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Did We Expect Too Much Of Rural Age-friendly Initiatives? Studying the Sustainability and Scope of a Rural Canadian Age-friendly Program

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Abstract

Understanding the sustainability of age-friendly initiatives is timely, given the interest of governments worldwide in age-friendly policy and the implementation of age-friendly programs. Focussing on expert perspectives from 11 rural communities in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador, this study examines how limitations to the sustainability of rural age-friendly initiatives (at both the committee and program level) may affect systemic community change. An iterative collaborative qualitative analysis demonstrates that the longevity of rural age-friendly initiatives was directly limited by financial and capacity challenges. These factors created limitations of scope, in which committees often were prevented from being able to address the multi-year, comprehensive requirements of bigger-picture issues facing older adults, especially among isolated, marginalized, or vulnerable residents. Over-dependence on volunteers and on the ability of small, rural municipalities to develop age-friendly initiatives that, in urban settings, are typically created with more capacity and resources, seriously limits the long-term scope, and by extension the impact, of rural age-friendly initiatives. 'Age-friendly' is often viewed as a positive way to improve the health and quality of life of older people. However, the present findings demonstrate that often-insurmountable challenges of longevity and scope, in terms of the breadth of issues that can be addressed, faced by rural age-friendly initiatives typically do not facilitate these anticipated outcomes.

Keywords: Aging, age-friendly communities, sustainability, scope, reach, Canada

1.0 Introduction

In a prescient and poignantly titled policy critique, Golant (2014) questioned the tangible outcomes of age-friendly initiatives, asking, "Are we expecting too much?" (p. 1) from the global age-friendly communities movement. Ongoing for nearly fifteen years, the age-friendly movement is a comprehensive, conceptual program developed by the World Health Organiation [WHO] (2007; 2015; 2018), which typically has been implemented as multi-year, collaborative, and largely local initiatives in over 1000 communities in 41 countries (Menec & Novek, 2021). In some jurisdictions, such as in Canada, national and subnational governments may fund age-friendly programs, wherein municipalities or local organizations apply for and receive funding to evaluate the needs of local older adults. Grass-roots steering committees of leaders, volunteers, and older people are founded, aiming to implement needs assessment recommendations. The term 'age-friendly initiatives' encompasses both age-friendly committees, as well as the work they do, the programs they may found, and/or the policy development they may facilitate. Age-friendly initiatives seek to span sectoral boundaries such as housing, transportation, recreation, inclusion, and health, intending to create long-term, positive change for both community-dwelling and institutionalized older people, and for community members at large. Conceptualized as a journey or trajectory and not a static outcome, communities following this process begin to become "more accessible to and inclusive of their older populations" (WHO, 2007, p. 1), expanding this process as the initiative grows and as community needs evolve.

The field of descriptive age-friendly research is now robust (see contributions to Buffel et al., 2018; Fitzgerald & Caro, 2017; Moulaert & Garon, 2016; Stafford, 2018), as many publications describe characteristics of an age-friendly community and many case studies describe age-friendly efforts. However, there are very few rigorous, empirical studies on age-friendly initiatives' processes, outcomes, impacts, and/or on program theory. Further, the literature is typically urban-focused, creating an imbalance between urban and rural age-friendly research. This paper addresses the rural gap in understanding the limits of age-friendly initiatives by exploring, through retrospective expert perspectives, initiatives' longevity, and scope. Based on interviews with experts from age-friendly committees in 11 communities that participated in one of Canada's first provincial age-friendly funding programs (Newfoundland and Labrador), our findings explore factors associated with longevity. By extension, critical implications of a limited scope or lack of ability to reach many older adults as they age in place, especially isolated, marginalized, or vulnerable residents, are articulated. Through this analysis, we aim to contribute to the literature that increasingly questions the academic and policy-level emphasis on describing features or case examples of existing age-friendly programs (e.g., Greenfield, 2018; Greenfield & Reyes, 2020; Lui et al., 2009; Steels, 2015). Our findings may contribute an understanding of the extent to which programs achieve the overarching goal of an age-friendly community, one that "adapts its structures and services to be accessible to and inclusive of older people with varying needs and capabilities" (WHO, 2007, p. 1). We address calls in the current literature (e.g., Menec & Novek, 2021; Russell et al., 2019) to consider the longevity and impact of age-friendly programs within a uniquely rural setting, complementing parallel urban age-friendly knowledge. To address these questions, we examine the insights of Canadian experts regarding the extent to which the long-term implementation of rural age-friendly initiatives may influence their overarching impact.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Aging in Place in Rural Communities

Internationally (Skinner et al., 2021), in Canada (CIHR, 2017; Federal/Provincial/Territorial [FPT] Ministers Responsible for Seniors, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2017), and in Newfoundland and Labrador (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007; 2020), the implications of an aging population are compounded in rural communities. Significant restructuring of social and economic services across Canadian rural communities has been a dominant trend (Halseth et al., 2019; Halseth & Ryser, 2006; Keating et al., 2011). As downsizing and restructuring many areas of service delivery have occurred, gaps in rural services and supports have challenged the activities of daily living for many older people aging in their homes or communities (e.g., aging in place) (Wiersma, 2016). Service restructuring has created additional pressure upon individual rural communities to support their older residents, with the implications of these demands emerging as a key theme in the scholarship of rural aging (e.g., Ramsey & Beesley, 2006; Scharf et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2021).

Essential services have been impacted by rural restructuring and downsizing (Halseth et al., 2019), pressuring local transportation, recreation, housing, and health services to address the gap in services normally directed by federal or state-level funding or programs (Skinner & McCrillis, 2019). For example, rural older people may be forced to drive further away from home to access key services, beyond their own comfort level (Dobbs & Strain, 2008), or alternatively may discontinue accessing services altogether given a declining ability to drive themselves and/or limited rural transportation (Turcotte, 2012). Local recreation commissions may be challenged to provide the comprehensive suite of services that they supported prior to systematic restructuring. This may produce a ripple effect for older adults who depend on community supports to remain physically and socially active (Skinner & McCrillis, 2019), and who require local and affordable housing alternatives (Novak et al., 2018). Further, local community health services may lack the capacity to provide a continuum of care appropriate for an aging population.

These challenges to rural service provision increase the likelihood that rural residents are unable to grow older in their own homes or communities with the appropriate supports. In other words, the downsizing of rural services may result in a population of older people who are 'stuck in place,' living in homes and communities that are no longer appropriate for their needs, rather than 'aging in place' in supportive physical and social environments (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012). Though there are many examples of innovative rural solutions utilized by communities to support their older residents (Skinner & McCrillis, 2019), the downsizing of rural services in conjunction with aging populations have pressured rural communities to appropriately support their older residents, often forcing heavy reliance on volunteers (formal and informal) and on voluntary organizations to pick up the slack (Davies et al., 2018; Skinner & Hanlon, 2016; Winterton & Warburton, 2021). This may include the founding of an often volunteer-based age-friendly initiative.

2.2 *The Age-friendly Movement*

To address some of the challenges presented by an aging population, an age-friendly policy structure (as outlined in WHO, 2007; 2015; 2018) seeks to promote the development of physical infrastructure, social engagement, and services that support older people's health and well-being (Scharlach, 2017) and life satisfaction (Menec & Nowicki, 2014). In Canada, age-friendly initiatives are typically funded by national, sub-national, or municipal level governments through one-time funding packages of varying magnitudes and are fundamentally cross-sector and community-led. Age-friendly committees usually are led by one person (e.g., Chair or program lead), supported by standing members that volunteer from municipalities, organizations working in sectors relevant to aging, and from the private citizenry (including older people and those interested in issues facing older people). Locally, committees aim to assess the unique, specific needs of older adults in their community, and to implement policies and programs that will affect change supportive of aging in place. In general, the process between obtaining funds and implementing community- or policy-level change can take anywhere from two to five years. However, given limits to funding, personnel, and the difficulty of creating 'age-friendly change,' initiatives can be accompanied by longevity challenges (Menec & Novek, 2021; Ozanne et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2019; Winterton, 2016).

In an era of both fiscal restraint and population aging, the WHO's (2007; 2015; 2018) age-friendly communities program is often viewed by policymakers internationally as an approach that may address and facilitate healthy aging (Spina & Menec, 2015). Scharlach (2017) identifies the promotion of older people's well-being as the primary goal of age-friendly initiatives, in which older people participate, are valued, and age with the support of services and infrastructure that meet their changing and dynamic needs (Alley et al., 2007). This may be understood within a constructive aging framework, in which programs and services consider the nuanced developmental processes associated with older age and benefit older people's sense of purpose and physical, psychological, and social functioning (Scharlach, 2017). At the policy level, age-friendly frameworks may seek to facilitate aging in place, in which older people "remain living in the community, with some level of independence, rather than in residential care" (Davey et al., 2004, p. 133). The aging in place concept holds generic appeal and salience, and its apparent cost savings makes it an attractive strategic direction often housed within an age-friendly policy agenda (Golant, 2018). Those aging in their homes or communities are commonly assumed to avoid or delay institutional care, in turn providing fiscal savings despite critical perspectives on the limits of aging in place policies (Dalmer, 2019).

Considerable case study research since the start of the WHO age-friendly program in 2007 describes program features, normally profiling only early implementation and development (Greenfield, 2018), and establishes typical trajectories of community planning, support services, or cross-sector partnerships (Black & Oh, 2021; Greenfield et al., 2015). Critique increasingly targets this exclusive focus on preliminary programing stages, usually on the early years following funding administration (Greenfield et al., 2015). Rather than exploring the requirements necessary for creating meaningful community change (Scharlach & Lehning, 2016), most age-friendly research does not consider mechanisms underlying becoming age-friendly in the longer term, with a few exceptions (e.g., Colibaba,

McCrillis & Skinner, 2020; Lehning & Greenfield, 2017; McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019). Further, the literature includes few process evaluations or considerations of broader political and economic contexts affecting implementation outcomes (Menec & Brown, 2018).

2.3 *Implementation of Age-friendly Initiatives*

Sustainable implementation of social initiatives, generally, has been clearly tied to individual community factors, or "place" (Skinner, 2014, p. 174). In conjunction with typical barriers and facilitators, specifically, the extent to which participation of local stakeholders, collaboration, capacity building, and empowerment of community partners is considered (Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2020), unique implementation factors are relevant to consider. Further, and important to the volunteer-based nature of many age-friendly initiatives, Skinner (2014) found that sustainable rural development is directly related to voluntarism, which itself influences and is influenced by how older residents and their communities interact. Seen predominantly in rural and small-town settings, 'older voluntarism' (where older volunteers and volunteer-based programs support aging rural communities) (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019) can be used to mediate the impacts of population aging (Skinner & Hanlon, 2016). However, given the paradox of older volunteers supporting aging rural communities and the limitations to older voluntarism, such as issues of participation, burnout, and absenteeism (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019; Colibaba et al., 2021; Wiersma & Koster, 2013), the efforts of volunteers in aging rural communities can be limited.

Within the context of age-friendly initiatives, implementation refers to the development of programs, policies, and infrastructure that supports older adults. Implementation is unique to each jurisdiction, given needs assessment outcomes. However, the type of implementation is also contingent on factors such as leadership, partnerships, finances, committee capacity, and interest of the local municipality (Scharlach & Lehning, 2016). Implementation comes in many forms; however, some common examples include social programing (e.g., craft or exercise groups), intergenerational programing (e.g., local schoolchildren and older adults working on community gardens together), infrastructure development (e.g., ramps and benches in public spaces or buildings), or policy development (e.g., anti-ageism campaigns or municipal legislation that includes age-friendly as a policy framework).

'Scope' refers to the extent to which age-friendly initiatives can address the multi-year, comprehensive requirements of bigger-picture issues facing the broader population of older adults in a community, including residents who may be physically or socially isolated, vulnerable, or marginalized, or who may choose not to participate in organized activities (Colibaba et al., 2020). The challenges of youth outmigration in conjunction with a rapidly aging population in most rural spaces underlines the importance of examining the initiative's ability to be effectively and sustainably developed (Scharf et al., 2016). Implementation limits may reduce an initiative's capacity to affect physical, environmental, and social change at the intermediate and long-term community level (e.g., Naskali et al., 2019; Greenfield et al., 2015; Ozanne et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2019). For example, developing fitness classes or social activities for older adults is a realistic, positive, and well-documented initial outcome of many age-friendly initiatives (e.g., Scharlach & Lehning, 2016); however, implementing community-wide change, such as housing (Davey et al., 2004; Eaton, 2019) and transportation solutions (Hansen et al., 2021;

Newbold et al., 2018) are often unfeasible. Indeed, larger age-friendly projects, although prioritized in achieving longer-term 'age-friendliness' (WHO, 2015), were rarely implemented given capacity challenges (Menec et al., 2014). Further, age-friendly initiatives may be especially challenged to support a population of older adults choosing or needing to age in place in rural communities rather than relocating to another destination (Golant, 2018), given the complexity of accessibility and care needs and the limited reach of often voluntary age-friendly initiatives.

Studies have questioned both the longevity of age-friendly initiatives and the extent to which those that are short-lived may be able to positively benefit a broad population of older adults. Recent studies have shown that community-level factors such as municipal engagement, partnerships, sense of community, community champions, pride, dedication, and a shared vision, were helpful in closing an implementation gap between initial and longer-term operations in both urban (Black & Oh, 2021) and rural settings (McCrillis et al., 2021; Pestine-Stevens, 2018; Russell et al., 2019). However, rural jurisdictional fragmentation—or a lack of geographic connectivity (McCrillis et al., 2021)—as well as disengaged local businesses, exclusion of older and/or marginalized people, and leadership problems weakened the likelihood of long-term implementation (Pestine-Stevens, 2018). Older people themselves are not always included in the leadership of age-friendly initiatives, or are included in limited or tokenistic capacities, which may negatively impact longevity (Black & Oh, 2021; Greenfield & Reyes, 2020). Greenfield and Reyes (2020) identified five diverse ways in which older people may be involved in age-friendly initiatives (consumers, informants, task assistants, champions, and core group members); however, the authors reflect that deeper engagement of older people in these ways is often limited. Further, Colibaba et al. (2020) demonstrated that older people themselves questioned whether the age-friendly programing they enjoyed and participated in had the capacity to implement larger-scale initiatives. Rural areas are increasingly recognized as playing dynamic, unique roles in the diverse ways in which people grow older (Colibaba et al., 2021). Thus, it is important to examine the distinctive ways that rural age-friendly initiatives may develop, unique from their urban counterparts (FPT Ministers Responsible for Seniors, 2007; Shahnaj, 2019).

Nonetheless, rural age-friendly initiatives may be challenged to implement programing in broader areas such as healthcare, housing, and transportation, and researchers have questioned whether it is the responsibility of rural local governments, often under-resourced and reliant on a small, aging tax base, let alone a grass-roots committee characterized by older voluntarism (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019; Colibaba et al., 2021), to undertake substantial social change (e.g., Golant, 2014). Though Yarker et al. (2020) noted that rural voluntary organizations might provide an opportunity for older volunteers to preserve self-identity and connection to place, smaller groups of older volunteers alone may lack the capacity to affect significant change (Colibaba et al., 2020).

2.4 Sustainability of Age-friendly Initiatives

The longevity of age-friendly initiatives and their impacts is an important focus of assessment. Sustainability can mean different things in different scenarios, and there is not a singularly recognized definition of this term. Instead, 'sustainability' encompasses unique aspects depending on its context (Bodkin & Hakimi, 2020). Nonetheless, a sustainable social program has become permanently built into the

community landscape and funding structures (Savaya & Spiro, 2012). Further, sustainability can refer to organizations that "can continue [to] deliver social value via the pursuit of its social mission" (Weerawardena et al., 2010, p. 347); essentially, sustainable initiatives experience longevity over a lengthy period of time. Within the purview of age-friendly initiatives, however, "lengthy" is rather arbitrary. Consistent with prior literature in the age-friendly domain (McCrillis et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019), the present study considers a sustainable age-friendly initiative to have begun to become self-sufficient and to have begun to implement age-friendly programs and/or to have started age-friendly policy development.

Brief, unsustainable age-friendly initiatives do not become permanent nor institutionalized within their communities. Premature cessation may pose challenges, as this does not honour local commitments to the target population (older residents and taxpayers) and may be wasteful of public spending (Savaya & Spiro, 2012). Although important to achieve, initiatives are often challenged to incorporate longevity (Fitzgerald & Caro, 2014). Conflicting municipal and national level priorities, an aging population, youth outmigration, declining fiscal capacity, and a reliance on overburdened, aging volunteers inadvertently challenge the extent to which many types of grass-roots or community-led initiatives are able to develop or to continue into the long-term and affect change (Neville et al., 2016; Ryser & Halseth, 2014; Neville et al., 2021).

Age-friendly initiatives ideally may support the inclusion and accessibility of older adults living in rural communities; however, limited research has directly focused on their longevity. In their review, Lehning and Greenfield (2017) observed gaps in the understanding of age-friendly initiative development, implementation, sustainability, and effectiveness, demonstrating a continued lack of understanding of factors associated with longevity. Further compounding the importance of these challenges, given Spina and Menec's (2015) suggestion that rural age-friendly research might benefit from extending its domain beyond short-term outcomes, it is important to highlight that Lehning and Greenfield's (2017) far-reaching observations were not specific to rural communities. Russell et al. (2019) articulated an 'implementation gap' model between earlier and later stages of implementation, further challenged by a lack of geographic connectivity or enhanced by a strong sense of community (McCrillis et al., 2021). Without an explicit focus on rural issues but rather on exploring implementation challenges, Russell et al. (2019) and Colibaba et al. (2020) recommended deliberate examinations of rural age-friendly implementation. Further, current literature does not connect age-friendly sustainability and its ability to create the enduring, community-level change necessary to facilitate aging in place—independent of geographic distinction.

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature regarding the connection between rural age-friendly longevity and its ability to facilitate supportive change for older rural adults. Drawing upon expert perspectives on limits to the longevity and scope of rural age-friendly initiatives, we aim to advance the understanding of their abilities to implement community change and to positively affect the well-being of older people. With these concepts in mind, the paper now turns to a study of 11 initiatives in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, that planned and implemented age-friendly programing.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Sampling Frame

Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada's most easterly Atlantic province, is characterized by diverse rural typologies, including rural communities, regional towns, small cities, and one capital city—St. John's (Simms et al., 2013). Newfoundland and Labrador provides an exemplary case study for studying rural age-friendly initiative implementation and sustainability, as the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador was an early adopter of the age-friendly concept. Administered provincially since 2010, the provincial government offered one-time grants of CAD$10,000 to 59 successful community applicants (as of June 2019) seeking to initiate the age-friendly process (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019).

With university ethics approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board, in 2017 and 2018 the authors recruited leaders (e.g., age-friendly committee chairs or program leads) of provincially funded age-friendly initiatives, obtaining their perspectives on implementation through semi-structured interviews. The goal of only recruiting leaders (as opposed to all committee members) was consistent with Menec et al.'s (2015) study on rural age-friendly challenges and priorities. This allowed us to exclusively interview persons most knowledgeable who had amassed a knowledge of the committee's processes from start to finish/present, contextualized within a high level of local understanding (Cornish et al., 2013). In contrast, standing committee members often lack the institutional knowledge required for insights into the topic of longevity and scope. Given that our focus had not been directly or intentionally explored in previous research, emphasizing long-term institutional knowledge from leaders was critical to ensuring an accurate and comprehensive analysis.

3.2 Inclusion Criteria and Recruitment

Our inclusion criteria required committee formation and needs assessments to have been completed and for program implementation to have begun. It was desirable to include committees who met the inclusion criteria but had disbanded, as their perspective was essential to assessing longevity challenges. This aim was achieved in our dataset with the inclusion of two formally disbanded committees and one that was rapidly approaching dissolution, according to participants. Recruitment followed consultation with the funder (the provincial government), who provided the contact information of all committees that had achieved our inclusion criteria (n = 21). We contacted each committee, asking to be connected with their age-friendly leader/chair/director. When contact information was incorrect or inactive, or following a delay, we actively sought out alternative contact information using a variety of methods (e.g., telephoning the municipal clerk or other committee members, or finding contact information in media articles). This varied approach helped ensure that as many committees that met the inclusion criteria as possible were invited to participate, allowing us to build a sample of 11 participants (no requests were declined), representing eight age-friendly committees who were active, and three that were disbanded or were in the process of doing so. Given the focus on sustainability, it would have been desirable to have participants drawn from the additional 10 committees of the initial 21 who met our inclusion criteria; however, it is possible that some were long dissolved and had been so informally structured that obtaining contact

was impossible. Nonetheless, the 11 participants of this study represent more than half (52%) of the eligible initiatives. Given the limits to sustaining rural age-friendly initiatives, achieving this sample size is important to note.

3.3 Participants

Interviews were conducted with 11 participants, each representing their individual committees. The 11 participants (64% females, $n = 7$; M age of participants = 53 years), reflected the typical composition of Canadian age-friendly committees: 45% ($n = 5$) were municipal employees, 45% ($n = 5$) were volunteers, and 10% ($n = 1$) were municipal officials, each having worked with older people for $M = 7$ years. Though not used to create the sample, which was strictly based on inclusion criteria and interest in participating in the study, rural typologies present in this sample mirrored provincial settlement patterns that exemplify degrees of rurality (Simms et al., 2013). Corresponding to those patterns, this sample includes representation from eight rural communities, one regional town, and two small cities. Of the 11 participants, 73% ($n = 8$) considered their committee to be presently or likely to become sustainable, whereas 27% ($n = 3$) identified their committee as presently or likely to cease operations (i.e., unsustainable).

3.4 Data Collection

Telephone interviews were conducted, ensuring that participation was as convenient as possible, as most interviewees participated while working at their full-time jobs (e.g., over lunch hour or during work hours). Also, telephone interviews occupy less time in the day in contrast to those conducted in person (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004), further strengthening their convenience. This was important for achieving maximum study participation from a pool of participants, many of whom are volunteers, who are often challenged to find time to participate in external research.

The interviews followed a predetermined protocol and evolved in a semi-structured manner, allowing for flexibly ordered questions with content that adapted to additional, relevant discussions (Dunn, 2016). Protocol questions addressed the program's development and status, challenges and successes, and within the context of rural program sustainability, sought reflections on finances, leadership, municipal involvement, volunteers, community support, marginalized populations, and transportation. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and they were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and input into NVivo.

3.5 Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic content analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles and phases, and Hall et al.'s (2005) iterative collaborative qualitative analysis (ICQA), as outlined in Russell et al. (2019). Both processes incorporate systematic development, testing, and revising of a code manual and dual coder collaboration to reinforce dependability. Specifically, a random sample of transcripts was reviewed, facilitating the development of an initial code list. This draft code list was tested using another random sample of transcripts, and finally, it was collectively revised and finalized. The code manual included nine codes; specifically, bigger picture aging issues (e.g., caregiver exhaustion and support, housing, social isolation, transportation, low-income seniors, generational differences), financial (e.g., payment of coordinators, grant dependency, funding sustainability), implementation (e.g., goals, evaluation, program growth or decline,

planning processes), municipality (e.g., municipal support, integration into municipal operations, elections, engagement with municipal staff), outcomes (e.g., identifying specific achievements), partnerships (e.g., networking, business partnerships, working in isolation without partnerships), rurality (e.g., geographic factors), social programing (e.g., implications of social programing), and volunteers (e.g., burnout, motivation, older voluntarism, volunteer recruitment, necessity of champions). The code manual was then used by the research team to code each transcript. The first coder assigned code(s) to raw text, which was then reviewed by the second coder. Summary documents were then created for each code, including both synthesized text from that code, and detailed writing about emergent themes and key findings. Multi-collaborator coding built into each stage strengthened reliability (Schoenberg et al., 2011), with only crosscutting themes from the final analytical stage being included in the following Findings section. Detailed information on each code or on this analytical process can be obtained by contacting the first author. To ensure anonymity, assigned community numbers only are used as identifiers, and any identifying information was removed.

4.0 Findings

Findings examine the perspectives of experts from 11 age-friendly initiatives in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Of the 11 initiatives, eight were operative at the time of data collection, and one was, according to the participant from that community, institutionalized in the community given a lengthy period of successful operation. Financial and capacity challenges directly limited the rural age-friendly initiatives' longevity. Specifically, a constrained budget was often quickly depleted or did not stretch into the implementation phase, resulting in an over-dependence on the capacity of volunteers to lead the initiative from conception to needs assessment to implementation. This situation created limitations of scope, in which committees often were prevented from being able to address the multi-year, comprehensive requirements of bigger-picture issues facing older adults, especially among isolated, marginalized, or vulnerable residents.

4.1 Limitations to the Sustainability of Rural Age-friendly Initiatives

4.1.1 Financial. Finances were an ongoing struggle for committees, both those run by volunteers and by a paid staff person. Indeed, participants expressed a general unease regarding their initiative's financial situation. Initial funding was perceived as integral to getting the initiative off the ground; however, most participants felt that this sum quickly depleted. Some devoted their funding to salary (e.g., hiring someone to complete the needs assessment), leaving little for implementation and requiring additional, largely unavailable, resources to sustain momentum and growth. Participants often felt that additional funds to pay a coordinator would minimize burnout and maximize volunteer efforts, facilitating longevity. The participants from community 5 observed: "It's [a paid coordinator] the only way it's really going to be sustainable. You cannot push volunteers forty hours a week."

Importantly, others felt that funding should not be put toward salary; rather, that money should be carefully reserved, instead relying on community-level factors to sustain the initiative. Some participants, including the participant from community 9, felt that capacity-building spending facilitated sustainability. This included spending small amounts of money on building and expanding local relationships, volunteer recruitment and training, or on essential components of programing or

infrastructure that could not be met through in-kind support, rather than spending on salaries or programing: "Try to use the money to build capacity that's sustainable and not social. I mean, the social part of it is needed and it's perfect and lovely, but it won't make major changes to the community." Top-up funds were applied for through other agencies or the municipality; however, grant applications required substantial capacity to write and held no funding guarantee, and typically were limited to a specific project or had to meet granting agencies' individual criteria—often only loosely related to the goals of the initial plan. In essence, operating funds were largely unavailable or challenging to obtain, forcing committees to limit the scope of their endeavours. Some participants did feel that success enabled additional funding or that alternate fundraising was possible; however participants universally expressed that top-up funds following milestone achievements were necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of an emerging initiative.

4.1.2 Capacity. Participants in this study, representing rural communities experiencing declining populations, expressing a sense of rural depletion and its cascading effects on their age-friendly initiative. Declining populations contributed to limited community capacity. Similar to the challenges experienced in communities 3 and 10, the community 11 participant noted: "Many of our people who were in leadership roles have moved from the community." With reliable leaders permanently relocating, fears developed that those remaining would be unwilling or unable to lead or volunteer, putting additional responsibility on active committee members and enabling burnout, as described by the participant from community 5: "We have a very good volunteer participation rate, but it's spread pretty thin." Nonetheless, and in keeping with age-friendly's grass-roots intent, volunteers were seen as key to sustainability. Volunteers apply for grants, sit on committees, and their diverse skills and professional backgrounds inform all program stages, but tensions between the need for volunteers and shrinking populations especially challenged growth. The community 1 participant articulated this:

> We're looking for volunteers because we're pulling from such an aging population and a lot of them feel that their time as volunteers has passed. That certainly plays a factor in whether or not something is sustainable because there's not a whole lot of money or manpower to go around. If I can't do it as a [paid] staff member, it relies on the volunteers and if we can't get those volunteers…because there is such a declining younger age population here...it's harder.

In community 7, the participant hoped that: "…the burnout wouldn't occur within the next 2 or 3 years. On the other side of the coin, most of these people are older. Help-wise, it's probably going to be an issue." These financial and capacity limitations severely challenged many participants' perceived likelihood of sustaining, typically limiting the scope of implementation to small-scale, one-off social programing. Unable to address the multi-year, comprehensive requirements of bigger-picture issues facing older adults, sustainability factors specifically and directly constrained the scope of rural initiatives.

4.1.3   Limited scope of rural age-friendly initiatives. The operational initiatives included in this study viewed themselves as effective in the short-term at creating small-scale social programing. For example, participants shared examples (typically one to two per community) that included individual programs ranging from transportation partnerships between taxi companies and grocery stores, intergenerational partnership programs in the school system, bus trips to fun activities, walking programs and other fitness activities, staff training among local businesses about effective communication with those with auditory or visual challenges, beginning community gardens, and quilting sessions. Though these activities are certainly important achievements that would have benefitted participants, they were often one-off events, or if a repeated program, they were usually limited to a small cross-section of older people who were able to come out and participate. Further, participants consistently expressed concern about how to sustain and grow these initiatives beyond the initial first or second time, or that they had been well-attended early on but that over time, attendance had dropped off. Ultimately, a limited program scope meant that small-scale social programing was typically the only realistic outcome of age-friendly initiatives. Changes identified through needs assessments that would reach and benefit a population of older people were, typically, not possible.

Through needs assessments or community consultations, and expressed across most of these interviews, specific, large-scale community challenges prevented residents from aging with required community supports, including problems with transportation, housing, caregiver support, home maintenance, social isolation, geography, poverty, or the limits of fixed incomes. These issues were recognized as important but simply too substantial and multifaceted to be addressed by most small, often volunteer-based age-friendly committees.

At the same time, responsibility to initiate change in these areas was perceived and internalized by participants—and they felt that their committees' expectations to affect major community-level change were held by the municipality, older adults, and private citizens alike—why else would a new committee devoted specifically to seniors have been funded and established? For example, older residents often turned to age-friendly committees for assistance with these bigger picture, multisector issues, but at most committees could only explore the topic; most far exceeded the scope or jurisdiction of a small, rural, largely volunteer committee. Transportation was an exception to this for one initiative, in which an age-friendly committee successfully implemented a pilot transportation project that has carried on for over a decade. However, questions surrounding sustainability were still at the forefront of that interview.

Housing and transportation were two overarching issues that each participant wished that their initiatives could address. They felt that their mission to create a more "age-friendly" environment was to facilitate a supportive environment for all. For example, ensuring that all older residents could move around the area on their own or with readily available support, shop for groceries, and live in safe, accessible, and affordable housing that they could easily come and go from, were activities that age-friendly committees felt responsible for. Participants, including those in communities 3 and 6, observed that older residents often continued to drive despite fears or limitations; further, limited or nonexistent public transportation forced those unable to drive to take taxis (considered to be costly), although taxis did not exist in the smallest areas. Regarding organized seniors' transportation, the community 7

participant reflected: "If you come to [community 7] and you pick up one person to go to [community 2], you know, it's not really feasible. But how do you take care of those people?"

Creating or improving appropriate housing for older residents was recognized equally as a critical role, but again this far exceeded initiatives' scope. According to participants, housing was one of the main issues raised in preliminary consultations, and some committees discussed it in planning meetings or even pursued it with potential partners—some even went so far as to develop housing proposals—but plans never exceeded early discussion. Some reflected that they, alongside their municipalities, had discussed seniors' housing but that local governments similarly lacked capacity and were not the appropriate entity to develop housing solutions. Younger seniors were thought to be able to live independently in their homes. However, for those older, isolated, or less mobile, the question of staying or leaving their home or community was often brought to committees who were unable to take action or support that person. Or, they were issues that committees particularly wished to tackle. For example, again, the community 7 participant reflected:

> A lot of the older ladies, when their spouse passes away, they have to sell their family home and move to [community 2], or even further to find assisted living accommodations. Places that mow the lawn for them, clear the snow, do the repairs, that kind of thing. So, I think that's a challenge for a town of our size.

Housing and transportation were immediate priorities, directly connected by participants to social isolation and to other broader, serious social issues facing older adults. The age-friendly initiatives, however, lacked the capacity to consider them, forcing a focus on only small-scale social goals. Participants recognized their initiative's contributions, but the limited scope found to be inherent to the age-friendly model was felt to be severely limited in its ability to reach isolated, marginalized, or vulnerable residents.

5.0 Discussion

Sustainability and impact may be some of the most relevant goals of age-friendly initiatives. The longevity of initiatives beyond early implementation (e.g., obtaining a grant, forming a committee, conducting a needs assessment, and developing programing) makes intuitive sense and is important. Following the announcement of age-friendly funding, in jurisdictions such as Canada, where age-friendly initiatives are usually funded by higher-level governments, older adults and the community at large are in effect being promised that their community will, in the coming years, become more "age-friendly". Expectations of long-term program policy and program development that support older people as they age in place are thus set. However, findings of this research imply that sustainability factors; specifically, finances and capacity, may inhibit the ability of rural age-friendly initiatives to offer a broad scope of policy and programs that effectively support older adults' activities of daily living. Among study participants, we found that age-friendly initiatives that were limited in scope were often unlikely to mature in impact from community-based age-friendly *programs* (e.g., one that hosts small-scale, often one-off social programing) to that of age-friendly *communities* (e.g., a

municipality with an arm's length seniors' council or with accessible, affordable rural transportation, housing, and social and physical infrastructure, for example). It is possible that when people grow older in social and physical environments supported by an age-friendly initiative with a scope that is comprehensive, cross sectoral, and impactful, then isolation, marginalization, and vulnerability may be lessened. However, in contrast, this study demonstrated that an inherently limited scope might be inadvertently built into the limited funding and implementation model typical of most initiatives that follow the WHO (2007; 2015) concept, particularly acute when executed in rural settings (Menec & Novek, 2021). Ultimately, both the long-term sustainability and the scope of rural age-friendly programs were found often to be limited. At the level of the individual, these limitations may undermine the constructive aging framework, within which programs and services consider developmental (aging) processes and support older people's sense of purpose and physical, psychological, and social functioning (Scharlach, 2017).

As demonstrated in the literature (Black & Oh, 2021; Menec & Brown, 2018), effective initiatives were founded alongside factors such as targeted champion and volunteer recruitment, local and regional partnerships, and active municipal support. However, consistent with recent research, findings demonstrated that financial and capacity challenges limited long-term sustainability (e.g., Colibaba et al., 2020; Neville et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2019) and that these challenges created tensions of scope. Financial and capacity factors limited initiatives' sustainability, with many, as a result, unable to facilitate 'big-picture' change. Further, longer-term energy and their ability to reach marginalized older people were often limited. Study participants, who led their age-friendly committees, reported on initiatives' accomplishments (typically in developing small-scale social programing). However, participants were concerned that their outputs could not begin to address the major issues directly affecting older people, for example, challenges to develop appropriate housing for older adults, especially those marginalized, isolated, or the oldest old. Further, most recognized that the multi-year, comprehensive financial and capacity requirements of a small, volunteer committee able to tackle issues such as transportation, housing, and social isolation were absent. With these goals being unfeasible, the energy required from mostly volunteers was limited, and long-term sustainability was uncertain.

Recently, the findings of Pestine-Stevens (2018; 2019) suggested that the future of a rural age-friendly initiative in New York State was uncertain, though engaging in collaboration and connection, given capacity and leadership challenges. Similarly, the implication of our findings questions the definition and framework of rural age-friendly initiatives as effective on a broad scale. Policy documents have been specifically designed to support rural age-friendly implementation (e.g., FPT Ministers Responsible for Seniors, 2007). Current findings present implications for both policy and practice towards the sustainability of age-friendly initiatives. Policy recommendations that additional, or top-up funding be built into age-friendly funding programs may enable expanded scope of programs and policies (e.g., housing, transportation, social isolation). For programs built without federal or state-level funding, finding ways to maximize budgets through building community capacity (e.g., local community partnerships) and drawing upon in-kind support, rather than creating positions for paid coordinators, can act to enhance capacity building on limited a limited budget. Expanding the composition of age-friendly committees to include a diverse representation of community members (e.g., local

organizations or businesses from different sectors, municipal representatives, older adult volunteers) may not only ease the burden on the core group of committee members, but may also expand the program's scope of implementation, with diverse representatives able to tap into their unique resources and contacts (Greenfield & Reyes, 2020).

Nonetheless, the present findings may raise the question of whether it is the responsibility of small, rural, volunteer-led committees or even of municipalities to address systemic concerns? Further, policy flaws suggest these responsibilities may be implied (e.g., Winterton, 2016). For the most part, participants in our sample talked about strong, supportive social programing that was enjoyed by a small group of older people but that, according to participants, could not be expanded, given financial and capacity challenges to sustainability. Instead, many participants shared concerns for the future of their age-friendly initiatives, and their wish to extend the scope of their age-friendly work to include and benefit more older people at the broader level of policy and infrastructure change. As a result, our results lead us to ask, has age-friendliness necessarily evolved into another version of social programing, sometimes undistinguishable from efforts executed by recreation committees, libraries, and seniors' and faith groups (e.g., Golant, 2014)? Is it possible that the age-friendly agenda has been taken up at the policy level as a cost-efficient approach to promoting aging in place (e.g., Golant, 2014; Iecovich, 2014; Scharlach, 2017), especially in rural communities and small towns where financial resources are often stretched? For example, crafting, social, and physical activity programs—'low hanging fruit' projects (Golant, 2014)—are important and can be vital to those able to participate (DiPietro, 2001). However, they are unlikely to reach those isolated or marginalized (Greenfield & Reyes, 2020; Menec & Brown, 2018). This study suggests, in fact, that rural age-friendly initiatives, at least in Newfoundland and Labrador, are often limited by funding and capacity and may be unable to consider bigger picture issues supporting aging in place. This is consistent with the findings of Menec et al. (2014) and Menec and Novek (2021), who drew upon data from other Canadian provinces. Ultimately, small-scale age-friendly initiatives largely do little to reduce the experience of being stuck in place (Erickson et al., 2012), wherein older people are forced to remain in their homes or communities despite their physical or social realities making this unsafe or inappropriate. In rural communities, in particular, the compounding effects of aging in place without necessary social, physical, or health supports is particularly problematic. Facilitating policy and infrastructure change appears inherently limited, and the publicized connection between delivering age-friendly funding and the outcome of supporting aging in place may be unfounded, as many initiatives are able only to implement quick-win strategies over long-term change.

Golant's (2014) poignant observations about "expecting too much" (p. 1) are helpful in interpreting our findings. Although there are rural age-friendly initiatives that are successful, sustainable, and have produced meaningful change for individuals and communities alike, we ask whether it is realistic to expect small committees to develop programs that meet the challenges of aging in rural regions. The absence of additional 'top-up' or even base funding from typically national, sub-national, or occasionally municipal government funders, common to most urban age-friendly funding initiatives in Canada (Menec & Novek, 2021), or the impacts of recent cuts to public spending for age-friendly initiatives following initial interest in the program (van Hoof et al., 2021), demonstrates significant state-to-community downsizing that occurs under the guise of grass-roots social infrastructure.

Our findings link to over a decade of age-friendly work internationally (WHO, 2018) and a significant body of critical rural aging literature (Skinner & Winterton, 2018; Skinner et al., 2021). With countless communities having embarked on an age-friendly journey, many initiatives are challenged to link early developmental stages with long-term viability (Russell et al., 2019) and, as was the case in this research, scope, and impact. Factors challenging rural longevity and scope paradoxically are also committees' strength—the grass-roots, community-based intentions of the global age-friendly agenda have been conceptualized as a downloading of responsibility onto communities and volunteers, risking overwhelming and burdening the voluntary sector (Wiersma & Koster, 2013). The related challenge of older voluntarism compounds this, in which older volunteers' activities and their organizations provide essential services and supports to aging communities (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019). Age-friendly initiatives' typically grass-roots, funding- and capacity-limited models may inadvertently facilitate limited scope, obstructing the reach of rural programs to marginalized older adults (e.g., Menec, 2017; Neville et al., 2021) and ignoring communities' individuality, resources (Buffel & Phillipson, 2018), and dynamism (Keating et al., 2013). Research that explicitly examines rural age-friendly sustainability and, by extension, impact, is largely absent from the academic literature, yet associated findings are fundamentally tied to the broader successes of age-friendly initiatives and their ability to support residents aging in place.

The present findings add a unique rural lens to the question of age-friendly scope. Using this lens, we ask whether one-time community grants sufficiently support the early development of age-friendly initiatives. Further, we suggest that supporting and strengthening aging in place may not, as a result, be a common outcome of age-friendly funding. Indeed, of our sample, only one community had made strides into the bigger-picture issues that support aging in place, described also in other Canadian settings by Colibaba et al. (2020). Taking this one step further, does this model thereby reduce older adults' abilities to age in place—consistent with the goals of age-friendly programs—instead strengthening the likelihood of older people becoming 'stuck in place' (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012) in a rural community touted as 'age-friendly'? In their recent review article, van Hoof et al. (2021) introduce ten key questions associated with the age-friendly movement, suggesting that, "on a global scale, an overhauled model of age-friendly communities is needed" (p. 20). The present findings bolster this comment, providing support for an updated global age-friendly model that includes a distinction between diverse challenges differentially faced by rural age-friendly implementation sites.

5.1 Limitations

The lack of rural age-friendly initiatives that have been sustained for a longer-term period limits the sampling frame from which researchers may draw; often, committees have disbanded, and it is challenging to recruit those participants. This is a limitation of the present sample, in that it excluded those who did not respond or could not be located. As a result, future research may be strengthened by a sampling frame that focuses exclusively on recruiting participants who had been involved in rural age-friendly committee work that did not sustain; or, further, those who were unable to begin the implementation stage of programing prior to termination. Second, our sample was drawn from one Canadian province under one funding umbrella, and so present findings may be unique to this jurisdiction. Extending future research to compare across provinces, or more broadly, across

national jurisdictions that are organized and funded in different ways would provide a more nuanced understanding of the applicability of sustainability and scope. For example, in the United States, age-friendly initiatives may begin without funding, they may receive ongoing funds from private philanthropy organizations, or they may receive funding from government entities. In contrast, in Canada, as with the present sample, age-friendly initiatives are usually funded by their respective provincial governments. By expanding upon the recommendations of Russell et al. (2019) and McCrillis et al. (2021) to pursue rural age-friendly sustainability research on a larger scale, but by also introducing an assessment of program scope, the universal applicability of the present findings may be enhanced.

6.0 Conclusion

Findings from this study of age-friendly longevity and scope in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, show that expectations for systemic change in the face of limited funding and capacity may overwhelmingly pressure (typically volunteer) initiatives, rendering the goal of age-friendly implementation unrealistic. In this way, committees are often set up for limited impact and long-term obsolescence. We have shown that rural age-friendly initiatives' limits stem from fiscal and capacity issues (e.g., volunteer reliance often inherent to rural communities) (Ryser & Halseth, 2014), restricting change to immediate, small-scale social programing; considering bigger issues affecting the aging population was mostly impossible. From a macro perspective, sustainability challenges are thought to stem from a withdrawal of upper-tier government funding and services, downloading responsibility onto initiatives that, in this case, were funded by small, one-time grants earmarked to spearhead collaboration and change. Consistent with literature that questions the challenges of resource gaps (both human and fiscal) (Neville et al., 2021) and a lack of overarching policy changes and investment in aging rural communities (Menec & Novek, 2021), our findings challenge systemic withdrawal of services and supports from small aging rural communities and reallocation of resources toward one-time grants. This may lead one to question the assertion that supporting and strengthening aging in place can generally be linked to the allocation of age-friendly funding.

Ultimately, we advocate for further research into the limits of the age-friendly movement, particularly in rural contexts, including via the often-neglected perspectives of older residents, municipal age-friendly committee members, and also that of disbanded age-friendly committees or those who did not begin implementation. We view these varied perspectives as essential for reframing Golant's (2014) question not as to whether we are expecting too much, but instead what can be realistically expected of the age-friendly movement when implemented in rural communities? It is important to note that we are often expecting too much of rural communities in many ways; this is the nature of living in precarious environments. However, resourcefulness and innovation have always been hallmarks of rural communities when facing challenges such as population aging. As a result, learning more from not only their precarities but their prospects is important in supporting not just age-friendly initiatives, but also in supporting rural community sustainability more broadly.

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