

## Change in an Evolving Niagara: Navigating the Age-Friendly Communities Movement and Volunteerism

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### INTRODUCTION

This policy brief is written in 2024 in the middle of the United Nations (UN) Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030). It is a global initiative to promote healthy aging and well-being for older adults, their families, and their communities. The key principle of the Decade is to foster older adults' participation as the "drivers of change" in creating age-friendly environments, combating ageism, improving person-centred integrated care, and increasing access to good-quality long-term care (WHO, 2020, xii). The Decade of Healthy Ageing calls on all of us to build enabling and caring "age-friendly communities" that promote health, diversity, inclusion, and cohesion. (WHO, n.b)

The region-wide community in Niagara has a head start toward achieving these goals, thanks to the Age-Friendly Niagara (AFN) movement, launched by dedicated community leaders in 2009. By 2024, this social movement—driven mainly by older adult volunteers in collaboration with local municipal governments, community organizations, and businesses—has expanded to all 12 local municipalities. The movement has created a structure of local advisory committees, fostering civic engagement and intergenerational connections in Niagara's urban-rural-mixed community.

As the last of the Baby Boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1965) exit the workforce and enter retirement, it is important to make plans to create and sustain age-friendly communities. The development of region-wide social networks, effective leadership, and the creation of the 2015 *Niagara Aging Strategy and Action Plan* (NASAP) have combined to make Niagara a leader in the WHO Global Age-Friendly Cities and Communities movement.

Alongside the many accomplishments of the age-friendly movement in Niagara, spearheaded by the Age-Friendly Niagara Council (AFNC), the last 15 years have seen two significant changes—the population in the Niagara region has become significantly older<sup>1</sup> and more diverse, while the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in social isolation and a decrease in community volunteerism.

Despite these notable changes and the possibility of revitalizing community volunteerism as a solution, challenges exist. Deep-seated ageist attitudes in our society still lead many to see our aging population as a predominant social concern. This positions older adults as burdens that receive disproportionately higher tax benefits and government funding compared to "working age" citizens, while contributing little to the economy (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). These sentiments create counterproductive intergenerational conflict between younger and older generations.

This policy brief proposes that while the demographic is aging and diversifying, and many challenges have been exacerbated by COVID-19, opportunities exist to engage older and younger generations alike, encouraging their civic engagement as community resources.

### LIST OF ACRONYMS

**WHO:** World Health Organization  
**AFC:** Age-friendly communities  
**AFN:** Age-friendly Niagara  
**AFNN:** Age-friendly Niagara Network  
**AFNC:** Age-friendly Niagara Council  
**NOAA:** Niagara Older Adult Alliance  
**EDI:** equity, diversity, and inclusion

<sup>1</sup> *The proportion of people aged 65 and over made up 23.3 per cent of Niagara's total population as of 2021, up from 21.4 per cent in 2016 (Niagara Connects, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2021). For a broader discussion of aging demographics, see page six of this policy brief.*

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To that end, we will first present our methodology and foci; show the evolution of the AFN movement in the context of ongoing sociodemographic changes and challenges; and finish with recommendations and conclusions.

This policy brief is meant to inform a diverse range of decision-makers in public, non-profit, and business sectors, as well as the Niagara community at large to work together to turn these challenges into opportunities.

## METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on a knowledge synthesis conducted between May and June 2024. To source texts, keywords such as “Age-Friendly Niagara”, “Niagara volunteerism”, and “older adults” were used to narrow down the search. While aging is a biological process, the term “older adults” is a social construct, with different meanings depending on the context. For example, while the Government of Canada defines “seniors” as those 65-plus because it aligns with the common age of retirement, its Older Adults and Population Aging page (previously named Seniors and Aging) acknowledges that the change in the page’s title more accurately reflects its content.

The AFNC’s official brochure refers to older adults as those 55-plus, and its recent survey on Empowering Older Adults in Niagara included those 50-plus to gain insight into people who may be transitioning out of the full-time labour force (AFNC, 2022; Age-Friendly Niagara, n.d.). Furthermore, the former Thorold Senior Citizens Association recently changed its name to the Thorold 50+ Citizens Association to better represent its centre (Fearn, 2024). The AFN movement has been shifting toward including those 50-plus in the broad category of “older adults” to communicate the demographic’s heterogeneity and to promote healthy aging. In light of this, use of the term “older adults” in this brief will also refer to those 50-plus, to reflect the nuance and meaning of older ages in the ongoing discourse. However, direct references to data should be understood in their original contexts and definitions.

Key publications and data from the websites of the WHO, the Age-Friendly Niagara Council (AFNC), Brock University’s Niagara Community Observatory, Niagara Knowledge Exchange (Niagara Connects—Community Potential), Statistics Canada, and the Niagara Region formed the bulk of this knowledge synthesis, which addresses the following areas:

1. The evolution and advancement of the AFN movement
2. Changes in Niagara’s sociodemographic conditions
3. The impact of COVID-19 on volunteerism in Niagara

We aim to generate recommendations that help promote the AFN movement, revitalize community volunteerism, and optimize the strengths of Niagara’s diverse communities.

## FINDINGS: Evolution of the AFN movement

### *What Is the Age-Friendly Movement?*

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), age-friendly cities and communities (AFC) are those that enable healthy and active aging, defined as the “process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2023, p. 7). This vision can be traced back to the WHO’s first *Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide* published in 2007, which has propelled the movement ever since. The movement’s goal is to create inclusive and enabling communities for all ages to support autonomy, participation, and diverse lifestyles while taking into account people’s different capacities (WHO, 2023). To achieve this, the WHO outlines eight domains that promote age-friendliness: outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community health and support services (WHO, 2007, p. 9).

The WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities was created in 2010 to connect AFCs around the world. The Network has since acquired the membership of 1,542 cities across 51 countries encompassing over 320 million people (WHO, n.d). Given global aging, the AFC movement advocates local-based inter-professional, inter-sectoral, and intra-sectoral planning and action. Recently, however, the diversity of older people has called attention to the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to support health and well-being in later life. Compared to the WHO’s 2007 original guide that regards older people as one group, the 2023 updated guide differentiates how social identities shape people’s experiences through the life course. Thus, the AFC movement is now shifting toward prioritizing the needs of equity-denied<sup>2</sup> groups to ensure that no one is left behind.

### *How Has Niagara’s Age-Friendly Movement Evolved?*

Niagara was one of the first region-wide communities in Canada to join the worldwide AFC movement in 2009. What began as a grassroots movement led by older adult volunteers expanded into the Age-Friendly Niagara Network (AFNN), still volunteer-led at its core.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “equity-denied” is defined by the Government of Canada (2021) as “a group of people who, because of systemic discrimination, face barriers that prevent them from having the same access to resources and opportunities that are available to other members of society, and that are necessary for them to attain just outcomes” (<https://bit.ly/46wYdJw>.) This term emphasizes that all persons are entitled to equitable treatment and places the burden of change on those who reinforce and perpetuate systemic discrimination.

In 2022 the network evolved to become the Age-Friendly Niagara Council (AFNC) and joined the Ontario Association of Councils on Aging, continuing to advocate for the needs and social participation of older adults and their families. This volunteer-led work is done in collaboration with leaders from local municipal council-appointed older adult advisory committees across Niagara, who meet regularly as the Niagara Older Adult Alliance (NOAA) to share information and align planning and action across the region (AFNN Research Team, 2023; NASAP, 2015; AFNC, 2024). Guided by the *2015 Niagara Aging Strategy and Action Plan*, these groups are strategically advancing Niagara as a “community for all ages” (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

The AFNC is led by a 15-member board of directors. It has engaged a network of more than 500 individuals and works closely with the NOAA group (Age-Friendly Niagara, n.d). By reframing itself as a “Council on Aging”, the AFNC acts as a representative body for older adults, to engage with local municipalities and advocate for inclusion in municipal plans (NASAP, 2015b). This committed and active network of volunteers has made Niagara a model for utilizing the voices of older adults in municipal and regional change.

### ***Positive Impacts of Niagara’s Age-Friendly Community***

The AFNC cites many major collaborative achievements over the last 15 years.<sup>3</sup> Age-friendly business guides were developed by local municipal older-adult advisory committees, in partnership with local chambers of commerce, in both the Welland-Pelham (2009) and Thorold areas (2018) (Thorold Age-Friendly Committee, 2018; Welland Senior Citizens Advisory Committee, 2009).

The *2015 Niagara Aging Strategy and Action Plan* is a cohesive guideline, based on a region-wide community needs assessment which involved over 500 individuals and organizations (NASAP, 2015). When the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the AFNC quickly responded, sending out an urgent “*Call for Action*” bulletin, encouraging decision-makers to address the impact of the pandemic on older adults across Niagara. Those impacts included the situation in long-term care homes, food security, social isolation, and the need for priority vaccination status.

In 2021, the Older Adult Infolink website was launched, and it continues to be hosted by the AFNC. This online tool draws upon 211 Ontario community services data to create a centralized and accessible site which provides information on services and programs for older adults in Niagara (Niagara Connects, 2023).

In 2022, to identify emerging needs and inform decision-makers during the post-pandemic recovery period, the AFNC conducted a region-wide *Empowering Older Adults in Niagara Survey* funded by the federal government’s New Horizons for Seniors Program. It gathered the opinions of more than 1,200 older adults 50-plus, from all parts of the region. Local data subsets of the survey results were released shortly after, and in 2023, the AFNC published the *Impact of the Niagara Aging Strategy and Action Plan-and the Way Forward to ‘A Community for all Ages’* (AFNC, 2023). This document provides a retrospective evaluation of how the 2015 NASAP has shaped Niagara’s priorities and initiatives in supporting all ages and reflects on results from the survey to guide the future of Niagara’s age-friendly movement (AFNC, 2023).

The work of older-adult volunteers in the AFNC and the NOAA has led to the creation of an Age-Friendly Niagara flag, raised by local municipalities during June, officially Seniors Month in Ontario. Several AFNC-affiliated groups have also recently supported the installation of “Let’s Talk Benches” in municipal parks across the region, to encourage community relationships (AFNN Research Team, 2023). As well, each local municipal older-adult advisory committee (or equivalent) has carried out its own initiatives, such as support for the establishment of hospice care, subsidized housing, a new community centre, and community information forums.

Each local municipal older-adult advisory committee is actively expanding its partnerships within and beyond its communities, to mobilize resources to inform local planning (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

As of 2024, many developments are underway to propel the AFNC toward their vision of “a community for all ages”. This includes the legal incorporation of the AFNC, the establishment of a Founding Board, and the implementation of the AFNC business plan, which outlines its plan for sustainability (AFNC, 2024; Niagara Community Foundation, 2022).

These successes are the result of the persistent and dedicated efforts of hundreds of volunteers who have expanded the capacity of the AFNC, expanded the network, and strengthened partnerships. AFC movements and initiatives around the globe tend to be short-lived, and yet Niagara’s AFC movement has managed to thrive. This has been achieved through the establishment of a stable organizational structure; financial, administrative, and political support from most local municipalities; and a progressive and dedicated workforce of older-adult volunteers (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> *Niagara Connects (part of the non-profit social enterprise Community Potential which is based in Niagara) plays an important role as the backbone support organization for development of age-friendly work in Niagara.*

AFNC board members and Niagara Region staff attend a flag-raising event at regional headquarters celebrating Ontario's Seniors Month, June 2024. Photo courtesy Niagara Region.



### ***Emerging Priorities Through the Eyes of Older Adults in Niagara***

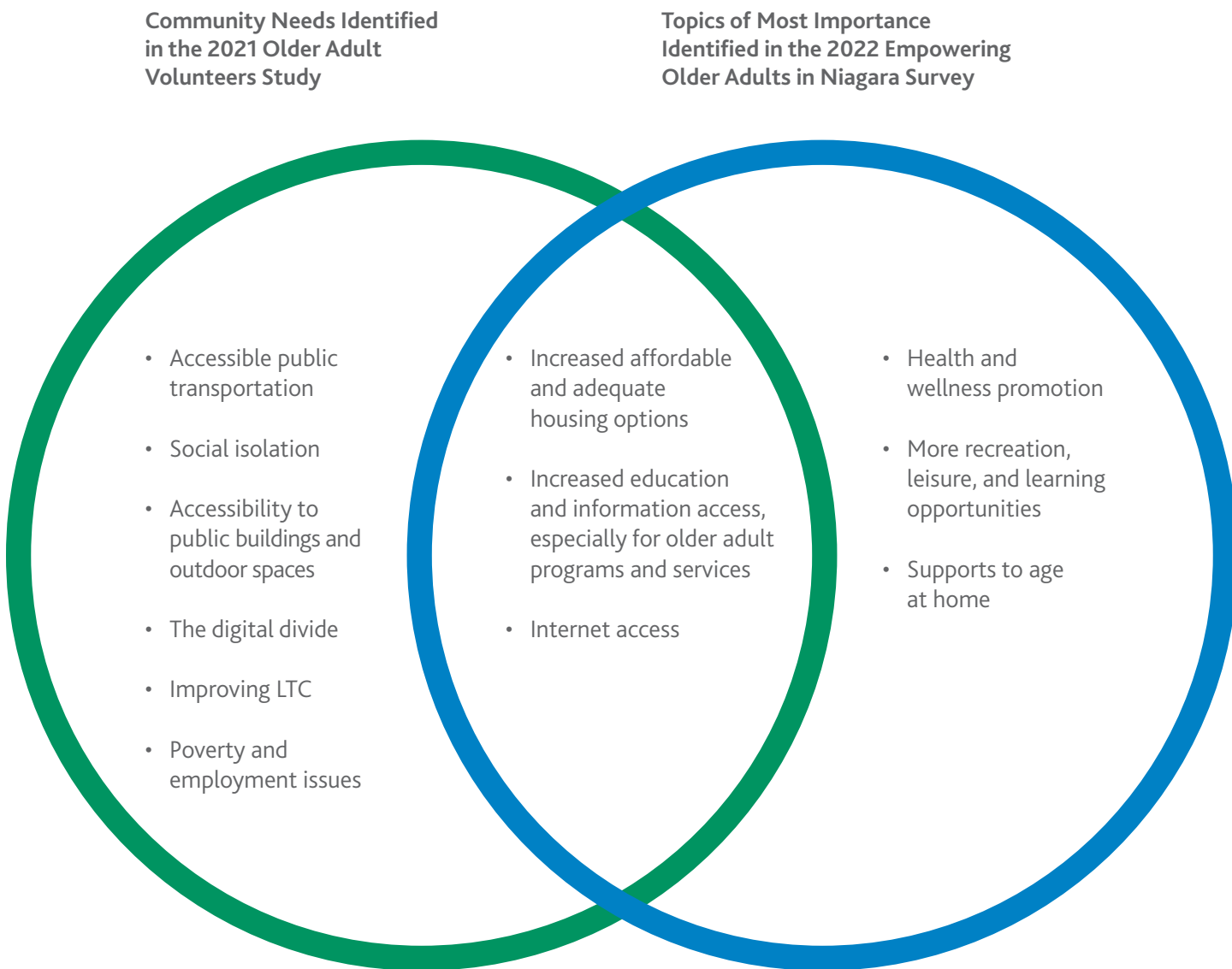
While the AFNC is producing tangible and meaningful changes in each local community, findings from two recent Niagara-based studies point to unmet community needs, some long-standing, identified by older adults. In 2021, a Brock University research team conducted a study called *Civic Engagement to Build Sustainable Local Capacity: Perspectives of Age-Friendly Community Volunteers in the Niagara Region* in collaboration with the AFNC (AFNC, 2023). The study aimed to identify effective strategies to recruit and retain volunteers by considering the perspectives of those on the municipal older-adult advisory committees across Niagara.

The Brock research team found seven top concerns shared by members of each committee: housing options, transportation, lack of access to information, internet access and digital divide, social isolation, accessibility to public and outdoor spaces, quality of long-term care, poverty and employment issues (AFNN Research Team, 2023). Furthermore, participants reported several challenges to age-friendly volunteering. These included

health, time, limited individual resources, the limited availability of volunteers due to lack of training, turnover and burnout; uneven municipal support (caused by staff shortages, etc.); the lengthy bureaucratic process needed to put their recommendations into actions; their limited capacity as an advisory committee; the disruption caused by COVID-19, persistent ageism, and attitude shifts toward volunteerism (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

Some of these challenges overlap with findings from the 2022 Empowering Older Adults in Niagara survey (AFNC, 2022). In the 2022 survey, the 1,200 respondents from across the region identified five areas that needed development: better housing options, health and wellness promotion, more recreation, leisure, and learning opportunities; supports for aging at home, and more education and information regarding programs and services for older adults (AFNC, 2022). Figure 1 visualizes the overlapping concerns of both studies, which taken together comprise older-adult perspectives across Niagara's 12 local municipalities. It should also be noted that different social identities may facilitate or hinder an individual's access to resources, services, information, and support.

**Figure 1:** Comparison Between Community Needs and Topics of Most Importance from Recent Niagara-based Studies.



## CHANGES IN NIAGARA'S DEMOGRAPHY

Niagara's demographics have seen significant change since the birth of the AFC movement in 2009. The *Living in Niagara (LIN) 2023 quality of life report*, provided by Niagara Connects-Community Potential, notes that the population of the Niagara region continues to grow and is becoming increasingly diverse.

## WHAT ARE THE DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY?

According to the Niagara Region's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan (2023–2027), there are 12 dimensions of diversity:

- Francophone
- Indigenous
- Ethnocultural
- New Immigrants
- 2SLGBTQIA+
- People with Disabilities
- Older Adults
- People with Low Income
- People Experiencing Homelessness
- Youth
- Gender

## Increasing Overall Population

The population in the region has steeply increased in the last decade. As indicated in Figure 2, it grew by 4.1 per cent between 2001 and 2006, and by 6.7 per cent between 2016 and 2021 (Kilty, 2008; Niagara Region Public Health and Emergency Services [NRPHEs], 2023; Statistics Canada, 2021). This is a desirable outcome—initiatives to increase Niagara’s population, especially people of working age, have been a consistent priority of official policy (Kilty, 2008). Yet each municipality needs to prepare to deal with this rapid growth.

## Aging Population

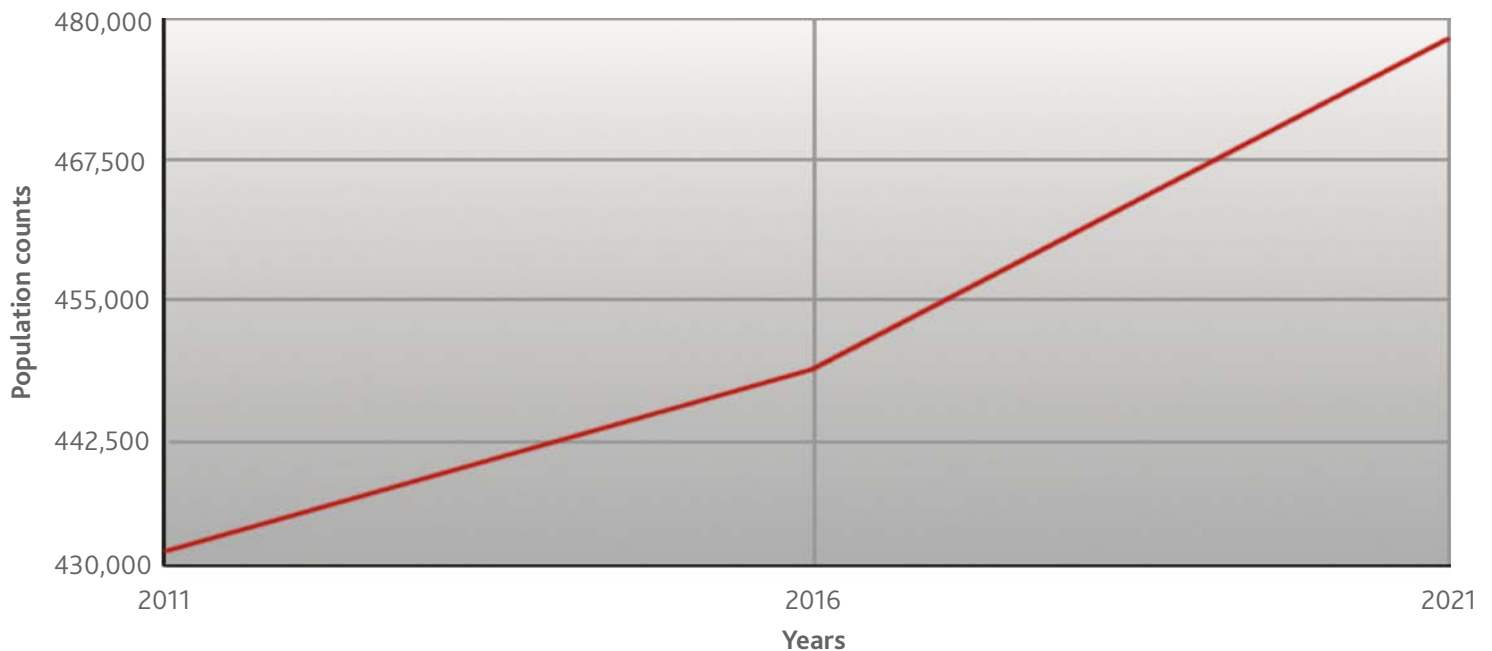
Another notable change in Niagara’s demography is the aging of the population. The proportion of people aged 65 and over made up 23.3 per cent of Niagara’s total population as of 2021, up from 21.4 per cent in 2016 (Niagara Connects, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2021). As Figure 3 shows, while the percentage of younger age groups (0-14 years old, 15-64 years old) has remained stable or decreased between 2011 to 2021, the proportion of those 65 and over has increased (Statistics Canada, 2021). The median age of Niagara in 2022 was 45.3 years old, slightly down from 45.9 years in 2021. Moreover, as age increases, so does the percentage of women in the age group (Niagara Region Community Dashboard, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2021).

Given Canada’s policy emphasis on *aging in place*, generally defined as the ability to remain in familiar homes or

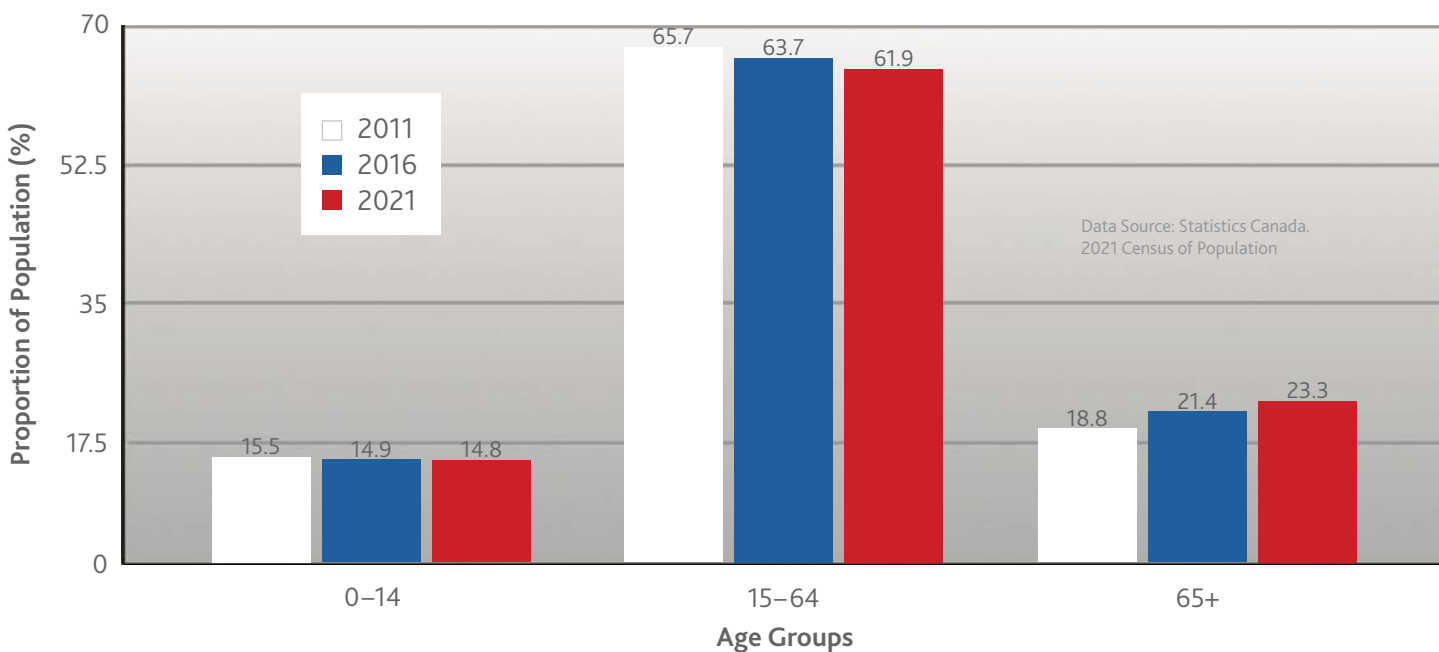
communities for as long as possible, Niagara’s rapidly aging population requires local municipalities to create age-friendly physical and social environments, especially for older adults with chronic conditions. This necessitates formal and informal community-based health care and social services as well as more efficient ways for older adults to access information and opportunities. The AFN’s vision of “a community for all ages” and its various community-based initiatives for creating inclusive and caring communities are a call to action: conditions allowing older adults to age in place must be created in Niagara.

Public perceptions of an aging population tend to be disproportionately negative due to ageism, which perpetuates the belief that older adults use more resources, send health-care costs through the roof, decrease workforce productivity, and burden families. However, it is important to recognize that inequity begins in early life and accumulates over the life course, impacting people’s experiences as they age (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). For example, over time poor health and poor working conditions (or lack of work) can harm one’s mental and physical health. Additionally, ageism can make it difficult for older adults to find employment, be treated with dignity, and access resources, which in turn results in financial insecurity, neglect, stigma, and social isolation (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). The systemic barriers and social attitudes that prevent healthy aging endanger community well-being more than the existence of an aging population in our midst.

Figure 2: Population in the Last 10 Years, Niagara Region



**Figure 3: Percentage of Population by Broad Age Groups, Niagara Region, 2011 to 2021**



## INCREASING DIVERSITY

### *Ethno-Racial Diversity*

In addition to age distribution, Niagara has also seen changes in ethno-racial diversity. The proportion of racialized people in Niagara has grown by 4.4 per cent since 2016 with the most common racial groups being South Asian, Black, and Latin American (Statistics Canada, 2021). This diversity is reflected in the fact that 14.3 per cent of the population’s first language is a non-official language (NRPHEs, 2023e). In 2021, 17.7 per cent of the Niagara population were immigrants, and almost one-fifth (18.2 per cent) of those were refugees (NRPHEs, 2023c; Statistics Canada, 2021).

Furthermore, first- and second-generation immigrants are older as a group, which necessitates consideration of the social challenges that an aging immigrant population presents (Statistics Canada, 2021). Indigenous peoples also make up three per cent of Niagara’s total population with 55-plus being their second-largest age group (Statistics Canada, 2021).

In Canada, immigrants and racialized people have a higher risk of experiencing substandard housing, food insecurity, reduced economic opportunities, and restricted access to health care (NRPHEs, 2023c). *The Living in Niagara 2020 quality of life report* acknowledges the importance of engaging newcomers and racialized and Indigenous citizens in community development to create a stronger and more inclusive Niagara (Niagara Connects, 2020).

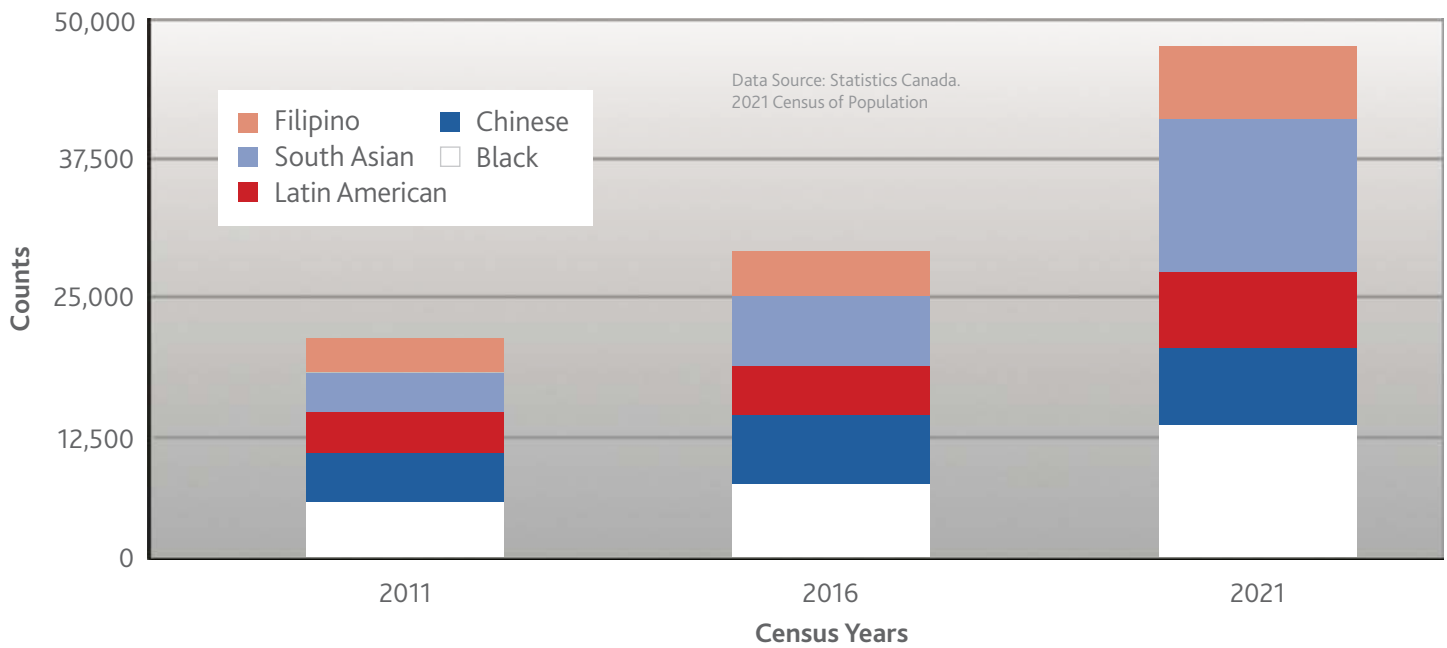
## HOW COMMON IS DISCRIMINATION?

According to the 2021 *Niagara Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Community Survey*, 66 per cent of respondents reported experiencing discrimination, while 77 per cent reported witnessing discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, age, mental health, or disability (Niagara Region Corporate Strategy and Innovation, 2022)

Niagara has also seen changes in gender and sexual diversity. Transgender and non-binary individuals made up 0.5 per cent of Niagara’s total population as of 2021 (NRPHEs, 2023g). Out of those who identify as transgender or non-binary, 47.8 per cent (transgender) and 24.7 per cent (non-binary) are aged 34 years or older (NRPHEs, 2023g). Gender discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia negatively impact access to social support and health care and decrease one’s sense of community belonging which is deemed essential for both mental and physical health (NRPHEs, 2023g).

The needs of LGBTQ2S+ communities are often overlooked, which results in further health and social disparities. In response to the lack of support as well as service-provider training for LGBTQ2S+ older adults in Niagara, *The Living in Niagara 2017 quality of life report* discussed the establishment of the Senior Pride Network Niagara to expand the programs and services for older LGBTQ2S+

**Figure 4:** Counts of Top-five Visible Minority Groups, Niagara Region, 2011, 2016, 2021



citizens (Niagara Connects, 2017). As of 2024, they have been taking a pause to recruit individuals to fill key roles on its board, however, its initiation and activities have been empowering for older citizens in these communities. This is one of many steps needed to engage and support gender and sexually diverse citizens in Niagara.

percentage of people living below the median income increases with age, with 68.5 per cent of those 80-plus earning below the median income (NRPHEs, 2023a). This is concerning because low-income older adults in Canada are 3.6 times more likely to live alone compared to those with the highest income. Income and financial security are thus major determinants of healthy aging (NRPHEs, 2023f).

### PROTECT TRANS KIDS

According to the 2020 Canadian Trans and Non-binary Youth Health Survey, which included 1,519 participants from all provinces and territories, 70 per cent of trans and/or non-binary youth reported encountering discrimination while 63 per cent reported experiencing “severe emotional distress” (Taylor et al., 2020, p. 3). Reflecting on the year preceding the survey, nearly half of these youth reported not getting their physical health-care needs met, while 71 per cent did not have access to mental health services (Taylor et al., 2020).

Niagara has also seen increases in unemployment, which grew from 5.9 per cent in 2016 to 17.7 per cent in 2021 among those 65-plus, while employment stayed relatively the same in other age groups (Statistics Canada, 2021). Niagara has had various employment initiatives targeting adults 55-plus, yet the increases in unemployment and stagnation in employment rates among this age group indicate that these initiatives may have not been effective (Niagara Connects, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2021). Also, while more and more older adults want to work longer, accessibility barriers often prevent them from participating in the workforce.

### Socioeconomic Status

Many changes can be seen in the socioeconomic status of Niagara citizens. Recent data shows the percentage of low-income individuals has decreased in all age groups except those 65-plus, where it remains unchanged (NRPHEs, 2023d). In fact, in Canada, the

### WHO COULD AFFORD A HOME TODAY?

Data from the Canadian Real Estate Association (2024) shows that average home prices in Niagara have steadily increased with the average prices peaking in January 2022 at nearly \$900,000.



Following these trends, homelessness and shelter costs have increased in municipalities, while home ownership has decreased in most age groups, especially among those aged 40-54 (Statistics Canada, 2021; NRPHEs, 2023d). The issue of precarious housing becomes more urgent as the gap between low-income and high-income earners widens, making it difficult for people to age in place or find accessible housing. Socioeconomic status thus impacts one's quality of life to a greater degree as one ages.

## HOW MANY NIAGARA CITIZENS GO HUNGRY?

Despite the overall decrease in low-income individuals, over 15 per cent of Niagara residents are experiencing food insecurity (Heritz, 2024). Community Care St. Catharines and Thorold saw an 82-per-cent increase in foodbank usage from 2022 to 2023, while Project Share in Niagara Falls saw a 65-per-cent increase (Heritz, 2024).

## Different Abilities

The various abilities of Niagara citizens must also be considered. In the St. Catharines-Niagara Census Metropolitan Area (not inclusive of Grimsby and West Lincoln), 28.9 per cent of people have disabilities, which is almost five-per-cent more than the rest of Ontario, but about 10-per-cent lower than all of Canada (NRPHEs, 2023b). People with disabilities experience more challenges in finding secure housing, treatment for mental disorders, employment, and educational opportunities (NRPHEs, 2023b). All these factors impact a person's access to home support services or adequate housing to age in place. Accessibility is crucial to the longevity and quality of life of Niagara citizens.

Niagara's growth and diversification create many opportunities for economic, social, and cultural prosperity. These opportunities can only materialize if efforts are made to reduce systemic barriers for equity-denied groups. This will lead to healthy longevity, which minimizes individual and societal burdens, while maximizing the region's potential (National Academy of Medicine, 2022).

## DISABILITIES ARE DIVERSE

In Canada, 38 per cent of older adults aged 65-plus have one or more disabilities. The five most common disabilities in Ontario are pain, flexibility, mobility, mental health-related, and vision (NRPHEs, 2023b).

## VOLUNTEERISM AND COVID-19

### *Manifest and Latent Benefits of Volunteerism*

Volunteers are an important unpaid labour force in Canada. Volunteering can be divided into *formal* and *informal*. The former means giving time to groups or organizations, while the latter involves providing helping hands to neighbours and friends on an individual basis (Hahmann, 2021). In either case, volunteerism in local communities mutually benefits both the volunteers and the people and organizations they support in two ways: *manifest functions* refer to an activity's intended and recognized benefits, while *latent functions* are the unintended ones (Nickerson, 2024).

The Niagara 2022 Canada Summer Games, as an example of manifest functions, ran successfully with the help of over 3,600 volunteers (Niagara Connects, 2023). Niagara Health has over 550 volunteers across all sites who aid with mealtime visits, welcoming and providing participants with information, working at gift shops, and supporting patients and their families' needs (Niagara Health, 2024). Another significant manifest function of volunteerism is the sizable economic benefit. The *2018 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* (GSS GVP) reported that volunteers in Canada dedicated approximately five billion hours, which equates to over 2.5 million full-time jobs (Hahmann, 2021).

## WHO ACTUALLY VOLUNTEERS?

According to the most recent *2018 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating* (GSS GVP), 79 per cent of Canadians aged 15-plus volunteered in 2018 (Hahmann, 2021). iGens (born 1996 and up) had the highest rates of formal volunteering at 52 per cent, averaging 82 hours annually, while Mature volunteers (born between 1918 and 1945) had the most average hours per year with 222 (Hahmann, 2021). One reason for this is the mandatory volunteer requirements for secondary school students.

For informal volunteer work, people in the 'mature' category and Baby Boomers contributed the most hours per year at 176 and 197 hours respectively, compared to 99 hours for iGen (Hahmann, 2021). These findings demonstrate that while the percentage of volunteers decreases with age, the number of hours greatly increases, and generational differences exist regarding attitudes toward long-term, high-commitment volunteering.

A recent study that examined the impact of the Snow Buddies program offered by Community Support Services of Niagara, reported that youth volunteers shoveling the driveways of older adults resulted in a total savings in hospitalization fees of \$81,398 (Snow Buddies Research Team, 2024). Furthermore, Auxiliary volunteers across Niagara Health sites have raised \$470,000 toward purchasing hospital equipment (Niagara Health, 2024).

Volunteers have also been playing an important role in improving inclusivity in Niagara. Region-wide initiatives such as aiding the accommodation of Syrian refugee families who arrived in 2015, as part of Niagara's 2015 to 2018 economic prosperity strategy, is another example of how volunteerism can be integrated into public policy (Niagara Connects, 2017). As Niagara's demography evolves, advocacy and volunteer work will play a large role in facilitating change and addressing the diverse needs of citizens.

Along with these recognized benefits, community volunteering can also bring non-tangible latent benefits, for each individual volunteer. The 2021 *Brock Older Adult Volunteer Study* identified such benefits including an increased sense of well-being, pursuing a healthy active lifestyle and lifelong learning opportunities, maintaining a continuing sense of self, and the "life satisfaction" gained from making a difference in one's community (AFNN Research Team, 2023). Most importantly, volunteering increases social capital, defined as the connections between individuals that promote trust and reciprocity (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). Increased social capital results in the strengthening of social support networks in neighbourhoods, one solution to the increased social isolation of older adults (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

In this sense, community volunteering is not just a charitable or altruistic activity carried out by those who provide services. It is also a participatory social safety net where volunteers "pay back" to communities with their time and effort. Evidence has demonstrated the positive effects of volunteering on older adults' risk of mortality, cognitive function, mental health, physical health, and overall happiness, especially among those who are the most physically, mentally, and socially vulnerable (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). These benefits underline the reciprocal nature of community volunteering.

### ***Decreasing Volunteerism in Niagara***

Volunteerism has always been an integral part of Niagara, especially among its older population. According to the 2022 *Empowering Older Adults in Niagara Survey*, 50 per cent of

respondents reported that they volunteer, while 8.6 per cent said they want to become a volunteer (AFNC, 2022).

Despite this, volunteer rates in Canada and the Niagara region have been decreasing. For example, according to the 2017 *Living in Niagara* report, cultural and recreational volunteering has decreased nearly 30 per cent since 1998. Additionally, Niagara Region's long-term care homes have seen a volunteer decrease, down nearly 9,000 hours between 2017 and 2019 (Public Health & Social Services Committee, 2018, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns hit community volunteerism hard. The 2023 *Living in Niagara* quality-of-life report states, "Volunteer patterns are changing, and numbers of volunteers are slow to build back after the COVID-19 pandemic. This is putting extra pressure on already-stretched agencies and their workers." (Niagara Connects, 2023, p. 6)

Many of these volunteer-based groups and community organizations have provided health and social services to the most vulnerable while promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. This means the reduction of their activities due to insufficient volunteers will especially impact marginalized groups. Furthermore, the reduction of the social benefits of volunteering—i.e. volunteers' physical, mental, cognitive, and social health and well-being—will have severe consequences, especially for older adults (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

Common barriers to volunteering include poor health, poverty, lack of transportation, lack of skills, and competing care responsibilities, many of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19 (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). Overall, the pandemic has highlighted the urgency for Niagara to focus on revitalizing its volunteerism for community well-being and healthy aging, while addressing the physical, social, and economic barriers that limit current and future participation in volunteering.

## **VOLUNTEERING IS WORK**

The 2021 *Brock Older Adult Volunteer Study*, surveying 64 volunteers who were engaged in the AFN movement as regional leaders and municipal advisory committee members (mean age 69 years old), reported they spent an average of 25 hours per month volunteering, placing them among the top 25 per cent of Canadian volunteers who contribute the most hours (AFNN Research Team, 2023). Many participants in the study also identified themselves as "lifelong volunteers", meaning their volunteer experiences began in childhood, often the result of family encouragement (AFNN Research Team, 2023).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Where Do We Go From Here?

The development of the AFN movement over the last 15 years has helped Niagara's region-wide community to move toward the goals of the Decade of Healthy Ageing. While ageist rhetoric portrays older adults as a burden to society, evidence demonstrates that empowering older adults to participate in local communities boosts the economic, social, and cultural development of Niagara. To this end, the work of volunteers is indispensable for sustaining and strengthening Niagara's economy and resilience, especially considering the increased challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The extent of these contributions depends not only on individual capabilities but also on the political willingness to support the creation of meaningful volunteer and/or work opportunities while addressing the geographic needs and barriers facing vulnerable older adults and other community members. To promote healthy aging within Niagara's current and future population, it is even more crucial to strengthen the Age-Friendly Niagara movement and revitalize community volunteerism—a long Niagara tradition—with a heightened emphasis on EDI. To move toward this goal, we make the following recommendations:

### **1. Support the Age-Friendly Niagara movement at the municipal and regional levels**

The growth of the age-friendly movement across the region has demonstrated the importance of municipal governments providing sufficient support to enable older adult volunteers to collaboratively make positive changes. However, to sustain and strengthen this valuable community capacity, the AFN movement needs more support from policymakers, community organizations, and residents to keep growing as a progressive social movement. Consistent and proportionate funding, as well as administrative (municipal liaison staff) and political (mayors and councillors) support from both local and regional municipal governments, is necessary to put AFN plans into action.

This calls for the prioritization of the urgent issues identified through the 2022 AFNC survey in municipal and regional planning, to ensure community members have direct input into the creation of policy. Ideally, the domains of age-friendly communities as outlined by the WHO—outdoor spaces and buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, and community health and support services—would be the focus of such policy. As well, all policies

and practices would be strengthened by being examined through the lens of the five goals of the *Niagara Aging Strategy and Action Plan* (NASAP): 1. Elevate the leadership and engagement of seniors; 2. Facilitate active and positive lifestyles for all seniors; 3. Optimize health and wellness for seniors; 4. Improve access and promote use of senior support services; 5. Improve and maintain supportive senior infrastructure (NASAP, p. 4)

At the very least, municipal decision-making about the creation of social infrastructure should be guided by the eight AFC domains from the WHO (with the support of the AFNC), as well as the *NASAP Toolkit*. These age-friendly frameworks are comprehensive and promote the interconnection of currently siloed systems and committees. Lastly, regional government, local municipalities, and other relevant groups and organizations could intentionally support older adults' search for information about community supports by promoting the Older Adult Infolink website.

### **2. Centre the needs of equity-denied groups in community development**

The vulnerability of equity-denied groups increases as individuals enter old age due to inadequate financial, social, and cultural support. Niagara local municipal governments would benefit from strengthening their inclusion initiatives and actively dismantling barriers by working in partnership with the AFNC movement and other equity-promoting groups in the region.

This can be done by subsidizing financial costs related to transportation, food, or other material needs for volunteers. Additionally, organizations and age-friendly groups can offer to help with equity initiatives, provide media coverage of intercultural events and accomplishments, or directly reach out to leaders/members of diverse communities to share knowledge and resources. For example, supporting, attending, and promoting folk festivals and cultural events (such as the Niagara Folk Arts' Water Lantern Festival and Brock University Hadiya'dagénhahs First Annual Pow Wow) are great ways to foster inclusivity, intergenerational connection, encouragement, and cultural awareness.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for EDI principles to be explicitly incorporated into all policies and programming through the consultation, collaboration, and active participation of equity-denied groups. Diverse groups have valuable insights to offer, so it is important to recognize Niagara's diversity and multiculturalism as a strength to spark innovative approaches to community-building across the region.

### **3. Revitalize community volunteerism by listening to older adults and incorporating new models**

One motivation to continue volunteering is creating tangible positive change in one's community. Volunteers want to be treated as equal and valuable partners, not just tokens or instruments to fill in for the shortage of paid workers. Older adults in Niagara want to be informed about volunteer opportunities that match their diverse interests, skills, schedules, and mental and physical capacities. They want a centralized place to find and access volunteer opportunities, similar to the layout of the Older Adult Infolink, as well as appreciation and recognition for their contributions. They want information relayed through communication channels that are most accessible to older adults (e.g., word of mouth, phone calls, emails, simple interface websites). They also need support to eliminate barriers—transportation and easy internet access are two—for volunteers from equity-denied groups.

Older lifelong volunteers observed that the seeds of community volunteering should be planted in the young by family, schools, and other local community events (AFNN Research Team, 2023). For example, workplaces can tie volunteer hours to promotions and professional development to incentivize these age groups. However, any initiative to increase volunteerism should not shame or condemn those who choose not to volunteer, nor should it frame volunteering as the only way for older adults to meaningfully contribute to society.

International models of volunteering and flexible paid work can also inform Niagara's, and Ontario's, approach to work for those outside the full-time labour force. The United States government's AmeriCorps Seniors RSVP program pairs adults 55-plus with organizations to address local, regional, and national challenges such as education, environmental stewardship, and healthy futures (AmeriCorps, n.d.). This model creates a centralized site for older adults to access volunteer opportunities that align with their interests, time, capacities, and financial needs. Federal grants and funds help sustain organizational initiatives, skill development, and volunteer stipends (AmeriCorps, n.d.). The success of this program may prove to be effective on a regional scale.

A potentially useful concept found in Japanese culture is that of "*ikigai*," translated as "that which most makes one's life seem worth living." This concept transcends mere enjoyment or happiness to include activities for which one can be paid. Japan's Silver Human Resource Center (SHRC) program, which incorporates aspects of *ikigai*, allows retirees to take on part-time, flexible work opportunities by contracting out their services. Within this structure, the SHRC charges employers for the work their retired employees provide,

to compensate for their labour (Weiss et al., 2005).

While volunteer culture in Niagara generally focuses on self-fulfillment and community needs, what is missing from this model—and what proves to be a significant barrier for low-income individuals—is some form of financial compensation. The establishment of a similar program in Niagara, or the creation of a system of grants and funds that go toward rewarding volunteers, may help increase volunteerism, creating more opportunities for older adults to apply their skills for income.

### **4. Foster cohesiveness and community well-being through intergenerational relationships in neighbourhoods across Niagara**

Strengthening intergenerational connections has been a long-standing goal of the Age-Friendly movement in Niagara. AFNC initiatives, coupled with the fact that Niagara is experiencing significant population growth and increased diversity, mean that local municipal governments could benefit from partnering with their already-established older-adult advisory committees. Together, they can strategically join with younger people to learn how to navigate the evolving landscape of Niagara's communities.

Intergenerational relations are integral to combating ageism, promoting EDI, and sustaining volunteerism (National Academy of Medicine, 2022). Community events are great ways to bring residents together and simultaneously create volunteer and work opportunities. Partnerships can be created between care homes, community groups, schools, and universities, for intergenerational programming. For example, the DSBN Academy Encore Program provides opportunities for community members to share their skills, knowledge, and interests with elementary and secondary students to develop their academic and personal capacities (DSBN Academy, n.d.). Niagara College also delivered a project called "A Senior's Freshman Year: The Intergenerational College Experience", where first-year students and older adults from care homes attended classes together and engaged in mutual learning (Niagara College, 2024). Programs like these could be scaled up or adapted to enhance intergenerational relationships.

Other ways to foster intergenerational connections include students' and older adults' co-housing programs, constructing long-term care homes and schools in the same area, or adapting the alternate work and volunteer models discussed in Recommendation #3 for co-op students to provide older adults affordable services while gaining work experience. Such intergenerational connections inherently promote a sense of belonging and social connectedness throughout the life course, while reducing social isolation and exclusion.

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The Niagara Community Observatory (NCO) at Brock University is a public-policy think-tank working in partnership with the Niagara community to foster, produce, and disseminate research on current and emerging local issues. More information on the NCO office, and an electronic copy of this report, can be found on its website [www.brocku.ca/nco](http://www.brocku.ca/nco)

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