

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Promising Practices for Supporting Rural Older Voluntarism

Authors: Erika Snowden, Mark W. Skinner, Elizabeth Russell, &
Amber Zapletal

Citation:

Snowden, E., Skinner, M. W., Russell, E., & Zapletal, A. (2026). Promising practices for supporting rural older voluntarism. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 21(3), 20–39.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



**BRANDON
UNIVERSITY**
Founded 1899



Promising Practices for Supporting Rural Older Voluntarism

Erika Snowden

Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
esnowden@trentu.ca

Mark W. Skinner

Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
markskinner@trentu.ca

Elizabeth Russell

Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
elizabethrussell@trentu.ca

Amber Zapletal

Trent University
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
amberzapletal@trentu.ca

Abstract

There is evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the precarity of voluntarism that supports vulnerable older adults in rural communities and small towns, where volunteers are often older residents themselves. To better understand how volunteer-based programs that serve and engage older rural residents coped with the pandemic, this research examines how three programs in rural Canada addressed challenges of serving their aging communities during the pandemic, and how these findings can address the sustainability of similar programs. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with program administrators and volunteers at three volunteer-based programs in one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions. The programs each engage an aging volunteer base and focus on recreation, heritage, and community support respectively. An iterative collaborative qualitative analysis (ICQA) process provided the foundation for examining how the challenges faced by older volunteers and rural volunteer-based programs were experienced and overcome during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Six promising practices emerged, comprised of key strategies used by volunteer-based programs during the pandemic: (a) communicating while apart; (b) empowering volunteers amid the challenges of the pandemic, and recommendations for the continued sustainability of older voluntarism; (c) succession planning; (d) making use of new volunteers; (e) providing opportunities for personal growth; and (f) making volunteers feel seen and heard. The practices outlined by this study can serve as a basis for ensuring the long-term sustainability of volunteer-based programs, their engagement with volunteer bases, and the aging rural communities they serve during times of unprecedented change.

Keywords: rural aging, older volunteers, community sustainability, Canada

Pratiques prometteuses pour soutenir le bénévolat des aînés en milieu rural

Erika Snowden

Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
esnowden@trentu.ca

Mark W. Skinner

Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
markskinner@trentu.ca

Elizabeth Russell

Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
elizabethrussell@trentu.ca

Amber Zapletal

Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
amberzapletal@trentu.ca

Résumé

Il est établi que la pandémie de COVID-19 a aggravé la précarité du bénévolat destiné aux aînés vulnérables dans les communautés rurales et les petites villes, où les bénévoles sont souvent eux-mêmes des résidents âgés. Afin de mieux comprendre comment les programmes de bénévolat, qui servent les résidents ruraux âgés et favorisent leur participation, ont fait face à la pandémie, cette étude examine la manière dont trois programmes du Canada rural ont relevé les défis liés au soutien de leurs communautés vieillissantes durant cette période, et comment ces enseignements peuvent contribuer à la pérennité de programmes similaires. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entrevues et de groupes de discussion avec des responsables et des bénévoles de trois programmes reposant sur le bénévolat, situés dans l'une des régions rurales du Canada connaissant le vieillissement démographique le plus rapide. Ces programmes mobilisent chacun un effectif de bénévoles vieillissants et se concentrent respectivement sur les loisirs, le patrimoine et le soutien communautaire. Une démarche d'analyse qualitative collaborative et itérative (ICQA) a servi de base pour examiner comment les défis rencontrés par les bénévoles âgés et les programmes ruraux reposant sur le bénévolat ont été vécus et surmontés pendant et après la pandémie de COVID-19. Six pratiques prometteuses ont été identifiées, reflétant des stratégies clés adoptées par ces programmes pendant la pandémie : (a) communiquer à distance ; (b) responsabiliser les bénévoles face aux défis de la pandémie (incluant des recommandations pour assurer la pérennité du bénévolat des aînés) ; (c) planifier la relève ; (d) tirer parti des nouveaux bénévoles ; (e) offrir des occasions d'épanouissement personnel ; et (f) faire en sorte que les bénévoles se sentent reconnus et écoutés. Les pratiques décrites dans cette étude peuvent servir de fondement pour assurer la pérennité à long terme des programmes reposant sur le bénévolat, leur engagement auprès des bénévoles et des communautés rurales vieillissantes qu'ils servent, en période de changements sans précédent.

Mots-clés : vieillissement en milieu rural, bénévoles âgés, pérennité communautaire, Canada

1.0 Introduction

Across North America and elsewhere, the populations of rural communities are disproportionately older than their urban environments (Berry, 2021; Channer et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2026), and contemporary research has begun to examine the integral role of voluntarism in supporting older people in aging rural communities (Li & Tang, 2021; Philip et al., 2022). In these settings, volunteer-based programs facilitate aging in place (Carver et al., 2018), and residents often rely upon volunteer-based programs to provide essential social services that would otherwise be absent, or in larger urban centres (Colibaba et al., 2021b; Yarker et al., 2020).

Research on the emergent phenomenon of older voluntarism (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019) has found that the interdependent relationship between aging rural communities, older residents, and the volunteer-based programs that serve them is complicated by the fact that it is often older residents themselves who comprise the group of volunteers providing services to their peers (Li & Tang, 2021; Philip et al., 2022). Coupled with the notion of precarity in later life (Grenier et al., 2020) and the unique challenges faced by older rural volunteers (Colibaba et al., 2021a; Hu et al., 2024), this phenomenon raises questions about the sustainability of rural older voluntarism, and how we can best support volunteer-based programs, older volunteers, and the aging rural communities where they live.

The global COVID-19 pandemic intensified the need to understand the key strategies for sustaining the volunteers and volunteer-based programs pivotal to aging rural communities. The pandemic presented new challenges for older voluntarism, jeopardizing the personal sustainability of volunteers who either stopped volunteering due to public health guidelines (i.e., closure of program or social distancing measures; Henning-Smith, 2020; Mao et al., 2021) or for personal reasons (i.e., health implications of contracting COVID-19) (Colibaba et al., 2021c). While many programs pivoted their operations to include virtual volunteering (Lachance, 2021), the precarious nature of the pandemic for rural older voluntarism put the sustainability of the older volunteers, the volunteer-based programs and the aging rural communities at risk (Colibaba et al., 2021c; Herron et al., 2025).

To address the timely need to sustain and support voluntarism in aging rural communities, this article highlights promising practices for sustaining rural older voluntarism at three rural volunteer-based programs in Ontario, Canada: key strategies that rural volunteer-based programs have implemented and can continue to use to support and maintain their volunteer bases throughout the pandemic and into the future. By identifying the ways that volunteer-based programs mitigated the challenges that were brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic crisis, we can inform the development of research, policy and practice that foster rural older voluntarism, in turn facilitating aging in place and rural resilience.

2.0 Scholarly Context

2.1 Rural Older Voluntarism

Contemporary research into the phenomenon of ‘older voluntarism’, which refers to the activities of older volunteers and volunteer-based programs that engage older adults as volunteers and/or service users (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019), has explored the ways rural communities are managing the complexity of rural aging (Colibaba et al., 2021c; Stoecker & Witkovsky, 2023). This body of work highlights the role

of older voluntarism in supporting community resilience by filling gaps in service provision created by rural restructuring, with older volunteers taking on roles in sectors across the voluntary sector spectrum (Halseth et al., 2019; Russell, 2024). By sustaining essential services, older voluntarism supports aging in place and broader rural community development (Carver et al., 2018; Noack & Federwisch, 2020; Russell, 2024).

The shift in responsibility of rural service delivery is complicated by challenges associated with the aging demographic of rural volunteers. Older volunteers face challenges such as accessibility, health issues, and transportation (Stathi et al., 2021), which are exacerbated in the rural context due to a lack of available volunteers, resources, and geographic distribution (Hu et al., 2024; Wiersma & Koster, 2013). These older volunteers often bear the burden of responsibility for service provision, placing strain on both the volunteers as individuals and the volunteer-based programs they serve to meet the needs of their communities (Colibaba et al., 2021c; Davies et al., 2021). Understanding how rural older voluntarism can be sustained and supported is therefore critical to long-term viability of aging rural communities and the reciprocal relationships among volunteers, programs and place.

2.2 Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a time of unprecedented change and increased vulnerability for older adults because of both heightened health risk and ageist stigma (Meisner et al., 2020). Lockdowns, social distancing and isolation public health measures created barriers to participation and inclusion for many older adults (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Henning-Smith, 2020), along with increased risk of isolation (Pickering et al., 2023). In the Canadian context, older adults' volunteer participation across Canada decreased 18% on average in May–April of 2020, often due to forced suspension of programming at volunteer-based programs (Lebenbaum et al., 2024; O'Dea et al., 2024; Statistics Canada, 2022). Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that older adults were strongly motivated to volunteer—or continue volunteering—during the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021; Principi et al., 2022; Sellon et al., 2021) and contributed significantly to their communities during this time when possible (Gott et al., 2024).

2.3 Learning From Pandemic Experiences of Rural Older Voluntarism

Research into voluntarism has sought to address the challenges faced by older volunteers by highlighting strategies implemented by volunteer-based programs and organizations in response to issues of retention, recruitment, and sustainability. In general, evidence suggests that improving communication between volunteers and their organizations, clarity surrounding volunteer roles and tasks, and meaningful support from program administrators can help to encourage the engagement and retention of older volunteers (Sellon, 2014; Stathi et al., 2021). Strategies such as job-sharing, where multiple volunteers are trained in the same role, and flexible volunteer scheduling have been identified as best practices to combat the issue of overburdening volunteers (Crittenden et al., 2021; Kritiz et al., 2021). In the rural context, building peer relationships among volunteers through the workshops and social opportunities has been suggested to strengthen the sustainability of voluntarism, as rural organizations may struggle with personnel shortages and isolation due to low population density (Hu et al., 2024).

While contemporary research has somewhat examined both how volunteer-based programs are addressing the challenges of rural older voluntarism (e.g., burnout, retention, sustainability) and the impact of the pandemic on rural aging and voluntarism (Colibaba et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hu et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2021; Socci et al., 2023), there is a timely need to investigate the overlap between these two branches of inquiry by examining the promising practices of sustaining older rural voluntarism during and after the pandemic crisis. This article seeks to address this gap in literature by providing a case study of three volunteer-based programs in one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions, examining the ways volunteers and administrators navigated and responded to the challenges of rural older voluntarism during and just after the pandemic.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 A Rural Canadian Case Study

To identify the promising practices that contributed to the sustainability of rural older voluntarism during the COVID-19 pandemic, a case study was undertaken in 2022–2023, in the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, in one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions: Peterborough County, Ontario. Peterborough County (pop. 148,000, more than 25% of whom are over 65) is situated on the treaty and traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg approximately 100km northeast of Canada's largest metropolitan area—Toronto. The county is comprised of diverse rural settlements typical of rural Canada including small towns (pop. <10,000), dispersed agricultural settlements, rural-recreational (cottage country) settlements, and rural–urban adjacent suburbs of the City of Peterborough, providing a case study context that typifies Canada's diverse rural contexts (Adams & Taylor, 2009).

The case study was conducted in collaboration with three volunteer-based programs that serve and engage older residents as volunteers; each program represents a typical category of volunteer initiatives (recreational, heritage, and community support) found in rural Canada (Ryser & Halseth, 2014). The programs were selected to complement existing studies on rural older voluntarism in Peterborough County completed by the co-authors (see Colibaba et al., 2021a; 2021b, 2021c; Skinner et al. 2026; Zapletal et al. 2026). Two of the volunteer-based programs are situated in rural townships of Peterborough County serving local populations, while the third operates out of the City of Peterborough and takes a regional approach to program implementation. Together, these cases represent variation in geographic scale and service delivery while sharing core features common to volunteer programs in rural Canada, including reliance on volunteer labour, limited organizational capacity, and strong community embeddedness (Ryser & Halseth, 2014).

Recreation centre. The Buckhorn Community Centre (BCC) is located in the township of Trent Lakes, which has a population of 6,439 (32% of which is over 65 years) who live in a rural–recreational (cottage country) setting. The BCC is a volunteer-based, non-profit community recreation centre that aims to offer activities, events and programs to meet the recreational, social, and cultural needs of the Buckhorn community (Buckhorn Community Centre, n.d.). The BCC's program offerings include sport and fitness activities, recreational programs, dinner theatres, community events, and arts and craft festivals. Along with five staff members, the BCC is supported by over 400 volunteers serving in roles such as administrative support, board of directors membership, special event coordination, and program delivery.

Heritage Museum. The Lang Pioneer Village Museum (LPVM), is located in the township of Otonabee-South Monaghan, which has a population of 7,087 (24% of which are over the age of 65 years) who live in small town and agricultural (farming) settings. The LPVM is an outdoor museum that aims to preserve, promote and authentically recreate the history of Peterborough County (Lang Pioneer Village Museum, n.d.). The museum hosts touring, educational programming and community events featuring over 30 restored and furnished historical buildings. Along with six staff members, over 150 volunteers serve at the LPVM in roles such as interpreter, historical tradesperson, musician, researcher, sewer/costumer, and special events helper.

Community support. The New Canadians Centre Peterborough (NCC, n.d.) operates out of the city of Peterborough, Ontario, which has a population of 83,651 (24% of which are over 65 years) to implement immigrant integration programming regionally across Peterborough County. The NCC is a non-profit charitable organization dedicated to supporting immigrants, refugees, and other newcomers to the Peterborough region (New Canadians Centre Peterborough, 2024); they provide support for housing, employment, English learning, immigration and settlement, and various community services. Along with 47 staff members, the NCC is served by over 200 volunteers who act as refugee support, tutors, youth program leaders, administrative support, and special event helpers.

3.2 Participants and Data Collection

With ethics approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board, a total of six administrator interviews and 20 volunteer focus group discussions were conducted between September 2022 and November 2023. Eight focus groups were conducted with volunteers at the BCC, seven with volunteers at LPVM and five with volunteers at the NCC. Focus groups varied in size, ranging from in size from three to six participants in each session. Participants were 56 administrator and volunteer participants ($n=6$ administrators, $n=50$ volunteers) across the three volunteer-based programs (BCC $n=25$, LPVM $n=20$, NCC $n=11$). The average age of all participants was 67 years (ranging from 30 to 92 years); however, volunteer participants were primarily older adults (72% over 65) with an average age of 70 years. All administrator participants were under the age of 65, with an average age of 44 years. Forty-two participants (75%) identified as female, 13 (23%) identified as male, and one (0.02%) identified as genderqueer. These characteristics are consistent with demographic trends of older rural Canadian volunteers (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Research began with a web-based search of program websites and staff directories of each volunteer-based program to identify key administrator staff who work directly with volunteers (e.g., volunteer coordinator, program manager). Once identified, an email was sent inviting them to an introductory meeting to discuss the project and to seek support recruiting volunteer participants. Once the program's involvement was established in these initial meetings, administrators were invited to participate in an individual, semi-structured interview. Administrators facilitated volunteer participant recruitment by circulating an invitational email to all volunteers on their program's Listserv, wherein interested volunteers were instructed to contact the research team directly via telephone or email. To elicit diverse perspectives from a range of participants, all volunteers in each program were targeted during recruitment, regardless of age, role, or length of engagement with the program. The volunteers who responded were self-selected and all volunteers

who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria of current involvement in the program were invited to participate; no volunteers were declined or excluded. This recruitment strategy was intended to capture a broad range of perspectives across differences in volunteers' roles, levels of responsibility, length of involvement, and patterns of engagement with the program.

Semi-structured interviews with program administrators ($n=6$) were 60–90 minutes in length and held in private meeting spaces at each of the collaborating volunteer-based programs. Interviews covered topics ranging from an overview of the program, volunteer involvement, and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the program and its volunteers. Focus group discussions ($n=20$) with volunteers ($n=50$) were an average of 90 minutes in length and were held either at private meeting spaces at each volunteer-based program, or nearby at Trent University's Centre for Aging and Society. Focus group discussions covered topics such as the experience of volunteering with a collaborating program, the implications of COVID-19 on the participants as individuals and as volunteers, and what they see as the future of volunteering at their respective programs.

3.3 Analysis

With participants' informed consent, interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect their anonymity, participants were identified by assigned pseudonyms, program and age/gender demographics in analysis and reporting. Following a process established by Russell et al. (2022), two researchers conducted an iterative, collaborative, qualitative analysis. Transcripts were reviewed, and a code list was systematically developed based on reviewer notes and emergent themes, then tested against the transcripts, and revised for clarity and reliability. The final code list contained seven codes relating to promising practices, age, conflict, change, social connection, volition, and sustainability. Transcripts were then manually coded in NVivo by two members of the research team according to the code list: the first coder assigned code(s) to raw sections of the transcript data, and then the second coder reviewed those pre-coded transcripts crosschecking and editing the first coding against the code manual. Data from each code was agglomerated across participants and code summary documents were created—one per code—each including all text from that code, agglomerated across participants. Holistically analyzed for emergent themes that speak to the challenges, successes, and key strategies employed during the pandemic, these documents formed the evidence from which the study's key findings developed. Reliability was strengthened by this use of multi-collaborator coding built into each stage of analysis (Hemmler et al., 2022).

4.0 Findings

The analysis of the data elicited from this case study of Peterborough County highlighted the challenges faced by the volunteers and volunteer-based programs in rural Ontario during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the strategies implemented to address them. Informed by the data on perspectives and experiences of program administrator and older volunteer participants, six themes, framed here as promising practices, emerged from the findings (see Table 1). Two promising practices that helped to support and sustain rural older voluntarism during the pandemic were identified, as well as four promising practices to support post-pandemic sustainability.

Table 1. *Promising Practices Emergent from the Findings*

Promising Practice	Strategies Implemented
Communicating while apart	▪ Use social media, email and/or posters to highlight key information like program updates and health/safety guidelines ▪ Check in with volunteers over the telephone, Zoom and email to foster strong connections ▪ Develop and communicate clear protocols to address challenges during times of crisis
Empowering volunteer autonomy amid health concerns	▪ Build flexibility into volunteer roles to encourage engagement ▪ Acknowledge differences and encourage volunteers to make choices that fit their needs ▪ Be transparent about volunteer roles and tasks (e.g., physical strain, level of responsibility)
Succession planning	▪ Formally document tasks, planning and processes ▪ Be creative and proactive with recruitment (e.g., volunteer ‘bring a friend’ days) ▪ Create mentorship opportunities to build succession ▪ Plan ahead and talk about who will step in when key personnel retire
Making use of new volunteers	▪ Be aware of who is called on first and who may be forgotten ▪ Encourage newer volunteers to take on leadership roles; be prepared to advocate for them ▪ Prioritize balancing new/longtime volunteers during event planning
Providing opportunities for personal growth	▪ Organize workshop/training opportunities for volunteers to develop knowledge and skills ▪ Encourage volunteers to bring their interests and experience to the role ▪ Let volunteers try new things—do not typecast based on their career experience
Making volunteers feel heard and appreciated	▪ Create opportunities for volunteer feedback and ideas ▪ Thank volunteers with light refreshments ▪ Provide sufficient notice of scheduling and events; respect volunteers’ time and availability ▪ Create opportunities for volunteers to connect and socialize with staff and each other ▪ Showcase volunteer contributions in newsletters and emails (e.g., volunteer profiles)

Note. This table presents actionable strategies for implementing the Promising Practices emergent from the findings.

4.1 Promising Practices for Coping With the Pandemic

Communicating while apart. Open, transparent communication from program administrators was found to be a key practice to keeping volunteers engaged with the program during the pandemic. Participants from all three programs indicated that programs used a variety of outlets such as social media, email updates, telephone check-ins and physical postings on doors and windows to keep them updated regarding safety measures, COVID risk, and the general goings-on of their programs through the uncertainty of the pandemic:

They kept us up to date by email in terms of what was going on with the vaccinations clinics that they held here, and the mask mandates and they kept us all informed. Because of that, I personally felt very safe coming back [...] I felt looked after. Communication is key. (Gail, BCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 67 years)

Along with communicating necessary information around the changing risk and health measures during the pandemic, it was important for the volunteer programs to maintain personal connections to volunteers during the time of crisis. For example, participants from LPVM described how staff organized Zoom check-ins with participants and made a point to call and speak with them over the phone. Participants felt that these efforts made a positive impact on their involvement with the program by making them feel valued and providing the opportunity to feel connected with the program, its staff, and other volunteers who were also unable to participate. These informal communication practices reflect the expanded role volunteer-based organizations assumed during the pandemic, as they worked to address not only the gap in service delivery but also the social and emotional impacts of prolonged isolation among older adults in their communities. In the context of reduced formal supports and rapidly shifting public health guidance, maintaining personal contact became a key institutional strategy all three programs used for sustaining volunteer engagement and organizational continuity, highlighting the reliance on maintaining relationships during periods of crisis.

Empowering volunteer autonomy amid health concerns. Participants described the value of being able to make their own choices about returning to volunteering during the pandemic, informed by the risk of the specific volunteer role and their own comfort level. Many participants expressed concerns of contracting or spreading the virus, a fear that was exacerbated by vulnerability due to age: “I think health issues was the number one fear. We saw a lot of older volunteers step back, no matter if they had the vaccine or not, no matter if they wanted to wear a mask or not” (Joan, BCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 60 years). To try to mitigate these challenges, administrators described adapting programming and events to make volunteers feel safer, such as by implementing masking requirements and gathering outdoors. While some volunteers chose to step back, especially seen in participants from BCC and LVMP, others, such as those from NCC, expressed that confidence in the safety protocols implemented by their volunteer-based program encouraged them to return.

Transparency about the requirements of the volunteer role (e.g. time commitment, physical requirements, indoor vs. outdoor), options for outdoor or remote volunteer opportunities, and masking/cleaning protocols were all identified as ways programs could promote volunteer autonomy. At the NCC, for example, administrators

provided volunteers on their refugee-support teams with the option to be matched with a family based on COVID-19 vaccination status:

They can make the choice and know [they're] going to be matched with somebody who is vaccinated or unvaccinated. In terms of having that security for their own health that's worked well. It's not an unknown, they like to make that choice and set their own boundaries. (Rebecca, NCC Administrator, Age: 33 years)

Participants described how having options for participation allowed them to rejoin volunteering at their own pace. This meant feeling safe enough to join outdoor gatherings or being aware of the program's masking requirements allowed volunteers to have the information they needed to choose to return. In general, participants felt that being in control of how they volunteered throughout the pandemic was a positive practice that fostered continued engagement. This flexibility reflects how volunteer programs adapted to shifting public health directives by giving their volunteers decision-making capacity—allowing individual volunteers to assess risk based on their own health, comfort and circumstances. Providing multiple pathways for participation worked as a strategy to balance volunteer safety and program sustainability during the pandemic.

4.2 Promising Practices for Post-Pandemic Sustainability

Succession planning. Succession planning was a prevalent discussion among participants from all three volunteer-based programs. Participants worried about the sustainability of their programs in cases where key staff and volunteer leaders were assumed to be the keepers of important knowledge, skills, and processes: “We take so much for granted....So, volunteerism isn't just [doing], it's making sure that you prepare the next people too” (Jean, BCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 71 years). Many participants feared that when leaders eventually moved on, their knowledge and expertise would be lost, feeling it was vital that their programs would be “wise enough to tap into the wisdom [of existing staff/volunteers] before the wisdom leaves” (Maureen, NCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 70 years). These concerns highlight the structural vulnerability of volunteer-based programs that rely heavily on long-term, older volunteers and administrators as keepers of organizational knowledge.

Key succession planning practices identified were documenting processes, mentoring new and upcoming staff/volunteers, and proactively seeking replacements for key personnel who could be trained over time. Volunteers and administrators alike emphasized the value of leveraging volunteers' wealth of knowledge through mentorship, developing and distributing resources like tip sheets and guides, and facilitating discussions for knowledge exchange: “From teams like ours that are working well, they could get some people who are willing to spend [time] with a team that's struggling to help them” (Maureen, NCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 70 years).

Overall, administrators and volunteers all expressed the importance of succession planning for the continued existence and success of their programs. In doing so, they viewed succession planning not just as a practical issue, but as an important way to support program continuity and resilience amid demographic change and future uncertainty.

Making use of new volunteers. Many participants expressed frustration that work often fell to the same experienced volunteers who had been with the program the longest. Participants, especially those at the BCC, indicated that newer volunteers were often underutilized, either because they were not made aware of the program's needs or because it was easier for leaders to call upon those longstanding volunteers they knew to be reliable. For longstanding volunteer leaders, this sometimes led to feelings of being overburdened: "We tend to be on the top of the list to get asked to do things, but I wish we were second on the list because I think there are other volunteers out there...new volunteers that want to get involved" (Anne, BCC volunteer, Female, Age: 62 years). Increasing awareness of who was being called upon first and most often was vital to making use of new volunteers, which could contribute to program sustainability.

To make the most out of new volunteers, participants suggested providing opportunities for new volunteers to role shadow more experienced peers, to engage a balance of new and experienced volunteer for events, and to be transparent about the roles available to everyone, as expressed by this self-described occasional volunteer:

At the beginning of the year you should say 'We would like to do these activities, but we need somebody to take the lead on this, this, and this and part of that is being a team leader and we'll train you on it' (Karen, BCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 76 years).

These volunteer perspectives show that participants viewed skill development, mentorship, and transparency as key ways to maintain volunteer capacity, particularly where formal training resources are limited. Along with planning for the eventual retirement of key volunteers/administrators, participants expressed the need to engage newer volunteers and how this process can help set volunteer-based programs up for success and sustainability and contribute to their resilience in future times of crisis—such as a pandemic.

Providing opportunities for personal growth. The COVID-19 pandemic provided time for many volunteers to reconsider their volunteer commitments and reassess their engagement with their volunteer-based program. Providing opportunities for volunteers to learn new skills, try out new roles, and build on their interests was found to be a key motivator for continued service. Most participants felt that their respective programs gave them a chance to have new experiences and explore their interests in a way that was mutually beneficial for themselves and the program, for example, through the creation of new roles, developing skills via workshops/training, or matching volunteers to a role that interested them. As this volunteer said: "If I have an interest and it's something that could be beneficial, then they're happy to let us run with it" (Donna, LPVM Volunteer, Female, Age: 61 years).

Some volunteers enjoyed using past career experience in their volunteer roles and not having their skillset underutilized. At LPVM, volunteers with agricultural, sewing, printing, and trade skills were particularly sought after. Administrative and financial skills were in demand at the BCC, while the NCC identified retired educators as ideal volunteer candidates. This need for specific skillsets often contributed to the roles volunteers were assigned to. However, participants cautioned that being 'typecast' according to their skillset risked leading to burnout

or a lack of motivation: “As an accountant, you're continually being asked ‘Will you be the treasurer? It’s not very much work!’ But I was sick of that” (Lynn, NCC Volunteer, Female, Age: 71 years). Being flexible and facilitating role rotation among volunteers often came up as a recommendation for keeping volunteers engaged and motivated.

Looking at the declining rates of voluntarism throughout COVID-19, volunteer engagement is a key issue to the sustainability of volunteer-based programs as we continue to navigate the post-pandemic era. Providing opportunities for volunteers to grow with the program can have a positive impact on fostering volunteers who are committed, engaged, and motivated.

Making volunteers feel heard and appreciated. Creating an environment where volunteers feel valued and heard as contributing members of their program was described as essential to combat feelings of disconnect many volunteers felt during and coming out of the pandemic. Volunteers who felt their contributions were appreciated were encouraged to return to volunteering once pandemic restrictions were lifted. For many participants, this was as simple as sharing a meal after an event. In addition to tangible acts of recognition (e.g., volunteer appreciation events), volunteers often spoke of having their time respected: “There seems to be a real focus on giving the volunteers sufficient notice of events and opportunities” (Bonnie, LPVM Volunteer, Female, Age: 59 years). These practices highlight how small, relational gestures contribute to rebuilding volunteer engagement and trust following periods of disruption.

Participants felt that fostering connections between volunteers, staff, and the program itself would improve their experiences as volunteers, ultimately increasing their personal sustainability. Participants pointed to volunteer biographies/showcases in newsletters and opportunities to connect with other volunteers, staff, and co-op students as practices they would like to see incorporated in their programs to promote the work volunteers do. At the program level, these connections were understood as reinforcing volunteers’ sense of belonging and recognition within the organization, which participants linked to their willingness to sustain engagement over time.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study presents a timely addition to literature examining the sustainability of rural older voluntarism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through focus group discussions and interviews with volunteers and administrators at three volunteer-based programs in one of Canada’s most rapidly aging rural regions (Peterborough, Ontario), this article presents data that highlights six promising practices that helped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on participants’ volunteer engagement, and for strengthening the sustainability of these volunteer-based programs in the future. The research findings identified communicating while apart and promoting volunteer autonomy amid health concerns as key strategies that helped to mitigate pandemic-specific challenges faced by the collaborating volunteer-based programs. Succession planning, making use of new volunteers, providing opportunities for personal growth and making volunteers feel heard and appreciated were key practices for sustaining the programs more generally in the future.

Stemming from government lockdown measures and health risks, the pandemic raised challenges of isolation, disconnect, and personal sustainability for volunteers,

particularly those older residents serving in rural communities (Colibaba et al., 2021c; O’Dea et al., 2024). Further, many volunteer-based programs were forced to suspend activities during this time, leading to concerns about the ability to continue operating throughout and after the crisis (Colibaba et al., 2021b; Lebenbaum et al., 2024; Statistics Canada, 2021). In line with the literature, participants expressed feeling isolated and disconnected from their volunteer activities during the pandemic. Older volunteers were also forced to examine the risk volunteering posed to their personal sustainability (e.g., health and ability) during the pandemic, contributing to concerns of program sustainability from administrators. In response to these challenges, the promising practices that emerged during this time were focused on maintaining the connection between programs and volunteer bases (e.g., through telephone check-ins) and encouraging volunteers to return to their programs in whatever way they felt safest (e.g., providing outdoor opportunities), as these strategies served to directly address the immediate concerns of volunteer retention. These findings highlight the importance of the relationship between volunteers and their volunteer-based programs in times of uncertainty and can be used to inform responses to future global crises, such as global health events and economic upheaval, where the sustainability of rural older voluntarism can become precarious.

When discussing what they felt the volunteer-based programs could do to remain sustainable in the future, the present research found that both volunteers and administrators pointed to strategies that would ensure a viable, ongoing source of volunteer support through recruitment and retention. These strategies, which often addressed concerns of burnout and labour distribution, echo practices outlined broadly across the voluntarism literature (Crittenden et al., 2021; Kritz et al., 2021; Stathi et al., 2021). This suggests that while the challenges faced by participants in the present study may be exacerbated by rural factors, there is some overlap in how volunteer-based programs are addressing issues of sustainability.

Succession planning was a frequently discussed theme by volunteers and administrators alike, particularly as it pertained to the knowledge and skills of longstanding volunteers in leadership roles. Volunteer leaders are often crucial for rural community development; however, as found in the present study, volunteers can be a challenging resource to secure (Davies et al., 2021). Although many strategies to address issues of leader succession were identified (e.g., mentorship opportunities, increased recruitment), their feasibility is unclear. In the present study, many of the ‘newer’ volunteers who would typically step into these roles were older adults themselves, and thus vulnerable to the same challenges of personal sustainability of their predecessors. Proactive strategies such as documenting processes and improving the training of current volunteers sought to address these challenges with the tools currently available to the volunteer-based programs.

Many of the strategies highlighted in this article pertained specifically to the management of volunteers’ personal relationships and engagement with their volunteer-based program. Due to their reliance on volunteers to deliver services, volunteer-based programs often find themselves dependent upon the commitments and desires of their volunteers to remain sustainable. The clear focus on keeping volunteers satisfied through gestures of appreciation, opportunities for personal growth, and fostering personal relationships underscores the precarity that comes with shifting the responsibility of rural voluntary service delivery onto the third sector (Power et al., 2021; Ryser & Halseth, 2014).

From a rural community development perspective, these findings highlight how volunteer-based programs function as critical components of aging rural communities, not only supporting service provision but also contributing to social connection, local leadership, and the ability of older residents to age in place. As rural populations continue to age and formal service supports remain limited or fragmented, the sustainability of volunteer-based programs becomes increasingly intertwined with the broader social and economic viability of rural communities (Carver et al., 2018; Noack & Federwisch, 2020; Russell, 2024). In this context, the interdependence between older volunteers, volunteer-based programs, and place has implications beyond individual programs, shaping community capacity and resilience over the long term (Halseth et al., 2019). These findings point to the need for policy approaches that move beyond short-term or crisis-based support and instead invest in the ongoing development of the rural voluntary sector, including succession planning, training, and coordination, as essential components of rural community development in aging communities. This study contributes to existing work on rural voluntarism and community resilience by extending, refining, and challenging how these concepts are understood in practice. First, the findings extend research on rural older voluntarism by showing how the interdependence between older volunteers, programs, and rural communities operates not only in the context of ongoing demographic change, but also during periods of unprecedented disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Colibaba et al., 2021c; Herron et al., 2025). In the case of the Buckhorn Community Centre, Lang Pioneer Village Museum and New Canadians Centre Peterborough, sustaining older voluntarism was not simply a matter of maintaining service provision, but depended on deliberate efforts to maintain communication, support volunteer autonomy, and preserve social connection. Second, the findings refine our understanding of community resilience by illustrating how it is carried out through everyday organizational practices, such as succession planning, mentorship, and recognition, rather than existing solely as a broader community-level outcome (Halseth et al., 2019; Lundgren & Nilsson, 2023). Finally, the findings challenge assumptions that rural volunteer capacity can be relied upon without sustained support, highlighting the precarity associated with aging volunteer bases and the uneven distribution of responsibility among older volunteers (Grenier et al., 2020; Power et al., 2021). Taken together, these findings point to the need to more explicitly recognize and support the ongoing work required to sustain volunteer-based programs as a central component of rural community development.

To broaden the insights presented in this article, future research into how volunteer-based programs in aging rural communities are responding to the challenges of rural older voluntarism is crucial. The volunteer-based programs highlighted in this paper represent three areas typical of programs in rural Canada (e.g., heritage, recreation, community support); however, the rural voluntary sector encapsulates a wider range of programming than presently explored, such as agriculture, fire services, health care, housing, religious, political, and sport and recreation. Complementary analyses to the one presented here and elsewhere (Colibaba et al., 2021c) would deepen our understanding of how these varying programs respond to both acute crises, such as pandemics, and the ongoing precarity of rural aging and may reveal different strategies for sustaining rural older voluntarism. In addition, volunteer-based programs in varying geographical contexts such as in other types of rural and remote settings, as well as urban and metropolitan areas, would provide an alternative lens on how communities are responding to sustainability challenges. Research in international contexts as well, most notably examining experiences of older

voluntarism in aging rural communities of the countries in the Global South would provide an important comparison to the analysis in this paper.

By identifying the promising practices that contributed to the sustainability of rural older voluntarism in rural Ontario, Canada, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this article contributes to the timely need to understand the response from rural volunteer-based programs in addressing the precarity of serving and engaging an aging community, particularly in times of crisis. Through understanding the ways in which volunteer-based programs mitigated the challenges that were both brought on and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we can inform the development of research, policy and practice that foster sustainable rural older voluntarism, in turn facilitating aging in place and rural resilience.

Acknowledgements

The research reported herein was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant Program (SSHRC grant no. 435-2021-0395).

References

- Adams, P., & Taylor, C. (Eds.). (2009). *Peterborough and the Kawarthas* (3rd edition). Trent University.
- Armitage, R., & Nellums, L. B. (2020). COVID-19 and the consequences of isolating the elderly. *The Lancet*, 5, e256.
- Berry, E. H. (2021). Demographic ageing and rural population change. In M. Skinner, R. Winterton & K. Walsh (Eds.), *Rural gerontology: Towards critical perspectives on rural ageing* (pp. 17–28). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003019435-4>
- Buckhorn Community Centre. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://www.buckhorncommunitycentre.com/about-us/>
- Carver, L. F., Beamish, R., Phillips, S. P., & Villeneuve, M. (2018). A scoping review: Social participation as a cornerstone of successful aging in place among rural older adults. *Geriatrics*, 3(4), 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/geriatrics3040075>
- Chan, W., Chui, C. H. K., Cheung, J. C. S., Lum, T. Y. S., & Lu, S. (2021). Associations between volunteering and mental health during COVID-19 among Chinese older adults. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 64(6), 599–612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2021.1904079>
- Channer, N. S., Biglieri, S., & Hartt, M. (2021). Aging in rural Canada. In M. Hartt, S. Biglieri, M. W. Rosenberg, & S. Nelson (Eds.), *Aging people, aging places: Experiences, opportunities, and challenges of growing older in Canada* (pp. 141–148). Cambridge University Press.
- Colibaba, A., Russell, E., & Skinner, M. W. (2021a). Rural volunteer fire services and the sustainability of older voluntarism in ageing rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 88, 289–297. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.08.016>

- Colibaba, A., Skinner, M. W., & Russell, E. (2021b). A critical view of older voluntarism in ageing rural communities: Prospect, precarity and global pandemics. In M. Skinner, R. Winterton & K. Walsh (Eds.), *Rural gerontology: Towards critical perspectives on rural ageing* (pp. 287–299). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003019435-28>
- Colibaba, A., & Skinner, M. W. (2019). Rural public libraries as contested spaces of older voluntarism in ageing communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 70, 117–124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.08.007>
- Colibaba, A., Skinner, M. W., & Russell, E. (2021c). Rural aging during COVID-19: A case study of older voluntarism. *Canadian Journal on Aging/La Revue Canadienne Du Vieillissement*, 40(4), 581–590. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980821000386>
- Crittenden, J., Hartford, A., & Coleman, R. (2021). *Supporting older workers and caregivers who volunteer: Examples from the field*. Maine Center on Aging Research and Evaluation. https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/moca_research/45
- Davies, A., Lockstone-Binney, L., & Holmes, K. (2021). Recognising the value of volunteers in performing and supporting leadership in rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 86, 136–144. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.05.025>
- Gott, M., Wiles, J., Morgan, T., Williams, L., Morgan, K., Black, S., Koh, A., Fanueli, E., Xu, J., Goodwin, H., Pilimalawwe, D., & Moeke-Maxwell, T. (2024). Older people's contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic response. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 36(6), 1396–1416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2024.2384322>
- Grenier, A., Phillipson, C., & Settersten, R. A. (2020). Precarity and ageing: New perspectives for social gerontology. In A. Grenier, T. Phillipson, & R. A. Settersten (Eds.) *Precarity and ageing: Understanding insecurity and risk in late life* (pp. 1–16). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447340874.002>
- Halseth, G., Markey, S., & Ryser, L. (Eds.). (2019). *Service provision and rural sustainability: Infrastructure and innovation*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781138483736>
- Hemmler, V. L., Kenney, A. W., Langley, S. D., Callahan, C. M., Gubbins, E. J., & Holder, S. (2022). Beyond a coefficient: An interactive process for achieving inter-rater consistency in qualitative coding. *Qualitative Research*, 22(2), 194–219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794120976072>
- Henning-Smith, C. (2020). The unique impact of COVID-19 on older adults in rural areas. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 32(4-5), 396–402. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1770036>
- Herron, R. V., Lawrence, B. C., Newall, N. E. G., & Ramsey, D. (2025). Older adults' resilience in rural places: Explaining the role of place, time, and social connection during COVID-19. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 114, Article 103579. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103579>

- Hu, R. X., Kayser, J., Dunkle, R. E., & Tarr, J. (2024). Needs and challenges for volunteering in rural areas: Lessons learned from a survey of a service organization in rural Michigan. *The Gerontologist*, 64(8), gnae080. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnae080>
- Kritz, M., Ntoumanis, N., Mullan, B., Stathi, A., & Thøgersen-Ntoumani, C. (2021). Volunteer motivation and retention of older peer walk leaders: A 4-month long investigation. *The Gerontologist*, 61(7), 1118–1130. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnaa159>
- Lachance, E. L. (2021). COVID-19 and its impact on volunteering: Moving towards virtual volunteering. *Leisure Sciences*, 43(1–2), 104–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1773990>
- Lang Pioneer Village Museum. (n.d.). *Our museum*. <https://www.langpioneervillage.ca/about/our-museum/>
- Lebenbaum, M., De Oliveira, C., McKiernan, J., Gagnon, F., & Laporte, A. (2024). COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing policies, and the non-profit sector volunteer force. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 53(1), 274–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640231163782>
- Li, K., & Tang, F. (2021). Voluntarism. In L. W. Kaye (Ed.), *Handbook of rural aging* (pp. 415–419). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003128267-78>
- Lundgren, A. S., & Nilsson, B. (2023). “For the good of the village”: Volunteer initiatives and rural resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 102, Article 103104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2023.103104>
- Mao, G., Fernandes-Jesus, M., Ntontis, E., & Drury, J. (2021). What have we learned about COVID-19 volunteering in the UK? A rapid review of the literature. *BMC Public Health*, 21, Article 1470. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11390-8>
- Meisner, B. A., Boscart, V., Gaudreau, P., Stolee, P., Ebert, P., Heyer, M., Kadowaki, L., Kelly, C., Levasseur, M., Massie, A. S., Menec, V., Middleton, L., Sheiban Taucar, L., Thornton, W. L., Tong, C., van den Hoonaard, D. K., & Wilson, K. (2020). Interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches needed to determine impact of COVID-19 on older adults and aging: CAG/ACG and CJA/RCV joint statement. *Canadian Journal on Aging = La Revue Canadienne Du Vieillessement*, 39(3), 333–343. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980820000203>
- New Canadians Centre Peterborough (n.d.). *About us*. <https://nccpeterborough.ca/about-us/>
- Noack, A., & Federwisch, T. (2020). Social innovation in rural regions: Older adults and creative community development*. *Rural Sociology*, 85(4), 1021–1044. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12333>
- O’Dea, E., Wister, A., Li, L., Canham, S. L., & Mitchell, B. (2024). Volunteering among older adults and effects of ethnic minority status before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: Longitudinal analyses of the CLSA. *Canadian Journal on Aging / La Revue Canadienne Du Vieillessement*, 43(4), 599–610. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980824000229>

- Philip, L.J., Maclaren, A. S., Wallace, C., & Adamczyk, K. (2022). Participation and civic engagement in Scotland: The importance of contributions from older adults. In R. Spanring, W. Smidt, & C. Unterrainer (Eds.), *Institutions and organizations as learning environments for participation and democracy: Opportunities, challenges, obstacles* (pp. 255–276). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17949-5_12
- Pickering, J., Wister, A. V., O’Dea, E., & Chaudhury, H. (2023). Social isolation and loneliness among older adults living in rural areas during the COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review. *BMC Geriatrics*, 23, Article 511. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-023-04196-3>
- Power, A., Hall, E., Kaley, A., & Macpherson, H. (2021). Voluntary support in a post-welfare state: Experiences and challenges of precarity. *Geoforum*, 125, 87–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2021.07.003>
- Principi, A., Lucantoni, D., Quattrini, S., Di Rosa, M., & Socci, M. (2022). Changes in volunteering of older adults in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of motivations. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(22), Article 14755. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192214755>
- Russell, E. (2024). Rural places and aging: Between aging in place and stuck in place. In M. Cutchin & G. Rowles (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and place* (pp. 277–292). Edward Elgar. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802209983.00026>
- Russell, E., Skinner, M. W., & Fowler, K. (2022). Emergent challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly initiatives: Qualitative findings from a Canadian age-friendly funding program. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 34(2), 198–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2019.1636595>
- Ryser, L., & Halseth, G. (2014). On the edge in rural Canada: The changing capacity and role of the voluntary sector. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research*, 5(1), 41–56. <https://doi.org/10.22230/cjnser.2014v5n1a162>
- Sellon, A. M. (2014). Recruiting and retaining older adults in volunteer programs: Best practices and next steps. *Ageing International*, 39(4), 421–437. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-014-9208-9>
- Sellon, A., Newsham, T. K., DuMont, R., Hollifield, C., & Thomas, A. (2021). Challenges and benefits: Volunteerism among older adults during COVID-19. *Innovation in Aging*, 5(Supplement_1), 931. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geroni/igab046.3368>
- Skinner, M. W., Zapletal, A., Snowden, E., & Russell, E. (2026). On the prospect and precarity of rural older voluntarism. *Geoforum*, 168, Article 104480. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2025.104480>
- Socci, M., Principi, A., Di Rosa, M., Quattrini, S. & Lucantoni, D. (2023). Motivations, relationships, health and quality of life of older volunteers in times of COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability*, 15(13), Article 10739. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151310739>

- Stathi, A., Withall, J., Agyapong-Badu, S., Barrett, E., Kritz, M., Wills, D., Thogersen-Ntoumani, C., & Fox, K. R. (2021). Mobilising people as assets for active ageing promotion: A multi-stakeholder perspective on peer volunteering initiatives. *BMC Public Health*, 21, Article 150. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-10136-2>
- Statistics Canada. (2021, April 23). *Volunteering counts: Formal and informal contributions of Canadians in 2018*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210423/dq210423a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2022). *Volunteers and challenges businesses face in volunteer recruitment and retention, fourth quarter of 2022* [Dataset]. Government of Canada. <https://doi.org/10.25318/3310061701-ENG>
- Statistics Canada. (2026). *Annual demographic estimates, rural and small town and functional urban areas: Interactive dashboard*. [Data visualization tool]. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2021030-eng.htm>
- Stoecker, R., & Witkovsky, B. (2023). Elder civic engagement and rural community development. *Ageing International*, 48(2), 526–546. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12126-022-09488-4>
- Wiersma, E. C., & Koster, R. (2013). Vulnerability, voluntarism, and age-friendly communities: Placing rural northern communities into context. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 8(1), 62–76. <https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/683>
- Yarker, S., Heley, J., & Jones, L. (2020). Stewardship of the rural: Conceptualising the experiences of rural volunteering in later life. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 76, 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2020.04.011>
- Zapletal, A., Skinner, M.W., Snowden, E., & Russell, E. (2026). Rural insights into the contested spaces of older voluntarism. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 124, Article 104107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2026.104107>