss of participants can be traumatizing without proper support.

Ageism

Ageism is a significant structural and institutional challenge that impacts the treatment and perception of older adults. This stigma can hinder the ability of older adults to access services and lead to social isolation and loneliness. Focusing on intergenerational programming and connections can help destigmatize and create a more inclusive environment. It is vital to encourage mutual learning and respect across generations. It is also essential to include the voices of older people in conversations surrounding older adult issues.

Social isolation and loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are significant challenges for older adults, particularly in rural areas where there may be fewer opportunities for social interaction and less infrastructure (i.e., transportation) to support connectedness. People lose a sense of purpose when they retire or lose partners. There is a need to integrate health and social services, focusing on person-centred approaches and ensuring health practitioners know what services are available. Solutions such as intergenerational housing and inclusive services that cater to seniors' needs, from language supports to accessibility considerations, can help to combat social isolation.

Other

In addition to the above priorities, participants noted the following as priorities that could be advanced through collective action:

- Inconsistencies in service quality and accessibility. There is a need for a universal standard of service that is consistent across regions. This standardization could alleviate the need for organizations to repeatedly justify their funding needs, creating a more equitable baseline for service delivery across communities
- Systemic racism
- Elder abuse
- Lack of:
 - Emergency preparedness for older adults
 - Food security
 - Transportation, especially in rural areas
 - Clarity on the levels of government and their roles
 - Affordable, senior-friendly housing
 - Support for transitions of care (such as moving between different care settings, such as hospital to home, home to long-term care, or when changing primary care providers)
 - Caregiver support

Supporting provincial priorities

Participants were asked how a strong CBSS sector could support BC's provincial priorities. We heard the importance of encouraging collaboration and reducing competition between CBSS organizations. Through open dialogue, collective issues can be identified, and innovative solutions can be discussed. Collaboration also enables the creation of a strong, unified voice, strengthening advocacy efforts to combat ageism and secure funds for older adult services and programs. The national sector can establish a standardized service framework adapted to regional needs by sharing best practices and successful models, such as social prescribing. A strong national sector could also help to identify cross-border strategies to support rural and remote areas. It could also play a critical role in clarifying the responsibilities of different levels of government, ensuring more cohesive and practical support for older adults.

Engaging in a national movement

When participants were asked how they see themselves in the national movement, four categories were identified:

1. Changing the narrative surrounding older adults: highlighting their value and debunking the myth that older adults overburden the health care system.
2. Being a voice in advocacy work to influence strategic priorities and funding decisions, including with elected officials and the medical system.
3. Leading and contributing to learning and mentorship between peers, organizations, and provinces; sharing resources, expertise, best practices, and stories.
4. Addressing cultural and accessibility issues, with a focus on language barriers and ethnocultural-specific programming.

Regional collaboration/coordination practices that may inspire a national sector

When participants were asked which regional collaboration practices are working well, the following were mentioned:

- United Way BC
 - Monthly collaborations
 - Aging in Motion (AIM) Transportation Supports & Innovation Grant
 - Better at Home
 - Healthy Aging CORE BC
- BC Association of Community Response Networks (BCCRN)
 - A Community Response Network (CRN), of which there are more than 90 in BC, is a local partnership of community members, service providers, agencies, and professionals working together to prevent adult abuse, neglect, and self-neglect and strengthen community safety.
- Seniors Action Tables (SATs)
 - In North Vancouver, there is a planning table that functions as a Coalition of Seniors Groups, with Lions View as the community collaborator. For more in-depth conversations, there is also a Seniors Working Group
- North East Van Active Aging Network (NEVAAN)
- West Kootenay Nav-CARE

- BC Rural Health Network
- Eldercare Partnership in Cowichan (EPIC)

Participants also mentioned national organizations, including the Canadian Coalition Against Ageism (CCAA) and World Health Organization's Global Age Friendly Cities Project. Participants from rural areas expressed that certain aspects of collaboration are easier in rural settings (i.e., people are familiar with each other) so communication can be streamlined. In general, practices that work well include conferences, seniors' tables, working as a network (either formally or informally), sharing priorities, developing data collection indicators, and working with all levels of government.

Collective action to support a national sector

When asked what collective actions could be taken provincially to support a national sector, participants expressed the desire to have regular discussions (in-person and virtually) and to hear from a broad range of people, including those in rural and remote areas. Further, there is interest in sharing case studies and promising/best practices to better understand what is and is not working, share priorities, develop consistent messaging, and act as a strong, collective voice for advocacy. There is also a need to standardize and improve the quality of data collection and develop stronger leadership. Participants would like to see the development of supportive partnerships, more collaborations with content experts on key seniors' issues, and the implementation of seniors advocates in every province/territory. Additionally, there is a desire to develop a database with an exhaustive list of all existing senior services and key organizations across Canada and an interest in supporting the merging of organizations to create a central location for accessing services and information. Lastly, participants expressed the need to take action on equity and accessibility issues, including addressing language barriers, providing culturally sensitive care, and using a trauma-informed approach.

Key takeaways

When asked about key takeaways from the World Café, participants expressed that the session sparked them to think about their role on a national level rather than just provincially. There is a need for cross-provincial strategies and funding, as well as national advocacy, data collection, and knowledge sharing. Regarding advocacy, it is important to hear about lived experiences and use a collective impact approach. Participants want to see advocacy training for frontline staff workers, doctors, seniors, community organizations, academia, and caregivers to support a unified voice. Participants also expressed the need to consolidate services and actions, develop a singular database where all information can be accessed, and standardize how data is collected. In terms of resources, there is a need for unrestricted multi-year funding, as well as transparency and accountability surrounding how funds are spent. Participants would like to change the narrative surrounding older adults/ageism and emphasize the professionalism and value of the CBSS sector.

Reflecting on the national consultation (Ottawa, June 2024) and the BC provincial consultation

Reflecting on the consultations at the National Summit in Ottawa (June 2024) and the BC consultation held in November, there was tremendous alignment in the priorities. The following table highlights where the discussion nuance varied within these priorities (Table 2).

Table 2. Nuances between national and BC provincial consultation

Priority	Discussion nuance
Funding	The national consultation highlighted that the gaps in funding particularly impact equity-deserving communities and hinder the ability to train and retain volunteers.
Data	The national consultation noted that data is needed for effective decision-making and service provision and that policy and program development should come from a data-driven approach. It was also suggested that staff and volunteers should be trained in data management practices.
Advocacy	The national consultation noted that the key goal of advocacy is to achieve systemic changes and to include the voices of older adults in the policy-making process.
Collaboration	The provincial consultation noted that there is a scarcity, competitive mindset that is hindering the ability to collaborate. At the national consultation, participants expressed that a lack of integrated communication and IT systems are hampering effective collaboration and recommended using technology and online platforms to connect agencies and share information.
Workforce	The provincial consultation recommended grief and bereavement training and noted that organizations are overly reliant on volunteers, having them fill roles that should be paid positions. At the national consultation, noted challenges included care work being seen as an undervalued profession and younger workers having different expectations and career aspirations than older workers, leading to increased turnover.
Ageism	The national consultation noted that ageism contributes to undervaluing care work, consequently impacting the recruitment, retention, and professional development of staff and volunteers. They also expressed that ageism requires a systemic approach and national senior strategy, including more educational campaigns.
Social isolation and loneliness	The national consultation noted that a lack of awareness is also due to a lack of digital literacy and that emergency preparedness is essential for isolated, vulnerable seniors.

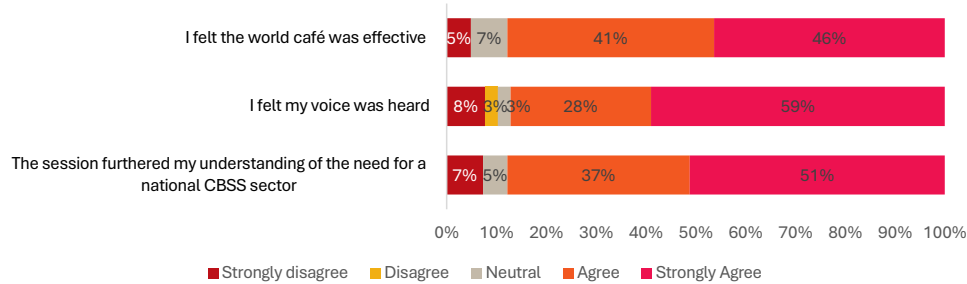
World Café Evaluation

Evaluations were completed electronically and on paper by 41 participants, representing approximately 40% of the participants who attended the World Café. Most participants were from BC (85%); those from outside of BC were from Ontario, two were from Saskatchewan, one was from Manitoba, and one was from outside of Canada. One-third (36%) of respondents self-identified as an older adult. Most respondents represented CBSS organizations (62%), non-CBSS or other organizations (including academia, Councils, and national research and/or policy organizations, 33%); the remainder represented government/funder (5%).

Effectiveness of the World Café Session

Most participants agreed that the World Café session was effective (87%), that their voice was heard (87%), and that the session furthered their understanding of the need for a national CBSS (88%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Feelings about the World Café session re effectiveness (n = 41), being heard (n = 39), and understanding the need for a national CBSS sector (n = 41)



When asked to reflect on the best part of the World Café session, the most common response was that it provided an opportunity to connect and hear from people in different organizations/sectors, as well as those in both rural and urban areas. Participants liked that they could collaborate, brainstorm, share ideas, and network. Additionally, participants found camaraderie in one another, discovering that their organizations were facing the same issues.

[I liked] sharing ideas and best practices with people from different sectors who want to achieve similar outcomes.

[I liked] learning from other organizations as to their struggles and how they see effective changes as possible.

When asked how the World Café session could be improved, recurring answers included:

- Having more frequent sessions/regular updates
- Having more time to discuss and network
- Spreading people out in a larger room to make it easier to hear one another
- Using darker/bolder markers that are easier to see

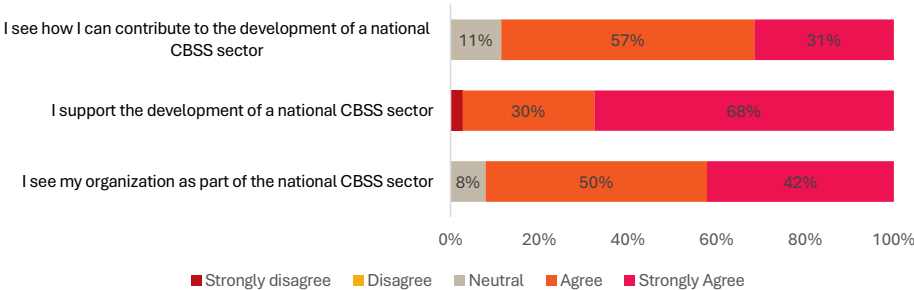
Small tables worked well, but the noise level was challenging due to the soft-spoken people in our group.

I find World Cafés work best with a few questions. It was too many questions in a short period of time. Just scratching the surface when you could dive deeper with fewer questions.

National CBSS Sector

Most participants agreed that they can contribute to developing a national CBSS sector (89%), support the development of a national CBSS sector (97%), and see their organization as part of the national CBSS sector (92%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Contributing to the development (n = 35), supporting the development (n = 37), and seeing their organization as being part (n = 38) of a national CBSS sector



When asked what their vision for a national CBSS sector would look like, participants commented that it would represent all provinces, where priorities, data, and resources are unified to create a collective voice for national advocacy. Respondents wished for the sector to be comprised of individuals, including older adults, who are eager to work together, problem-solve, and meet regularly to share knowledge and best practices and offer support.

I envision a strong integrated sector with key priorities and regular meetings.

When asked to share some actions that feel necessary to support the development of a national CBSS sector, recurring themes included:

- Acquiring sustainable, unrestricted funding
- Including more voices (i.e. diversity in language and culture, input from seniors, and representation from all provinces)
- Having more opportunities to collaborate, share ideas, evaluate, and offer feedback
- Creating a unified voice for advocacy
- Having more engagement and collaboration within and between agencies, governments, and community-based organizations regarding decision-making and funding
- Creating advertising campaigns to raise awareness surrounding older adult issues

[We need] more transparency about the resources available [as well as] more ways to offer feedback and chances to gather our voices for advocacy.

Bring government/decision makers into the room without consequences but to listen and learn.

Reflecting on the national consultation (Ottawa, June 2024) and the BC provincial consultation

Analogously, participants who attended the National Summit World Café in Ottawa were asked how *likely* they were to support the development of a national CBSS sector; 94% agreed. Also, 88% see their organization as being part of the national CBSS sector, and 80% agree that they see how they can contribute to the development of a national CBSS sector.

Also aligned with input from BC, national summit participants commented on the power of a collective voice with a unified vision being needed for stronger advocacy, to change policy, and to secure funding. Participants also commented that a national CBSS sector brings people together to identify common issues, collaborate, and problem-solve. Key actions that are necessary to support the development of a national CBSS sector include: having more opportunities to collaborate and communicate; securing funds at all levels of government through advocacy and awareness; gathering data/credible metrics that demonstrate the impact of CBSS; developing strong leadership and representation from each region; and improving education and awareness of the CBSS sector.

Key takeaways and lessons learned

Key lessons learned include:

- Discussion questions were effective; participants understood the context and contributed as expected. Some individuals struggled with understanding the concept of a national sector.
- The hybrid of online and in-person improved accessibility; hosting the online group separately was effective.
- Table facilitators were instrumental in the entire process. A check-in before the discussion is recommended to ensure all table facilitators are prepared and comfortable with the planned approach. It is critical to ensure strong table facilitators.
- The facilitator guide was practical in supporting table facilitators and ensuring the purpose and objectives were clear.
- Table discussion boards were effective in capturing key discussion points.

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- Evaluation received a reasonable number of responses.
- The context setting, while critically important, was lengthy and may not have provided sufficient information on the national perspective.
- Questions may have to be adapted to reflect the 'maturity' of the development of a CBSS sector.
- Most participants would have liked to participate in the priority voting (not just table facilitators).
- More time would have been beneficial (or fewer questions).
- Aligning with an existing forum presents challenges to the design and autonomy of the consultation process.

Summary and Conclusion

The World Café session held at the United Way of BC's Healthy Aging Summit brought together approximately one hundred participants from across British Columbia and beyond. The purpose of the session was to explore how local experiences and priorities connect to the emerging vision for a national Community-Based Seniors' Services sector. Through structured discussions, priority voting, and collective reflection, participants identified funding, data, and advocacy as the most urgent priorities that could be advanced through coordinated action.

Participants described a CBSS landscape marked by short-term and project-based funding, workforce pressures, administrative burdens connected to inconsistent data requirements, and ongoing challenges related to ageism, isolation, and accessibility. At the same time, they highlighted strong examples of collaboration already taking place in the province and pointed to the potential of a national movement to amplify local work, share best practices, and build a collective voice. Participants also expressed how a national sector could support provincial priorities by clarifying roles across government, fostering collaboration instead of competition, and creating consistent service standards adapted to regional needs. Evaluation findings indicate strong support for the process and its goals. Participants felt heard, valued the opportunity to connect with peers, and reported an increased understanding of the need for a national CBSS sector. They also expressed clear enthusiasm for contributing to this work and saw their organizations as part of this emerging sector. Suggested improvements focused on providing more time for discussion, continuing to host regular sessions, reducing noise levels, and ensuring strong and neutral facilitation.

Across both the national consultation held in Ottawa and the provincial consultation in BC, there was considerable alignment in priorities and in the aspirations expressed by participants. Differences between the two settings reflected local context rather than divergence, offering useful nuance as the Interim Community Leadership Council continues to develop a national roadmap. The BC consultation reinforced the importance of addressing competition for resources, strengthening the workforce through training and fair compensation, and improving coordination across organizations.

In conclusion, the BC World Café session provided valuable insight into the strengths, challenges, and opportunities within the provincial CBSS sector and its relationship to a national vision. Participants expressed a clear desire to work together, learn from one another, and advocate collectively for sustainable, person-centred support for older adults. Their contributions will inform the ongoing development of a strategic plan for the national CBSS sector and support the Interim Community Leadership Council in identifying concrete next steps. Continued engagement, consistent communication, and opportunities for collaboration will be essential as this work progresses and as consultations across other provinces and territories deepen the shared understanding needed to build a strong and unified sector in Canada.