



Strengthening Community-Based Seniors' Services in Prince Edward Island: An Ideas Exchange & Working Session

In Partnership with United Way Prince Edward Island
September 22, 2025



The United Way of PEI's mission is to improve the lives of Islanders by empowering communities and supporting collective action.



Executive Summary

HelpAge Canada partnered with United Way of Prince Edward Island to host a provincial consultation on the community-based seniors' services (CBSS) sector at both the provincial and Pan-Canadian level. Held in Charlottetown on September 22, 2025, the session built on consultations held across Canada and included a presentation from HelpAge Canada and a co-chair of the Pan-Canadian CBSS Leadership Council, insights from the National Institute on Aging (NIA) on Atlantic survey data, and two working sessions.

Participants identified several core challenges in PEI, including limited access to transportation, volunteer shortages, fragmented communication across sectors, gaps in funding and service coordination, and limited representation of older adults in planning and policy development. They also highlighted opportunities to strengthen intergenerational engagement, improve collaboration and information sharing, enhance service navigation, and leverage PEI's close-knit communities to advance coordinated advocacy. Reflections on the national CBSS definition noted the need to more clearly reflect diverse organizational types, local realities, and the full range of supports needed for older adults to age in the right place.

The consultation reinforced PEI's readiness to contribute to a unified Pan-Canadian CBSS sector while recognizing the importance of provincial level coordination, stronger communication channels, improved data and resource sharing, and ongoing engagement with communities. The insights gathered will support future planning in PEI and inform the continued development of a coordinated, community-informed approach to seniors' services across the country.

Introduction

With the support of United Way of PEI, HelpAge Canada held a consultation on developing the community-based seniors' services (CBSS) sector in Prince Edward Island. The session took place in Charlottetown on September 22, 2025, bringing together older adults, community organizations, and service providers to explore what a strong CBSS sector could look like in PEI and how provincial perspectives can inform a Pan-Canadian approach. Nineteen participants attended, and no post-consultation survey was administered.

The consultation offered participants an opportunity to learn about the emerging CBSS sector, reflect on the needs and strengths within PEI communities, and consider how a coordinated provincial and national approach could support aging in place. Discussions were guided by a shared working definition of CBSS:

"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."

Purpose and objectives

The consultation employed a participatory approach that centred the perspectives of older adults and service providers. The questions were developed in collaboration with United Way of PEI and HelpAge Canada and built on previous consultations held across the country.

The objectives of the session were:

- To increase participant understanding of a provincial CBSS sector.
- To build a vision for a provincial CBSS sector in PEI.
- To motivate participants to invest time and energy in developing a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector.
- To help participants see themselves as part of a Pan-Canadian sector.
- To contribute to and inform the development of a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector.
- To identify next steps at the community, provincial, and Pan-Canadian levels.

Discussion questions can be found in Appendix A. A list of participants can be found in Appendix B.

Findings: PEI CBSS Sector

The first working session focused on building the CBSS sector in PEI and explored the challenges and opportunities.

Challenges

Participants described a range of interconnected challenges that shape the experience of aging in PEI. Communication across organizations was identified as a significant barrier, with many noting that information is often siloed, informal, or dependent on individual relationships rather than coordinated systems. As a result, older adults and caregivers frequently do not know where to go for help, and organizations cannot easily identify others offering complementary services. Several groups remarked that PEI lacks a centralized or accessible directory of seniors' services, which contributes to duplication in some areas and gaps in others.

Volunteer shortages were raised repeatedly, particularly in rural regions. Although PEI has a strong culture of volunteerism, participants noted that many long-standing volunteers are aging out of their roles while the need for services is increasing. This is compounded by a shrinking younger population, which reduces the pool of potential volunteers and places greater strain on families caring for older adults. Participants described a cycle of burnout in which overextended volunteers become unable to continue, causing programs to shrink or close.

Transportation access emerged as one of the strongest and most consistent challenges. Public transportation is limited, especially outside Charlottetown, and older adults rely heavily on nonprofit or volunteer-driven programs. These supports are often stretched, inconsistent, or costly for organizations to maintain. Participants noted that transportation barriers exacerbate isolation, restrict access to healthcare and social activities, and limit participation in community life.

Gaps in funding and service coordination also create instability. Funding is often project-based, short-term, and highly restrictive, which prevents programs from becoming established and makes it difficult to retain staff. Smaller organizations do not always have the capacity to apply for or

manage grants, and some noted that they are unable to pursue multi-year planning due to the unpredictability of their financial resources.

Participants discussed the limited availability of culturally informed services and the need for programs that reflect the diversity of older adults in PEI, including newcomers, Indigenous older adults, and LGBTQIA2S+ seniors. Several remarked that the province lacks sufficient mental health supports for older adults, and that existing programming does not always meet the needs of people with mobility limitations, chronic illness, or cognitive decline.

Finally, several participants noted that PEI lacks a strong provincial framework or structure for seniors' services. Without a shared vision, organizations work in parallel rather than in partnership, which limits opportunities for advocacy, planning, and coordinated service delivery.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges, participants identified several strengths and promising opportunities for sector development in PEI. Many noted that the small size of the province enables relationship building and quick communication across sectors. While this feature can also present challenges, participants agreed that it offers a strong foundation for provincial coordination and could make PEI a leader in piloting integrated approaches to seniors' services.

Participants expressed interest in developing shared communication channels or platforms to streamline information flow between organizations. This could include a centralized online hub, coordinated newsletters, or shared outreach tools that help older adults more easily access services. Participants also discussed opportunities to establish working groups or networks that connect organizations across health, social services, volunteer programs, and community development.

Intergenerational engagement was identified as an important opportunity in PEI. Participants noted that bringing older adults, students, and younger community members together could support volunteer recruitment, reduce isolation, and strengthen community relationships. Schools, youth-serving organizations, and post-secondary institutions were identified as potential partners.

Several participants emphasized the potential of a hub model for centralized service navigation. This could support older adults in finding information, connecting with programs, and navigating systems that currently feel overwhelming or unclear. A hub model was seen as particularly valuable in rural regions, where organizations may have limited staff and volunteers.

Participants also highlighted the strong volunteer culture in PEI as a strength to build on. Although volunteer shortages are an issue, many noted that the province has a long history of community engagement and that older adults themselves are often active volunteers and leaders. Participants felt that with the right supports, training, and recognition, volunteerism could be strengthened and renewed.

Findings: Pan-Canadian CBSS Sector

CBSS definition

A working definition of CBSS (as presented at the beginning of this report) was shared with participants. Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing the full continuum of supports that help older adults age in the right place. They suggested that the definition could more explicitly include transportation, housing supports, mental health services, cultural inclusion, and systems navigation, which they viewed as essential components of community-based seniors services. Participants also noted that the current definition reads as technical language intended for government or professional audiences. They expressed interest in developing a more accessible public-facing definition that resonates with older adults themselves.

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

Participants saw significant value in being connected to a national CBSS sector. They described specific supports that a Pan-Canadian approach could offer, including shared data collection, sector-wide learning opportunities, coordinated advocacy, and access to tools and resources developed in other provinces. Participants expressed a desire to connect with organizations across the country that face similar challenges, particularly in rural and remote communities.

Participants also highlighted the opportunity for national coordination to support consistent policies and stable funding for seniors' services, noting that federal engagement is essential for long-term sustainability. Several remarked that the Pan-Canadian sector could help amplify the voice of smaller provinces like PEI, ensuring their realities are reflected in national strategies.

Communication was identified as a key area where national support is needed. Participants suggested a regular newsletter, cross-provincial working groups, shared training opportunities, and intentional strategies to highlight promising practices. They emphasized the importance of including PEI representation in national leadership spaces to ensure that smaller jurisdictions are not overshadowed.

Participants also discussed the need for national supports that strengthen accessibility and inclusion, including consistent resources for caregiving, culturally informed approaches, and frameworks for intergenerational initiatives.

Defining success and determining impact

When discussing what success would look like for a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector, participants emphasized long-term sustainability, clarity in roles and structures, and meaningful support for older adults regardless of where they live. Success would include stable, multi-level funding, accessible and consistent service navigation, reduced isolation, and improved collaboration between health and social sectors.

Participants described a future in which older adults can easily find information, access services that reflect their needs and identities, and remain active contributors to their communities. They also envisioned a sector that is recognized and valued by all levels of government, with coordinated policies that support aging in place.

Conclusion

The consultation in Prince Edward Island highlighted both the strengths and challenges shaping community-based seniors services across the province. Participants described ongoing issues such as transportation barriers, limited volunteer capacity, and fragmented access to information, while also emphasizing PEI's strong sense of community connection, willingness to collaborate, and readiness to contribute to a broader provincial and national vision for seniors' services. The discussions reinforced the value of continued engagement with older adults and community partners, and the need for clearer and more coordinated structures for communication, collaboration, and service integration.

Participants expressed interest in building a more cohesive provincial network, strengthening shared learning, and contributing actively to a Pan-Canadian CBSS sector that amplifies regional voices, supports policy development, and fosters sustainable funding models. The insights shared through this consultation provide a foundation for further work in PEI and offer direction for both provincial and national planning.

Recommended next steps:

1. Establish a provincial CBSS network in PEI to support coordination, communication, and shared planning, ensuring representation from rural communities, community organizations, volunteer groups, and older adults.
2. Develop a province-wide environmental scan to map existing seniors' services, identify gaps and assets, and provide a clearer picture of community needs to guide provincial and national planning.
3. Engage in the development and use of the Atlantic CORE platform to strengthen regional information sharing, knowledge exchange, and collaboration across the Atlantic provinces, and to ensure that PEI's perspectives inform the broader regional and Pan-Canadian sector.

These steps will help PEI build a stronger, more connected CBSS sector while contributing meaningfully to a coordinated, community-informed Pan-Canadian approach that supports older adults to age in place, remain connected, and thrive in their communities.

Appendix A: Discussion questions

Part I discussion questions: PEI focus

Discussion question #1: Thinking about community-based seniors' services (CBSS) in PEI, what are the top challenges and where are the opportunities?

Discussion question #2: What strengths or success factors within the CBSS sector in PEI can be built upon to create a stronger provincial network?

Discussion question #3: Looking ahead 3–5 years, what would a strong CBSS sector in PEI look and feel like for older adults, organizations, and communities?

Part II discussion question: Pan-Canadian focus

Discussion question #4: When you reflect on the definition of CBSS (definition provided), what feels missing or what would you add?

Discussion question #5: If we imagine a pan-Canadian CBSS sector, what would success look like? How would we know we are making an impact?

Discussion question #6: What supports or actions at the pan-Canadian level would best help strengthen CBSS in PEI?

Appendix B: Participant list

Name	Organization
Alyssa Jo Bernard	Aboriginal Women's Association of PEI
Carolyn Villard	Age-Friendly PEI Inc.
Cathy Bourque	Family Service PEI
Devon Broome	ResourceAbilities
Emma Harris	BGC Prince County
Haley Zavo	Meals on Wheels PEI
Jackie Bourgeois	Southeast Environmental Association
John Burton	The Salvation Army Charlottetown
Keith Hillier	John Howard Society
Lisa Mackinnon	The Reach Foundation
Martin Dutton	The Salvation Army Charlottetown
Myron Yates	Big Brothers Big Sisters of PEI
Nancymarie Arsenault	Hospice Palliative Care Association of PEI
Natasha McKenna	Family Service PEI
Olive Bryanton	Health Research Network UPEI
Peggy Doughan	Spinal Cord Injury PEI
Sharon Claybourne	Canadian Mental Health Association
Shawn Fraser	Southeast Environmental Association
Tanya Craig	Women's Network PEI