



Strengthening Community-Based Seniors' Services (CBSS) in the Northwest Territories: Community Conversations

In Partnership with NWT Seniors' Society
October 21, 2025



The NWT Seniors' Society is dedicated to promoting the independence and wellbeing of older adults through advocacy and the delivery of services.



Introduction

HelpAge Canada, in partnership with the Northwest Territories Seniors' Society, held the first Provincial Territorial consultation on developing the community-based seniors' services (CBSS) sector at the provincial/territorial and Pan-Canadian level. The "*Strengthening Community-Based Seniors' Services in Northwest Territories*" discussion was held in Yellowknife on October 21, 2025. The event included setting the stage for CBSS in the Northwest Territories and Canada, and two working sessions – the first focusing on building CBSS in the Northwest Territories and the second on a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector (discussion questions found in Appendix A).

The working definition of CBSS is "*The CBSS sector includes municipal, volunteer, and not-for-profit organizations that provide services and programming for older adults at the local level – at community centres, single and multi-service agencies, seniors' centres, community coalitions and neighbourhood houses and circles, among others. CBSS organizations deliver programs, supports, and services that enable older adults to age in place, stay connected, and thrive in their communities. They are rooted in community and built on trust, relationships, and deep community knowledge and understanding.*"

To complement the territorial consultation, additional input was gathered from the Yellowknife Women's Society (YKWS) and reflects the lived experiences of seniors who reside in supportive housing. The findings are based on interviews and focus groups conducted by social work practicum students with predominantly Dene, Inuit, and Métis seniors.

Purpose and objectives

The discussion employed a community development approach, ensuring the voices of older people and service providers informed Northwest Territories and Pan-Canadian strategies, approaches and planning efforts. The consultation questions were developed to reflect the regional context and build on the previous consultations held in Manitoba, Ontario, PEI, Newfoundland and British Columbia.

The objectives of the session were:

- Participants increase their understanding of a provincial/territorial CBSS sector.
- Participants build a vision for a provincial/territorial CBSS sector in the Northwest Territories.
- Participants feel motivated to invest time and energy in developing a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector.
- Participants see themselves as part of a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector.
- To contribute to and inform the development of a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector.
- To identify next steps at the community, provincial/territorial, and Pan-Canadian levels.

Discussion questions can be found in Appendix A.

Findings: Northwest Territories CBSS Sector

The first working session focused on building the CBSS sector in the Northwest Territories and explored the challenges, opportunities, strengths and desired future state.

Points of strength

The points of strength mentioned by participants throughout this session included the following:

- Strong collaboration between sectors (a strengthening integrated system between various seniors' societies),
- The presence of community health representatives (in certain communities),
- Social support resources and events for seniors to address social isolation in certain communities,
- Advocacy efforts, and issues are visible and clearly communicated to the public and the organizations,
- Current active community clubs promoting seniors' events and activities (such as racket club, sewing workshops, teaching, etc.),
- Use of social media to advertise services,
- Free theatre tickets,
- Yoga classes, walking trails, and more with a large weekly attendance,
- Social activities at seniors' centres,
- Strong sense of community and elder respect, and
- Insured homecare services.

Findings from the YKWS highlighted the value of programming focused on healing, trauma recovery, and addiction support, in addition to skills development, such as computer and financial literacy classes. Older adults were more motivated to participate when programs included opportunities for cultural reconnection.

Challenges

Participants listed the top challenges when it comes to CBSS in the Northwest Territories, some of which include:

- The lack of reliable and sustainable funding opportunities,
- Difficulty navigating the current funding system,
- Less coordinated communication between different organizations (including community services and government organizations),
- A lack of understanding of the diverse needs of the community (which affects decision-making processes, thus affecting those who need certain services the most),
- Unaffordable senior services programs,
- Lack of focus on preventative measures and healthy services and agents,
- Inaccessible transportation to essential services (like medical services and community events), access to local health services (dentists, medical appointments, lab work, etc.),
- Lack of in-person resources and services,
- Lack of training to navigate online services,
- Lack of new members in weekly activities,
- Services not well promoted throughout the community,
- Unstable digital infrastructure throughout the territory (e.g. limited internet),

- High cost of living, language barriers between older adults and healthcare workers, and
- A large geographic spread of communities, therefore making it difficult to ensure the maximum number of participants can attend events and programs.

Supplementary input from the YKWS highlighted more acute challenges, including unsafe housing conditions, stigma in healthcare, limited mental health and addiction supports, and lack of culturally safe services. An instance of neglect further highlighted gaps in oversight and coordination across systems.

Opportunities

Some opportunities identified within the territorial CBSS sector by participants included:

- Implementing homecare services in all communities,
- More community-based programs need to be implemented to help meet needs (such as adult development programs, a NWT services helpline, housing and fuel subsidies, dementia care and more),
- Property taxes are too high for older adults,
- A lack of comprehensive coverage of extended health benefits for older adults (including medical travel),
- A lack of wellness programs to accommodate First Nations communities (including interpreters, meals on wheels, advocates, etc.),
- More face-to-face opportunities with service providers and advocacy organizations,
- More train-the-trainer workshops to widen training reach,
- More volunteer supports (local high schools, college internships, community programs),
- Skills-sharing classes amongst different generations,
- Lobbying MACA for better transport (especially with city councils and local indigenous groups), and
- A driving school for older adults.

Findings from the YKWS emphasized expanding culturally grounded programming, such as traditional activities (e.g., sewing, mitt-making, cooking traditional foods), on-the-land opportunities (e.g., fishing, hunting, land-based healing), and community gatherings that strengthen identity and intergenerational connection, while also fostering understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents.

Looking ahead to a desired state

Looking ahead to a desired state, participants stated that in 3-5 years, ideally:

- Funding would be consistent and stable, with a proposal-based program for fundees and funders; coordination, communication and diversity would be considered in the process,
- Programs and services to seniors would be culturally tailored to meet the diverse needs and cultural backgrounds of the target population,
- Prevention measures would be in place to support healthy ageing outside of medical needs, and communication through different streams would be consistent across various organizations,
- Accessibility to resources (in-person and online) would be much more open to the public,
- Policymakers would cater to community voices,
- Champions would be in place to help advocate for seniors' needs to the government (including healthcare advocates and government service officers), and
- There would be increased volunteer involvement from young people/students, and increased respect for seniors.

Findings: Pan-Canadian CBSS Sector

Call to action to support the desired state of CBSS in NWT

To support the desired state of CBSS in NWT, participants remarked on the importance of the following:

- Federal policies would have to be implemented and adhered to on a long-term basis,
- Funding opportunities would have to be made more accessible for more programs that have potential for long-term sustainability,
- Enhanced data and research practices to better collect, consolidate and resolve the biggest issues facing older adults in the community,
- The development of a credible strategy for ongoing advocacy and education efforts about supporting older adults within the community,
- Having all territories at the table for decision-making to ensure full inclusivity,
- Determining the best national bodies for the territory organizations to engage with and join,
- Sharing information cross-provincially to ensure consistent alignment across organizations and provincial governments, and
- Advocacy for more resources and awareness, and more support for Indigenous languages on forms and digital platforms.

Defining success and determining impact

To define success and determine the impact of the CBSS consultations, participants noted the following:

- Continuous input from community members,
- Organizations and policymakers demonstrating active listening and monitoring for gaps and trying to fill them,
- More awareness about national work that needs to be done,
- An improved quality of life for seniors,
- Better access to seniors' services and programs,
- The implementation of more age-friendly policies,
- Having a one-stop shop for all available programs and services dedicated to older adults,
- Introducing more local service's presence,
- A more comprehensive and wider reach of programs to ensure fewer seniors fall through the cracks,
- Legislative standards introduced for long-term care living,
- Including more Indigenous organizations,
- Leaders and government members at the table to make CBSS truly pan-Canadian,
- Increase advocacy roles across Canada in more appointed roles,
- Introducing incentives for people to work in the north in healthcare roles on a long-term basis to prevent high turnover rates, and
- Better infrastructure to connect rural and remote communities to urban ones.

Summary and Conclusion

The Strengthening Community-Based Seniors' Services (CBSS) in the Northwest Territories consultation highlighted both the resilience of communities and the systemic pressures shaping the experiences of older adults. Participants emphasized long-standing strengths, including:

- Strong collaboration among local organizations,
- Deep respect for elders, and
- A strong sense of community connection.

At the same time, they identified persistent challenges that limit access to supports, such as:

- Gaps in transportation and health services,
- Fragmented communication,
- Digital barriers, and
- The realities of serving geographically dispersed and predominantly Indigenous communities.

Participants expressed a clear vision for a more coordinated and responsive CBSS system that reflects Northern contexts and elevates community voice. Priorities included:

- Better territorial-level alignment,
- Stronger communication pathways,
- More accessible in-person and digital services, and
- Program design rooted in Indigenous and cultural knowledge.

There was also recognition that linking territorial efforts with pan-Canadian work can help strengthen advocacy, shared learning, and long-term planning.

Additional input from the Yellowknife Women's Society reinforced the need for culturally safe, trauma-informed, and coordinated supports, particularly for older adults navigating housing instability and complex needs.

Overall, the consultation demonstrated a strong willingness across sectors to work collectively toward a more connected, culturally grounded, and inclusive CBSS system that supports older adults to age well in their communities.

Recommended next steps:

- 1) Strengthen coordination and communication across the territory by creating a shared space for information exchange, regular touchpoints among organizations, and support for connecting remote and Indigenous communities.
- 2) Improve access to services by expanding both digital and non-digital options, increasing face-to-face opportunities with service providers, and supporting local training and skill sharing to reduce reliance on external programs.
- 3) Continue elder abuse training in communities across the territory to build awareness, prevention capacity, and stronger supports for older adults.

Appendix A: Discussion Questions

Part I discussion questions: NWT focus

Discussion Question #1: What points of strength exist within community-based seniors' services in the NWT that could be expanded or scaled? What are the success factors that have made these approaches work in your context?

Discussion Question #2: Thinking about community-based seniors services (CBSS) in your territory, what are the most pressing challenges? Where do you see opportunities for strengthening support for older adults?

Discussion Question #3: If you imagine the CBSS sector in the NWT 3–5 years from now, what does a strong and well-supported sector look and feel like? What has changed for older adults and for the organizations that support them?

Part II discussion question: Pan-Canadian focus

Discussion Question #4: What supports or actions are needed at the Pan-Canadian level to help realize the future vision of CBSS in the NWT that you discussed earlier?

Discussion Question #5: Looking across Canada, what would success look like for a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector? How would we know we are making an impact—in your community and across the country?

Appendix B: Participant list

No participant list was provided for this session.