



# **Understanding CORE – How Online Support Facilitates Independent Living for Older Canadians**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Global Report on Ageism identified that one out of two people are ageist, with examples including negative stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against older persons (Krug et al. 2022). Samuel (2022) points out that ageism has been shown to increase social isolation and loneliness, impacting more than one million older adults in Canada (Gilmour & Ramage-Morin, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic “exacerbated preexisting inequalities in our systems and societies that have long been in place—inequalities that only further our descent into social isolation...(with) a parallel pandemic rooted in loneliness and mental health” (Samuel, 2022, pp. 36-37). Technology and online platforms provided support and connection for older adults during the pandemic, especially critical when meeting face-to-face was not a safe or viable option.

In their research on older adults’ sense of connectedness with online social contacts, Chen et al. (2024) focused on post-COVID-19 impacts and found that older people who stopped attending social groups had the lowest connectedness ratings and quality of life in contrast to individuals who continued to engage with social groups in some format. While social groups have been found to be of benefit when individuals experience a shared identity with the group (Jetten et al., 2014), Chen et al. (2024) note that it is unclear to what extent this shared identity can be maintained in older adults through their virtual social interactions.

This report focuses on how online platforms and virtual communities can best support older adults and the organizations that serve them, ensuring that older adults

remain connected with a sense of belonging. It also aims to identify gaps in current online programming and approaches.

## **2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### ***2.1 Demographic Landscape of Aging in Canada***

In Canada by 2037, the growth rate of older persons aged 65 and older is expected to increase by 68% (CIHI, 2017). Between 1977 and 2017, Canada's population of older persons has more than tripled in size (CIHI, 2017). Additionally, the subset population of older adults over the age of 85 has experienced rapid growth, with a 12% increase between 2016 and 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). People aged 85 and older represented 2.3% of the Canadian population in the 2021 census, and is anticipated to increase with population growth peaking between 2031 and 2036, and potentially tripling to almost 2.5 million people by 2046 (CIHI, 2017, Statistics Canada, 2022). While the population growth of older persons in Canada necessitates access to comprehensive health and social care (Statistics Canada, 2022), it further emphasizes the importance for older adults to age-in-place at home and in their community.

### ***2.2 Aging in Place***

The concept of aging in place (AIP) refers to the personal preference to age in one's home instead of moving to a long term care residence (Forsyth & Molinsky, 2021). The authors note that aging in place operates at multiple scales, including the person's home, their neighbourhood, and the wider context which can include the physical place, social connections, and needed services (Forsyth & Molinsky, 2021). In their qualitative research study, Wiles et al. (2011) found that aging in place provided older adults with a

sense of attachment, practical benefits of security and familiarity, and a sense of identity through autonomy.

However, Rogers et al. (2020) offer the suggestion that there are emerging terms that are more encompassing such as “aging in the community” and “aging in the right place.” According to Blanchard (2013, p. 7) aging in the community evolved as a “grassroots movement of like-minded citizens who come together to create systems of mutual support and caring to enhance their well-being, improve their quality of life, and maximize their ability to remain, as they age, in their homes and communities.” Aging in the community promotes older persons’ agency in meeting their social needs for meaningful connection and belonging as well as support in accessing resources (Forsyth & Molinsky, 2021). Alternatively, Golant (2015) proposed “aging in the right place,” which allows for greater options such that an individual can remain living in the community or residence of their choice.

### **2.3 What is Community?**

Mannarini & Fedi (2009) suggest that the purpose of small communities is for individuals to connect through continuing interactions, common interests, identity, and shared values. The notion of community can be challenging as it may assume a sameness of identity, focusing on unity rather than diversity, and cohesion instead of conflict (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009). This makes it difficult to define ‘community,’ however the authors note that the meaning of community generally assumes that it is socially constructed, and develops from social interactions and negotiation (Cohen, 1985; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009). It may be possible then for individuals to identify themselves

as members of different communities, each of them fulfilling specific needs, including contradictory ones (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).

#### ***2.4 What is Sense of Community?***

Sense of community (SOC) refers to an individual's experience of their community (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009). Sarason (1974, p. 1) defined it as “the sense that one was part of a readily available mutually supportive network of relationship” (Sarason, 1974, p. 1). People need to feel this community membership, and any social change fostering it increases individual well-being and the quality of social life, and can apply to geographic, organizational and/or relational communities (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009). McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a theoretical model of SOC consisting of four dimensions: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

#### ***2.5 Using Technology to Stay Connected***

Aging is often noted for being accompanied by a contracting social network due to retirement, death of family members and friends, ailing health and lack of mobility. With societal changes to the family structure, where family is no longer seen as a reliable source of support due to economic pressures and mass migration (Harley et al. 2016). Local communities are not structured to provide companionship and social support to older persons, furthering the propensity for social isolation and loneliness (Harley et al. 2016).

Older persons historically use communication technologies to remain connected, particularly with geographic distance, through letter-writing, telephones, and telegrams. The inventions of the computer and the internet provided new opportunities for social

contact, online community and maintaining social ties, through interaction and collaboration in 'social dialogue' (Harley et al. p. 106). However when it comes to older adults' use of the internet, email remains most popular as a way to stay connected with family and friends (Harley et al. 2016). There has been reluctance to use online social networking initiatives, with older persons pursuing computer technology to maintain established relationships, rather than as a strategy to create new social connections (Harley et al. 2016). The reasons for their limited engagement is not well understood, however the authors (2016) note that lack of privacy is of concern, as well as interactions which are perceived as superficial or potentially harmful and abusive to older persons.

While some older adults use 'elder-specific online communities' (Harley et al. 2016, p. 106) to connect with their cohort in the pursuit of shared interests and activities, most social networking platforms, such as Facebook, are not seen as meaningful sources of social connection for older adults (Harley et al. 2016). However the authors (2016) suggest that creating opportunities for older persons to engage in peer learning may facilitate understanding about online platforms and online communities which may be more in alignment with their motivations and challenges.

## ***2.6 Older Adults' Use of Technology and Virtual Supports to Age in Home and Community***

An AGE-WELL poll was conducted in 2020 by Environics Research, with 2,026 Canadians over the age of 50 interviewed about their use of the internet and technology. The results included:



- 76% reported feeling confident using technology;  
88% of Canadians aged 65+ use the internet daily;
- 30% of those 65+ used streaming services;
- 52% of Canadians aged 50+ had a tele-health appointment in the previous three months;
- Over a quarter (29%) of Canadians 65+ use social media for “health, wellness and/or independence”;
- Among those 65+ who use social media, 68% use Facebook, 40% use YouTube, 19% use Instagram, 18% use Twitter, and 16% use WhatsApp; 13% of those 65+ engage in online activities such as book clubs and games.

The survey found that the majority of users agree that technology helps them to maintain relationships, reduce social isolation, pursue hobbies, maintain mental health, stay safe, independent, and active (AGE-WELL, 2020). In its 2022 survey, Statistics Canada (2023) reported that older adults 65+:

- 89.6% used technology for emails,
- 76.9 % used technology to access news,
- 75.2% watched content on video sharing websites,
- 73.7% used technology for social networking websites (Facebook),
- 69.3% researched info on health, and
- 21.8% used technology for formal training or learning through an organization or institution.

AGE-WELL contends there are two primary challenges to address regarding older adults use of technology; firstly that technology is user-friendly and inclusive of people living with disabilities and secondly, technology is accessible and affordable such that it addresses the divide between older persons who have access to digital devices and technology, and those who do not.

## ***2.7 Older Persons: Local Communities Versus Online Communities***

Research has shown that there are characteristics of physical places and virtual spaces which can promote or deter community engagement (Harley et al. 2016). Sharing a common geography and physical space can often lead to community involvement for older people although not necessarily of shared interests. Physical places can bring people together to share a daily life experience, at a park, at a cafe, in the lobby, at the bus stop, connecting as acquaintances without expectation of a long term connection. They may offer the sense of 'being known' in a local community, which develops over time (Harley et al. 2016, p. 113). In some cases these local spaces can be a source of lasting reciprocal friendships (Harley et al. 2016).

While older adults may experience community engagement in virtual spaces, the nature of shared space is focused on interests, ideas and activities (Kamalpour et al. 2021). A shared interest or a purposeful discussion can be motivation for older persons to engage with an online community (Harley et al. 2016, Vargo and Lusch, 2011).

Online networking sites such as Facebook may offer both communal activities for older adults and group membership with their peers, promoting a sense of independence with opportunities for meaningful engagement and making new friends (Harley et al. 2016). Bakardjieva (2005) highlights the importance of 'warm experts'

when teaching older people to use the Internet, i.e. people who the older learner knows, that have superior knowledge of computers, technology and the Internet, but also have a personal connection with and a level of trust that allows them to support their learning in the virtual space.

## ***2.8 Communities of Practice***

Wenger notes that he and a colleague, Lave, created the concept of community of practice as a learning model (2011). He theorized that communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning, where members of a community connect in shared activities related to an issue of importance that matters to its members (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2011). In 2011, he further defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and (want to) learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2011).

It is defined by knowledge (exchange) and exists because its members value participating in the learning space of the community of practice. Wenger (1998) notes that a community of practice differs from a network as its focus is on a specific issue of importance to its members rather, not simply a cluster of relationships. It bears ‘an identity as a community’ and may inform the identities of its members (Wenger, 1998). It is the shared learning and interest of its members that encourage a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In 2011, Wenger added that this process takes time and ongoing interactions between its members. Furthermore, members of a community of practice are practitioners who develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and approaches to address recurring issues.

## **2.9 Overview of Community-Based Senior Serving (CBSS) Sector**

The community-based senior serving (CBSS) sector is made up of a vast network of public, private, and not-for-profit organizations. These institutions form the backbone of communities across Canada (Healthy Aging Core Canada, <https://healthyagingcore.ca>). Organizations serving older adults play a critical role in helping Canadians age at home in the community. The Community-Based Senior's Serving (CBSS) sector has an essential role in promoting healthy aging and bridging the gap between the healthcare system and the community (Parliament of Canada, n.d).

## **2.10 Impact of CBSS Organizations**

The CBSS sector provides a range of supports to older adults including transportation services, meal delivery, financial & legal support, information/referral & advocacy, mental & physical health support, social engagement, caregiver support, well-being supports, home supports, supportive living, end-of-life care, and recreational centres (Healthy Aging CORE Alberta, n.d-d).

Older adults consistently express a desire to age in their homes and communities for as long as is feasible (NIA, 2021). The support of senior-serving sector organizations can facilitate aging at home, preventing or delaying the stress and costs of moving to acute and/or long term care while sustaining their dignity and sense of independence (Healthy Aging Core Alberta website).

Healthy Aging CORE Alberta notes that link workers, who are non-clinical professionals in community-based organizations, support clients in connecting to relevant community resources which benefits both older adults and their communities. Older adults consistently demonstrate that they are top contributors in their

communities; they are active as volunteers, donors, caregivers, and politically-engaged citizens in their local communities (Healthy Aging CORE Alberta, n.d-d). Furthermore, they often serve important roles as caregivers for their friends and family members including young children, indicating the benefits of older adults to age at home for their own health and wellbeing, and for their broader community as well.

## **2.11 The C.O.R.E. Online Platform - History and Purpose of CORE**

Barbara McMillan developed CORE (Collaborative Online Resources and Education, “CORE”) in 2018 as a result of consultations funded by United Way and the BC government to examine the community-based senior serving (CBSS) sector and what the sector needed in order to develop and ultimately serve seniors better. As noted, earlier, the CBSS sector is made of different entities—small grassroots, large organizations, local government-run, non-profit—all of which support older adults to remain in their homes and communities, and live as independently as possible.

There were two recommendations: firstly, to develop a knowledge hub where CBSS organizations could connect on an ongoing basis, share information, connect about research, bridge research and practice, learn from each other, share model programs and training opportunities; and secondly to transition from single-year funding to multi-year funding, so that “organizations could focus on their work rather than constantly focused on filling out grant applications” (McMillan, 2024). The government of British Columbia and the United Way organization committed to those recommendations.

In 2017, the first Healthy Aging Summit was held and approached the CBBS sector as a network. McMillan explored the potential vehicle or platform to connect the

disparate organizations. An interim advisory group became a longer term CBSS sector leadership council that would guide CORE, be the voice of the sector and provide direction and guidance around Healthy Ageing programs.

In visioning the idea of CORE, there were certain stipulations: there would be no businesses and the site had to be easy to navigate. The idea was that CORE would not be a website, but rather an interactive platform to connect and strengthen the CBSS network, involving mentoring, peer group discussion groups, resources, calendars for training, webinars and news.

The intention was for the CORE British Columbia platform to be replicable so that other provinces as well as the national CORE Canada could be built using the same platform. It was launched in 2018-2019 and the federal minister of seniors provided funding for CORE Canada. In 2020, when COVID-19 hit, the Alberta government contacted Barb McMillan about creating CORE Alberta based on the model from B.C. There was a realization that an urgent response to COVID-19 needed to be coordinated and a virtual platform became a critical necessity.

The audience for CORE is the CBSS network, many of whom are seniors, rather than individual seniors. The CORE sites are accessible to everyone, anyone can view them, but in order to join and participate in the groups, individuals must meet the criteria of being part of the CBSS sector. CORE provided a way for the different entities to connect with each other, learn from each other, share their experiences and concerns, and to create a collective voice. It also provided the ability to recognize patterns, analyze data and provide improvements for better or more strategic activation, and optimize the value of the CBSS sector.

A leadership council was set up based on the initial advisory group in 2017. It was felt to be important to formalize the advisory group for the United Way to be able to bring the diverse voices of the sector to the table. It ranged from between 20 to 25 people and was very intentionally representative of geographically rural and urban parts of the province, and also the different types of CBSS organizations. For example, local government, senior centres, multicultural organizations running seniors' programs, LGBTQ+, Indigenous and the different generations within healthy aging. The leadership council is independent, and their role is to advise and provide guidance on CORE, as well as other program areas, serving a two-way opportunity to get grassroots input when organizing regional consultations.

## **2.12 CORE Platforms Statistics: Users, Members, and Groups (Table 1.0)**

	<b>Total Users</b>	<b>Members</b>	<b>Newsletter Subscribers</b>	<b>Groups</b>	<b>Webinars</b>
<b>CORE Alberta</b>	10,000	2,068	2,901	17	-
<b>CORE British Columbia</b>	N/A	2,518	1,674	15	10 in 2023
<b>CORE National Canada</b>	13,000	N/A	-	11	-

## **2.13 Models of Online Communities**

The following four case studies represent community organizations which have successfully created and fostered online communities for older adults. The organizations are: Art Your Service, Centre for Brain Health and Innovation (CABHI) LEAP Program, CompanionLink and GenWell.

### Case Study 1: Art Your Service

Art Your Service (AYS) promotes itself as an 'online community for thriving older adults'...With meaningful programs and experiences. It is a virtual platform designed to engage older people with 'easy-to-access' online programs including exercise classes, wellness lectures, book clubs, discussion groups, creative arts, and social events. The founder and owner, Jen Tindall, established Art Your Service to address the loneliness and social isolation many older adults experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and has since expanded to include caregivers who also benefit from the online programs. AYS has broadened its access to senior centres in the province of Ontario, which support older adults to age-in-place and connect with others from their home. AYS offers a selection of live classes daily as well as an on-line library of recorded programs.

#### **Art Your Service tailors its online platform for older adults by:**

1. Making the online platform **accessible and user-friendly**. Registration for the platform occurs initially and there is no additional registration required to attend events and programs. There are no passwords or codes needed to access classes and events. Every morning, participants receive an email in large font with a list of the programs and a large button to enter their selected event. Once they press the button, they arrive into the meeting. People can arrive and leave as they wish.
2. Every Friday, AYS delivers a **weekly calendar of scheduled events** so that older adults can plan their programs to meet their individual schedules.



3. The **owner of AYS hosts all the events and acts as moderator** who addresses technological issues. She welcomes participants to each event, informs them about upcoming weekly events, does a land acknowledgement, and spotlights the facilitator. Participants are able to see her at online events, so if they have any problems they can e-mail her for assistance.
4. **Skilled facilitation** is a key component of AYS. It promotes a sense of community, belonging, and a safe, trusting environment. The focus of facilitation is on social interaction and interactive events. Facilitators of each program encourage discussion and 'chit-chat' during events, valuing participants' contributions to the group. Facilitators spend time before the class to say hello and after the class to answer questions and receive feedback about the program.
5. AYS promotes **diversity and inclusion** by having diversity among its facilitators and staff. Diverse staff creates a sense of safety for its range of participants, who feel more comfortable when there is meaningful representation of their lived experience, and provides a safe space for older persons of all backgrounds and abilities.

### **Case Study 2: CABHI's LEAP Program 55+**

In 2022, the Centre for Aging and Brain Health Innovation (CABHI) launched an online community called Leap. The Leap platform provides older adults with an opportunity to participate in contributing their lived experience and apply it to innovations that can promote good quality of life and aging in place in community. Leap is positioned as an inclusive virtual community that involves older persons and their

caregivers in meaningful ways. In doing so, Leap members build social connections, learn together, co-design and co-create solutions to real-life issues, and have access to mental, physical and cognitive supports. A foundational aspect of Leap is its advocacy of age-friendly and intergenerational community wherein older persons are valued, respected and seen as contributing members of society.

**CABHI Leap incorporates older adults into their online platform in the following ways:**

1. In 2014, CABHI Leap implemented a senior's advisory panel in its governance structure which serves as an advisory body to ensure that CABHI Leap addresses relevant problems and has a sense of what the older adult community needs. Its fundamental belief is the importance of having the involvement and input of older adults into their innovation activities.
2. Putting into practice the belief in the potential and unique abilities of older adults. Understanding that older adults bring a different level of wisdom, crystallized intelligence and lived experience to issues, innovations and ideas, and that their brain works in a different way.
3. While the Leap online platform can have a degree of rigidity because of the actual platform and its technology specifications, it is important to be as agile as possible on the platform which includes having trained facilitators who are able to adapt communication and help identify what the priorities are of the group of older adults, as opposed to just delivering content based on the curriculum.

4. It is important to identify older individuals who would benefit from participating on the virtual platform. During the onboarding process, it is important to build relationships with older adults before connecting them with the platform. This can include relationship-building that may take months, even years, before having taken months on-boarding an older adult onto the platform. This also serves to avoid tokenism of older adults on the platform.
5. Connection and online participation with older adults is promoted on the platform. Before an online event, the platform is open so that people can connect beforehand. For example, older adults may start to arrive onto the platform about 20 minutes before to talk and reconnect after taking similar courses. They may start to, with permission, connect virtually outside of the platform or in real life, depending on where they are.

### **Case Study 3: Companion Link**

CompanionLink is a Canadian organization that promotes the social and emotional wellness of seniors by offering virtual one-on-one friendships, direct-impact programming, and mentorship opportunities with compassionate, well-trained volunteers. Their aim is to alleviate social isolation and loneliness, foster intergenerational learning, and celebrate the value and contributions of older persons.

CompanionLink recruits, screens and trains University student-volunteers who are prepared to make an ongoing commitment and engage in weekly friendly calls to a senior-friend living at home or in long-term care. The core activity of CompanionLink is one-on-one connection between the generations, intentionally fostered into a friendship. Friendship is the most powerful aspect of the program and can lead to the most

meaningful outcomes.

**CompanionLink approaches the online platform to meet the needs of older adults:**

1. It built the entire organization to support the path of student-volunteers to friendship with older adults through its online platform. It offers online training, an intake process, extensive online communication with the volunteer and in-person training as a complement, preparing the volunteer to develop friendship with the senior.
2. It created a suite of training modules to the student-volunteers for their upcoming volunteer experience and also build their aging literacy; it develops their empathy, teaches social skills, and hones their communication skills, all of which set them up for a friendship with their senior-friend.
2. The student-volunteer and senior-friend collaborate to co-create a life history project using an online platform or the telephone. This activity teaches the younger volunteer how to make a friend; what to say and how to start a conversation. While learning these skills, ostensibly to put in practice with a senior who they think they are helping, in fact helps them and positively impacts the social well-being of both individuals.
3. Regular communication is critical to friendship building and friendship maintenance, and the online platform supports consistency. It alleviates barriers such as inclement weather, illness, and geographic distance.

4. Facilitation includes set scaffolded pieces of training. Many training sections are optional, based on circumstance, with the goal of friendship between student-volunteer and senior-friend. They need to be engaging and exciting for the participants, and with extra support and pacing as required for each person.

#### **Case Study 4: Genwell**

Genwell is an organization whose vision is to address social isolation and loneliness through education, empowerment and catalysis about social health and promoting face-to-face interactions. Their guiding message is “social health cannot be done alone...it requires population-level engagement.” In addition to targeting social connectedness in schools, workplaces, seniors residences and communities, Genwell focuses specifically on connecting older adults with its “Genwell for Seniors” Program. It offers a ‘Digital Social Health Toolkit’ to encourage social health in the virtual environment with strategies to help older adults connect online and build healthy connection habits.

**GenWell promotes the following aspects related to older adults virtual connection:**

1. Technology is a wonderful supplement to human connection, but it is not a replacement. Nonverbal cues are often missed in the digital connection. Many older people are able to start conversations around personal connection, and do it better than others, compared to the transactional need that we usually have when we contact someone.

2. GenWell recognizes that asking older adults to get more social is not as helpful since many older individuals do not feel that they can do it. GenWell promotes the need for other people to step in and provide support, and emphasizes the importance of a societal approach to making social connections. Their solution to social isolation and loneliness is to defocus on any one group and instead focus on our disconnected world recognizing that we are in this together for the health and wellbeing of our society.
3. Educate older adults to understand why human connection is important to them as individuals and to the people around them. In the interview with Genwell's founder and CEO, Peter Bombacci, he noted that educating everyone is critical so that each person recognizes that "we are part of the solution for our own sense of connection and also for the connection and that sense of community with others."
4. Empower older adults in their capacity to connect in their communities, and the individuals in their immediate surroundings - online and in person - contribute to each other's sense of connection and sense of inclusion.
5. Catalyze older adults as a community through intentional online campaigns. GenWell uses its online platform to remind and catalyze older adults, and Bombacci suggests, "to do something about social connection" such as Loneliness Awareness Week. It takes place in June and is a global effort to raise the collective consciousness around loneliness and its impact on people. There

is also “GenWell Weekend” which happens two times of the year during seasonal transitions, when people struggle to build and maintain their social connections.

## **2.14 Theoretical Framework**

Blanchard et al. (2011) propose a model of trust for the creation of a sense of virtual community (SOVC). The authors suggest that identity theory and social exchange processes are both necessary for the development of trust. Social exchange processes include observation, active engagement, information exchange and emotional social support (Blanchard et al. 2011). These social exchanges help in the formation of group norms in online communities which contribute to the sense of virtual community (SOVC). Identity theory refers to the process where we create our identity and learn the identity of others.

The authors define trust at the group or collective level as the ‘belief that a group makes efforts to behave in alignment with its commitments, and does not take advantage of another even when an opportunity presents itself’ (Blanchard et al., 2011, p. 77; Cummings & Bromiley, 1996), whereas social trust is trust which is directed towards the group not specific individuals. Therefore, in virtual communities, social trust is especially important in interactions, such as exchange of information and social support, among the entire group as an entity and not specific individuals. Group members experience a sense of virtual community through feelings of identity, belonging and attachment, which plays a key role in developing trust, and this sense of virtual community provides the link between norms and the development of group trust (Blanchard et al. 2011).

Online groups may offer greater anonymity; group members of online communities may want to create 'online' identities and engage in great self-disclosure than in face-to-face groups (Blanchard et al. 2011). However, when members feel they are identifiable (not anonymous), they show a stronger awareness of group norms and adhere to group behaviour with increased accountability to/in their virtual community (Blanchard et al. 2011). The authors (2011) propose that exchange of online support at the group level, including observing the exchange of support between others, has positive outcomes for the group's functioning, particularly in the creation, adherence and commitment to group norms, and supports the process of developing online trust.

### **3. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

The purpose of this research project is to understand the impacts of virtual platforms on participants' experiences of connectedness, belonging, and on knowledge sharing and exchange. It specifically focuses on how online platforms can best support community-based senior serving (CBSS) organizations to ensure that older adults remain connected, have a sense of belonging, and identify gaps in current online programming and approaches.

#### ***3.1 Research Questions***

**The following questions guide the research project:**

1. How does the sense of community and belonging in an online environment focused on serving older adults, such as the CORE platform, differ from traditional, face-to-face settings and other professional support networks, and what factors contribute to these distinctions?



2. What role do virtual communication tools and platforms, such as CORE, play in shaping and fostering a sense of community in online environments which serve older adults? How can these tools be optimized to enhance the online community experience for older adults?
3. In what ways does facilitation of online communities need to be adapted to effectively build trust, strong social connections and a sense of belonging among members, including older adults, considering the absence of physical proximity and non-verbal cues?
4. How do online platforms address issues of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and the needs of diverse participants in online communities?
5. How can online platforms be leveraged to create inclusive spaces, with and for older adults, considering the potential for anonymity and the absence of face-to-face interactions that might impact individuals' sense of belonging?
6. What are the best practices to support community-based senior serving (CBSS) organizations nationally to facilitate a sense of community online?

### ***3.2 Research Methods: Data Collection and Data Analysis***

#### **3.2.1 Qualitative Research Methods**

This qualitative research project involved interviewing participants from CORE to understand their experiences, and to explore benefits and challenges of using the CORE platform for engagement. The research also seeks to describe the needs of CORE participants and how local community-based seniors services organizations

(CBSS) can further support older persons in online communities to age-in-place with dignity.

### **3.2.2 Data Collection**

Data collection involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through the CORE network with a view to access participants with a diverse range of online experiences and varying engagement with CORE such as its groups, resources, events, and communication tools. In addition to data collected from the administrators and moderators of the CORE platform, two open groups were selected for their high engagement from and with their group members.

There were two focus groups; one focus group was conducted with three administrators of CORE Alberta and CORE British Columbia, and one focus group was conducted with four members of the leadership team of CORE Alberta's Intergenerational Linkages Group which is an open group to CORE members. A focus group interview guide was created to provide a framework for the discussion and questions sent to individual participants in advance of the focus group.

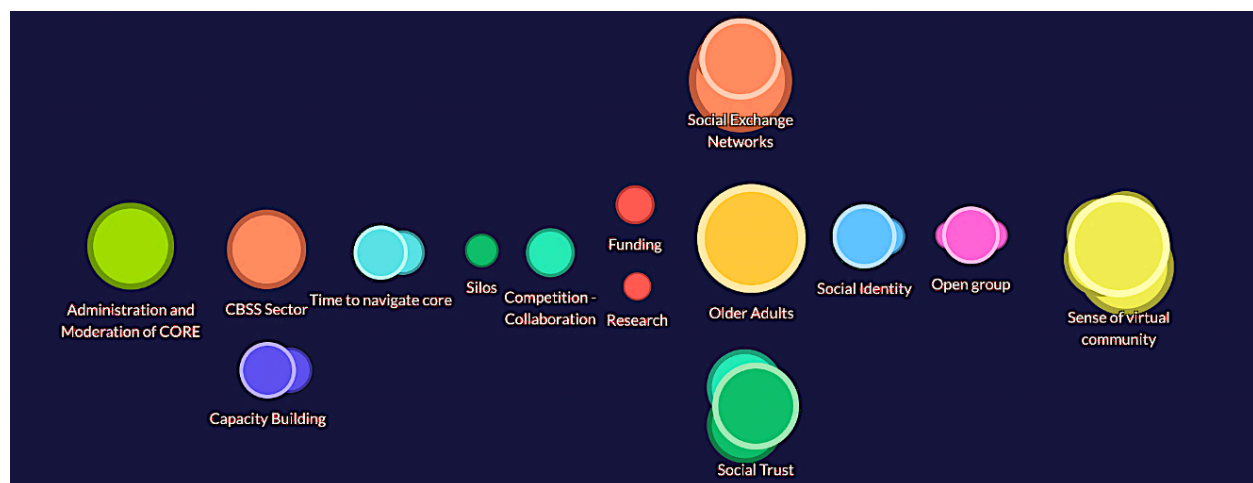
The research study included two semi-structured interviews: one with the lead of CORE Alberta's Men Shed group, which is also an open group on the CORE platform, and one interview with a team member of the Intergenerational Linkages group. The interviewees received the questions in advance to allow time for reflection. Finally, the creator of the Healthy Aging CORE Platform was interviewed about its history and background, and to provide context about the online site. There was an attempt to recruit CORE members who were not active participants on the platform, however due to lack of information and analytics this was feasible at this time.

### 3.2.3 Data Analysis

Analysis of the focus group and interviews was conducted using a deductive process of thematic analysis. The researcher started with preconceived themes based on Blanchard et al.'s (2011) theoretical model of trust for the creation of a sense of virtual community (SOVC), suggesting that identity theory and social exchange processes are both necessary for the development of trust. Using Quirkos qualitative data analysis software for closed coding, the following results were obtained.

### **3.3 Results**

Thematic analysis of the collected data identified five main themes, (1) Administration and moderation of virtual platform, (2) Social exchange networks, (3) Social trust and facilitation, (4) Older adults, and (5) Sense of virtual community, and four sub-themes were identified: (i) CBSS connections, (ii) Challenges with the CORE platform, (iii) Complement of in-person and virtual contact, and (iv) Inclusion and accessibility.



**Themes (Figure 1.)**  
*Figure 1.0*

### **3.3.1 THEME: Administration and Moderation of CORE Platform for CBSS Sector**

Healthy Aging CORE virtual platforms are rich repositories of resources, content and information for practitioners and professionals who work in senior-serving organizations. Moderation of the CORE platform includes continuous updating of resources and materials to ensure that content remains relevant and topical. Members and users of the CORE platform refer to the platform when they are searching for specific information such as grant funding, specific projects, or resource sharing. As one CORE participant noted, “It’s on an as-needed basis. If we need something to do our work, we’ll go and search CORE, and we will reach out (to other members) or people will reach out to us.”

In addition to maintaining the upkeep of the content, moderators of the CORE platform serve in the role of virtual community developers, noting the places where organizations could connect in the virtual sphere and helping establish those connections. CORE is an example of a virtual platform that has communities of practice and groups working on specific issues related to older adults.

The moderators of CORE Alberta and CORE BC are the key technological supports for events; their role includes taking responsibility for the technological aspect of online events, introduce and support the facilitator, train participants how to communicate and respond at an online event, lead the land acknowledgment, provide the feedback link for participant evaluation, and deal with technological glitches.

The moderators also provide training to members, such as CORE 101, on how to use the platform: to find and access resources, to post events and information, how to

join closed and open groups, how to contact fellow CORE members and to participate in discussions. Administrators normally facilitate events and workshops which they have planned on the CORE platform, or they support the facilitation of the events which groups have planned and organized. They are a consistent presence on the CORE platform.

**(i) Subtheme: Community-Based Seniors Serving (CBSS) Connections**

The CORE platform is designed for the community-based senior serving (CBSS) sector. Its target audience is CBSS practitioners and professionals. The purpose of this virtual platform is to connect the sector, wherein the CORE platform is the tool that provides opportunities for groups to form, webinars to be hosted, and for professionals to connect and get to know each other.

Three participants shared that one main benefit of the virtual platform is having one central location where CBSS practitioners can find quality information for and about their sector. Another identified asset of the virtual platform and virtual events is the ability to cross geographic distances; CBSS practitioners can connect with each other across the country and internationally.

When considering the ripple effect for older persons and how they will benefit from CORE, moderators and administrators of the virtual platform note that the seniors themselves may not look at the website, but their community-based service providers are more likely to refer to and use CORE. However an interviewee noted that their impression of the CORE platform was broader, “Until recently, I wouldn’t have said that it was targeting CBSS organisations. I saw it as anyone working in the ‘silver sector’.”

While the site includes older persons, they are included as part of the CBSS sector and are viewed, as one participant suggested, 'a champion for services'. Although the CORE platform was intended to be a virtual space for the community senior serving sector to connect, collaborate on key issues and discuss systems change, it was apparent that there are older adults in the space. One CORE moderator shared,

There are older adults in those spheres. They work in the CBSS sectors, they are on the boards, they're in volunteer roles, they are actively interested in policy. So the space is for the older adults who are trying to make change in those areas.

One goal of the CORE platform is to help CBSS practitioners to understand how the CORE platform can help them in their role and provide additional resources that will be of benefit while saving time. The CORE moderators share many resources and publish newsletters with information so that CORE members can view what has recently been added without needing to visit the platform regularly. The functions most used on CORE, in order, are: Funding, events page, resources page, news and programs pages. Newsletters are sent out bi-weekly formatted as themes related to healthy aging such as transportation, accessibility, physical activity or supports for newcomers.

Administrators of CORE noted that the search function, wherein CORE members are able to find what they are searching for, is a functional aspect of the virtual platform that they want to improve. A related comment by a CORE group participant was a recommendation to incorporate a calendar feature that would promote interactivity, including teaching their group members how to use it, "It would benefit (CORE members) to know all of the different (offerings) on the CORE platform."

A leader of the CORE Men's Shed group proposed that the CORE virtual platform offered its group members ongoing access to information from recorded events,

We try to tell men's stories through the CORE platform. By using the CORE platform, we can bring all the Men's Sheds leaders together for discussion group. We are doing a zoom session, but we're doing it on the CORE platform, so that the recording is kept on the CORE platform for use again and again and again.

## **(ii) Subtheme: Challenges with the CORE Platform**

### **Capacity Building**

The CORE Administrators received feedback evaluations about capacity building including the type of content that is shared about events, general group engagement, the ability for users to start groups on certain issues and the ability for community of practises (provincial or national) to collaborate on issues. One participant observed that having a calendar would promote interactivity and users could easily learn how to use it and be beneficial in knowing the different offerings on the CORE platform on a particular date.

CORE members and users were less likely to post information themselves, and rather rely on the CORE moderators to create and share content. One administrator shared, "We (receive) few posts from community members... It's a little scary (for users) to navigate that and get comfortable or figure it out."

### **Time to Navigate CORE**

Administrators, moderators and facilitators all noted that finding time to use the CORE platform was the biggest challenge, acknowledging the limited time of CBSS

practitioners to navigate the platform or to visit the site regularly. As one CORE administrator stated,

We know our users, they're overwhelmed by a lot of work so how do we make the website as simple and easy to navigate? CBSS practitioners may have great aspirations for how they would like to connect in the virtual space and they just don't always have the capacity to do it how they want to.

Additionally, a participant of Intergenerational Linkages shared that from the perspective of a CBSS professional:

CORE is easy to use but there's so much there. There are pages and pages of information. There is a search option, but it is a lot. I think (it would help to) understand what the CORE platform is and how it can help you in your role. There are so many different platforms where people gather information and CORE is another one to look into, right. So how is it going to benefit me in reality, and is it going to save time? If it is going to provide me with additional resources, I'm going to take the time to explore the website and learn a little more.

### **3.3.2 THEME: Social Exchange Networks**

The CORE platform helps to build a sense of community for practitioners and professionals of CBSS organizations, connecting people around specific topics and, to some extent, facilitating some personal connections. One CORE group member offered,

The camaraderie that we have after so many years of (pandemic) isolation, the (intergenerational linkages) group is like a community, we have something in common. We share positive aspects of life, and it just brings joy to my life and those around me.

In general, the CORE platform supports users to connect with other practitioners through the events section, for example, if they attend webinars and online events. Otherwise however, users do not usually have opportunities to connect. CORE administrators shared that CORE users can search a particular group, click on the list of group members where they can access the names and contact information for each



member. The feature of the online groups is that it offers practitioners a way to engage and share their experiences and resources. As one group participant suggested,

There is a lot of reciprocal learning from each other in these conversations. I love this group. When I think about connections, all my work is relational. That's really important to me. So, (this) CORE group itself, who organize things and are always there, is a very tight group.

Group participants discuss their experiences with each other such that it is not 'just talking'. It is a relationship-building process wherein participants understand that their opinions and perspectives are valuable, which helps to create a greater sense of community. The Intergenerational Linkages focus group participants shared positive experiences of collaborating with other CORE groups such as the Elder Abuse and Age-Friendly groups, to share and exchange knowledge:

A few years ago we connected with another group on CORE, the Elder Abuse group. We collaborated with the leader of that group and she was a speaker at our Intergenerational (IG) Cafe. The goal was to talk about how intergenerational programs help reduce elder abuse. We collaborated there and we could probably do more of that.

But we don't do it on a regular basis. We have also connected with the Age-Friendly community of practice and we see the potential collaboration, because age-friendly doesn't mean seniors only, it involves seniors and other age groups in our communities. So that is something we're going to explore this year.

### **(iii) Subtheme: In-Person and Virtual contact complement each other**

The CORE platform allows CBSS practitioners to meet online and engage in virtual discussion groups, creating a connection that deepens when meeting at an in-person event. As one participant shared,

Making those online connections helped me to make those physical connections with people, where I've since reached out to individuals virtually to discuss our common interests or share information.

CORE moderators and administrators noted that the opposite can happen as well where CORE members may meet in person, at a regional or national event, where they chat with colleagues and make connections and new contacts. The CORE platform then offers the individuals a way to continue that conversation on a regular basis, and motivates them to join one or more of the CORE groups or communities of practice in order to share content and resources. Some users have reached out to the CORE administrators to request support to start a new group on a specific issue. One group leader noted that “connecting in person allows for intersectionality between different sectors” to learn who is doing what and how practitioners and organizations can work together. It can spark creativity and collaboration such that connecting in person was deemed invaluable. A participant from the Men’s Sheds group spoke to the difference between in-person and virtual connections,

I think the (Men) Shed groups are beginning to understand that that's the mechanism we're using to try to communicate with them. But (virtual meetings/gatherings) have their drawbacks. I mean, you can only do so much, you can't have a side conversation over a beer with two guys when you're in a virtual situation. You can, but it's lonely.

### **3.3.3 THEME: Social Trust and Skilled Facilitation**

While one of the main benefits of CORE platform is having a single place where practitioners can find information for the CBSS sector, the CORE administrators notice more connection within the CORE groups compared to the general user. Some groups are set up for community partnership building and use the online space to build those connections. Skilled facilitation was a key strategy for social engagement, information exchange and the development of social trust in the online platform.

A facilitator of a CORE open group, Intergenerational Linkages, who is an older

adult, shared many key strategies and suggestions for participant engagement on the virtual platform. She noted that her role included “pulling the (leadership) team together,” planning and scheduling meetings, and making sure online events are organized successfully. In addition, the facilitator keeps track of the registrants who attend online events or discussion groups, collects the data in a spreadsheet so the facilitator can send an email to everyone about upcoming planned events which promotes personal communication, regular attendance and relationship-building.

I get a lot (of attendees/participants) because they hear from the facilitator every time there's an event. The mailing list is also used when looking for ideas for events, and to ask if group members are interested in a topic.

Ninety per cent of the group's virtual events are interactive. They often have three speakers during a 90-minute event, and then a Q&A session either after each speaker, or at the end. With larger groups, after the speaker presents, the facilitator sends attendees into virtual breakout rooms where participants discuss the topic or issue, and then bring back ideas to the large group, similar to a conference where there are table talks. The facilitator and leadership team use the virtual breakout rooms to create space to talk in smaller groups. They pose leading questions that stimulate discussion and evoke other questions.

If somebody is expected to respond, they'll be more engaged. Breakout rooms are like our table talks where we bring it all together. And then the important questions or responses come out.

The Intergenerational Linkages group started cafes because they were smaller, so people could interact and engage with other group members and get to know each other, “That's the group members' favourite part, talking with each other.” Group members from rural communities can feel isolated, so the ‘virtual cafe’ concept with a focused topic allows them to join in. If the cafe group numbers are small, the whole

group stays together. If they are bigger, the facilitator moves them into breakout rooms for discussions.

The facilitator uses strategies to actively engage group members to participate in the virtual space. At the beginning of each event, the facilitator asks an ice-breaker question. For example, *Tell us about a friendship that you've had with somebody from another generation.* Participants in the virtual group can speak up or type their answer into the chat box. The facilitator starts the Q&A with an engaging question to evoke discussion. She also designates a team member for each breakout room who would be ready to engage others and encourage discussion, avoiding the uncomfortable silence that can happen in breakout rooms. At the end of the event, the facilitator also asks a question such as, *What value are you taking away (from today's session)? Say a word or put a word into the chat box.*

An important component of facilitation, for the team and participants, is ensuring virtual events start at the same time. The leadership team—moderator and facilitators—connect online 15 minutes ahead of time to ensure the technology and platform works properly, and then they chat,

When we open it up we never hide the participants. As they show up in the space, and this is where it comes naturally for me, and I'm naturally a curious person, so I will just engage them. I'll just say, hey, where are you from? Tell us where you're from and how's the weather where you are? If I see somebody that I have emailed before I'll say, hey, it's nice to see you here or, (engage in) small talk with each other. We make them feel part of the group before we get started.

The facilitating team leaves five minutes at the end of every session for feedback where the CORE moderator provides an evaluation link in the chat box. The facilitator announces that the participants should return after they complete the feedback form to

learn what the group will be doing in the next virtual meeting, which avoids group members leaving and not returning to the large group.

### **3.3.4 THEME: Older Adults**

There were various perspectives on the role of older persons and their involvement with the CORE platform including its potential to involve older persons. One focus group participant suggested,

There is such great potential. I'd love to see it involve more older adults. Well, it's tricky because many older adults can spend more time at home and if they're feeling isolated, maybe a virtual interaction isn't going to be as fulfilling to them as actually going out into the community. But for some older adults, they don't have the opportunity to go out or they're not able to go out.

A member of the Intergenerational Linkages group offered that older adult participants play an important role in sharing their needs, "We actually do much better by learning from participants, especially older adults who might be in that forum, to share what they want." Yet an observation made by a Men's Shed leader is that the CORE platform is clearly targeting the CBSS sector and is not intended for older adults,

I looked through CORE Canada and they have a huge range of topics. It's specialized information. It's not going to be for seniors. I'm not going to go looking for that as a 79-year old. It's going to be useful for practitioners and other professionals.

Furthermore, three focus group participants suggested that if an older adult came to a group meeting or CORE event, they might not feel comfortable in the virtual space. If it was an open platform for older adults and practitioners to be in the same space, there could be the potential for a difficult mix in some subject areas. For example, when discussing the ways in which CBSS practitioners address the challenges of older adults, an interviewee remarked,

Sometimes we may need to get to the nitty gritty of the challenges we're having to support older adults, and older adults may feel that they are just being seen for their challenges, which may come across as ageist. Yet to be efficient, to try to quickly deal with the challenges that we're facing, it could inadvertently feel like an unsafe space for older adults.

Specifically with older men, Men's Sheds Canada realized that they did not have the capacity to connect their members online, and that they needed external support. This led to partnering with Healthy Aging Alberta, which helped connect the Men's Sheds Canada organization with the CORE virtual platform. According to a leadership team member of the Men's Sheds CORE group, older men use the CORE platform for two purposes: firstly to offer formal webinars on specific topics, and secondly, to engage all the Sheds in the province of Alberta in online gatherings called 'Coffee Pot Sessions'. According to the Men's Shed leader,

Those coffee pot sessions were for the guys, whoever is online, to engage in banter as if they were in a Men Shed. They talk about everything, whether it is wanting to find out more about marketing, what other sheds are doing, some issues they want clarification on, where things (with Men's Sheds) are going in the country, research studies that are going on. Or it could be something that's more of interest to men in the sheds. So for instance, it could be prostate cancer. So we would bring in a speaker who would talk about prostate cancer. We try to get more guys on 'the call', or the webinar, or the coffee pot session. We want as many guys as possible.

The online platform has the potential to further issues around older men's health and the importance of creating and funding support systems that can help the grassroots organization of Men's Sheds to address health issues of older men, especially their mental health. As this Men's Sheds leader offered,

There are all kinds of negative factors related to men. I think one of the challenges that we have as men is trying to tell our stories. Men are afraid to speak. They've been conditioned not to speak. It's not manly to speak about your problems. You gotta suck it up. A huge number of men have been sexually abused and nobody, nobody cares and nobody is talking about it so there's all these issues. What's an effective way for men to use the CORE platform? I think

that as we become more at ease with using the CORE platform, then we'll be able to tell our stories. We could have a whole section on men telling their stories, from a man's perspective, and the challenges men have. Maybe it will reduce their suicide rate.

The inclusion of older adult advisory panels was a possibility presented by three CORE administrators and moderators, as a way to engage older adults as well as caregivers, “to influence the work and (create) a space between older persons and caregivers.” However they speculated as to how many older adults would be interested in exploring and developing systems and mechanisms to provide online support for their cohort, and suggested it would be a small number of individuals.

### **3.3.5 THEME: Sense of Virtual Community**

The CORE platform has successfully created a sense of virtual community where its participants experience a sense of belonging and feel connected in relationship with other members. This has shown to be most evident in select open groups such as team members of the Intergenerational Linkages group. One participant shared,

I love this [IG Linkages] group. When I think about connections, all my work is relational. That's really important to me. So, the Intergenerational linkages core admin group itself, who organize things and are always there, is a very tight group.

The virtual platform offers CBSS practitioners, including older adults, the opportunity to meet peers over geographic distances, and establish connections. As one focus group participant offered,

CORE members share your interests, share your values, share your hope and your visions. Because we live thousands of miles apart, the potential to connect with someone who is somewhere else in the country is really inspiring. That kind of community means you get the opportunity to converse with others who are interested in the same things as you want, the same things for society and community that you do. There's still potential for connecting with people even if you live a long way apart. Knowing how connected our (CORE) group is, I see

great potential for other groups and the platform to actually engage older adults as well.

An important aspect of creating a sense of virtual community was the knowledge that everyone who attends a virtual meeting chose to be present.

When people have made that choice, you're always going to have that feeling of community. It feels like everybody who's there wants to be there, wants to learn something. We all want to learn from each other. Instinctively we're asking people questions. Have you ever experienced this? It's not just us talking. So when you ask other people, and you make them feel that their opinion is valuable, immediately you create a greater sense of community.

#### **(iv) Subtheme: Inclusion and Accessibility**

The CORE administrators have a content approval process that includes reviewing and approving all content that is shared on the virtual platform. This allows the administrators to ensure that any hate speech, spam, or biased information is screened, thus promoting a welcoming and inclusive online space. CORE administrators and moderators regularly post information on equity, diversity and inclusion, such as critical race theory and resources on how to promote accessibility in members' community agencies. They plan to have each newsletter with a different theme such as transportation, newcomers or accessibility.

The CORE platform promotes access to CBSS organizations and practitioners in rural contexts. A participant from the Intergenerational Linkages focus group shared, "There are a lot of rural communities and often they feel like they're alone. So by having the virtual cafe with a topic, they [are able to] join in." With regards to accessing a CORE open group, a participant noted their difficulty in joining the virtual group,

Right now I'm struggling to even get into the group. you have to request join. It sent me an e-mail to verify, but that doesn't come through and it's not letting me request any other ones. It's giving me an error message, so I don't know. I'll follow up with this.



The CORE administrators addressed accessibility issues related to languages, confirming that information provided on the virtual platform is only available in English. While there could be some resources in French and other languages, there is limited staffing capacity to offer the information in multiple languages. Despite this, there are efforts being made to prioritize resources for the public or service providers that are easy to understand. They are aware of needing to make information accessible for people with disabilities, such as the ability to write a description when posting an image, yet acknowledge that more could be done, including an accessibility audit of the platform. There have been requests for translations on video, which they are not always able to accommodate, however they do embed subtitles when posting videos.

A practitioner from the Intergenerational Linkages shared that their community organization serves many seniors who do not use computers often and offer a drop-in centre at their supportive living facility where the day manager shares interesting CORE events with older adults,

She gathers everybody, she signs up for it and shares it with seniors from the lodge or the care facility who are part of our supportive living. There are also people that are Life Lease residents as well as our community of seniors who can go over there anytime for any of the scheduled events. So we just share it out.

Three participants from a CORE open group agreed that one of the goals is to make the CORE platform a more user-friendly system such that more seniors can get on once they've been taught how to join. For example, offering the option to CORE members to join the day of the event rather than advanced registration. "It takes out that one extra step. it would be helpful if they don't have to sign up first and can join just before the meeting, when possible."

A Men's Shed participant shared an insight regarding an interpersonal experience and personal realizations related to diversity and inclusion,

We were doing a presentation from Mens Sheds in Edmonton to a group. And one of the guys put up his hand and said, "I've looked at a lot of videos of Men Sheds from around the world and my assessment is it's a middle class, white guys, private club. And we, the three of us that have been working on this for a long time, looked at each other and shook our heads and learned that we didn't know how to work with multicultural groups. There were barriers inside ourselves/us. We were throwing up our own barriers because we didn't understand how to work with them, and so that's a challenge. It's not the norm. We have to admit that we are not doing a good job, we can't fool ourselves.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The CORE platform has proven itself successful in connecting practitioners from community-based senior serving (CBSS) organizations to support older adults to stay well and age-in-place. By providing a virtual space, professionals from CBSS organizations can fulfill many needs; they can find information and resources for their clients, meet in communities of practice to discuss and problem-solve challenges, address systemic issues with their peers, learn about funding grants to support their programs and work, and share and recruit participants for research projects. In so doing, the CORE virtual platform has created a space where CBSS organizations and individuals can get to know each other as colleagues and peers, with a common purpose to support older persons living at home and in community.

When the CORE platform was originally created in 2018, its intention was to bring together the CBSS sector which has shown to be of great value and importance. CORE has established itself as a rich repository of relevant and up-to-date resources related to older persons' health and well-being. However, in the five years since its inception, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the critical need for

online platforms that include older persons to stay informed and connected for their quality of life.

#### ***4.1 Social Identity***

The CORE virtual platform fosters a sense of social identity, particularly in groups with skilled facilitation and high levels of engagement. There is a strong feeling that CORE users belong to the CBSS sector, in part due to efforts by administrators and moderators to establish CORE as an online space for connection, collaboration, learning and reciprocal exchange. As Blanchard et al. (2011) propose, exchange of online support in groups, including noticing others exchange support between themselves, promotes the creation and commitment to group norms and the process of developing online social trust towards the group. With its resource-rich library of offerings and information, the CORE platform offers information exchange and social support for the CBSS sector. Its members experience feelings of identity and belonging, which play a key role in developing a sense of virtual community (Blanchard et al. 2011).

#### ***4.2 Complement of Virtual and In-Person Connection***

Incorporating a hybrid model of virtual and in-person meetings promotes social connections, with each format supporting relationship-building. This research project has shown that CORE members may meet virtually, in general events or group meetings, then connect in-person at CBSS regional and/or national summits, which deepens the connection. The complement of virtual and in-person contact promotes connection while addressing challenges of geographic distance, inclement weather and illness. Furthermore, it encourages interactivity in both realms, and exchanging

information and updates about other parts of the province or country. Social connectedness and sense of community require both in-person and online contact and experiences for both CBSS practitioners and older persons alike. According to Hage et al. (2020), providing older adults with the means to connect online can boost opportunities for in-person social connectedness. While online platforms can enhance social well-being, the authors note that adapting to technology can be a challenging process for older adults with little online experience and digital literacy (Hage et al. 2020). Importantly, their study suggests that offering user-friendly access and information about online platforms begins to “enhance social connectedness” (Hage et al., 2020, p. 194); it encourages older adults to (re)connect in their broader community and society by participating in offline conversations.

#### ***4.3 Types of Virtual Groups***

There are two types of groups on the CORE platform, closed groups and open groups:

- The closed groups require a request to join including the user’s reason for joining. Closed groups are often communities of practice, and are a closed, structured space for a specific target such as a grant project or funding call.
- The open groups are easily accessible with a click request to join, and are geared towards general learning, sharing and discussions. The CORE Men Sheds open group has a Men's Sheds cafe which they call 'Coffee Pot Sessions' and are unstructured meetings to "just hang out, chat about all things Men Sheds, and meet each other."

The CORE Intergenerational Linkages Group is an open group which has cafes with discussions about a certain topic or issue, where group members have an opportunity to connect and get to know each other.

#### ***4.4 Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC): CBSS practitioners and Older Persons***

The CORE platform offers opportunities for active engagement, particularly in its CORE groups. Two open groups with the most social engagement, Intergenerational Linkages and Men's Shed, promote social exchanges including information exchange, such as webinars, and emotional social support, such as Intergenerational Linkages Cafes and Men Sheds coffee-pot sessions. These social exchanges help form group norms in these online groups which contribute to the sense of virtual community described by their group members and participants (Blanchard et al. 2011).

The main focus of the CORE platform is to provide CBSS practitioners and organizations access to relevant information to support older persons independence and wellbeing that is effective, efficient and in a comprehensible format. Connecting with like-minded professionals who have similar goals and challenges to discuss their experiences and share knowledge is invaluable and helps to develop connections and collegiality to address systemic issues in health and social care. While a sense of virtual community is helpful for CBSS professionals, it is essential for older persons who experience social isolation and loneliness.

#### ***4.5 The Focus and Purpose of Virtual Platforms***

The focus of virtual platforms related to older persons may have several purposes. One purpose, such as the CORE platform, may be to address systemic issues and advocate for and with older adults through CBSS sector organizations.

However, older persons may also seek out virtual platforms for other purposes including to address their own social isolation and support their sense of independence in their communities. As seen through the aforementioned case studies, older persons participate in virtual platforms for cultural and arts programs, lifelong learning, volunteering and civic engagement, recreation activities, and health and well-being. As such, there is potential for the CORE platform to expand and directly impact older persons social isolation and connect older persons, rather than through the middle agent or intermediary of the CBSS practitioner and organization. Various virtual platforms support older persons in unique ways to remain independent and well in their communities—Art Your Service, CABHI Leap, Companion Link, CORE Alberta/BC/Canada, GenWell—such that connecting to merging into one seamless platform can improve accessibility, collaboration, and participation with and by older persons.

#### ***4.6 Inclusion of Older Persons in Governance Structure***

CORE does not directly support the older adults themselves, nor does it involve or include older adults in the decision-making or governance of CORE. However the creation of an older persons advisory committee or advisory panel was a noted recommendation by participants in the study as well as in one case study featuring CABHI Leap program. This gap of older persons in the governance structure of CORE, particularly since it serves the CBSS sector, may support decision-making regarding the virtual platform. In discussing the participation of older adults in co-creating value in online communities, Kamalpour et al. (2021, p. 435) define value co-creation as “positive reciprocal activities that result in resource integration and service provision.” It

often refers to a collaborative process which can empower those who are involved including individuals, organizations, and service providers (Blaschke et al., 2018; Cova and Salle, 2008). Being part of the governance structure of CORE may a) address the social determinant of health, including ageism, and b) increase representation of the 'seniors' of the CBSS sector.

Kamalpour et al. (2021, p. 435) suggest that within an ecosystem, actors (such as older adults, caregivers, professionals and service providers) interact and share resources such as information and experience, creating a dynamic negotiation process about how resources are communicated and shared. This mechanism turns passive actors into active participants who are engaged in 'resource integration activities'. This collaborative engagement of actors in resource integration activities within a social context is described as "co-creation practice" (Kamalpour et al. 2021, p. 435). The authors note that no study has explored value co-creation practices of older adults in online communities (Kamalpour et al. 2021, p. 436). They identified three practices older persons engage in virtual communities which can lead to value co-creation: communal coping, happiness creation, social capital generation (Kamalpour et al. 2021), which can have positive influence on their resilience and sense of social isolation.

Thus, CORE can be more intentional and transparent regarding the involvement of older adults they serve by creating an older persons advisory committee that is inclusive of diverse older adults. It would transform the role of older persons as passive recipients of services and resources into active participants who play a role in making decisions that impact older adults themselves.

#### ***4.7 Virtual Facilitation***

The role and skill level of virtual facilitation in open and closed groups/community of practice is essential for a sense of virtual community. There are several potential ways in which the skills and knowledge of older adults who presented as masterful facilitators and leaders of virtual community engagement in the study, could be shared and explored: The creation of a Facilitators Advisory Committee of older adults to promote, advocate and educate about online facilitation and engagement, SOVC and social connectedness for users of CORE platform, a 'Train the Trainer' format with other group leaders including older persons, and/or research on facilitation with and by older adults. In keeping with Blanchard et al.'s (2011) theory on identity and social exchange, skilled facilitation promotes social trust in virtual communities, including social support and semi-structured opportunities for discussion and sharing information.

#### ***4.8 Role and Value of Research***

This research project highlighted the lack of awareness of research in connection with the CORE platform, including research opportunities, recruitment of study participants for research projects and where to find research in the virtual platform. With the purpose of the CORE platform on community-based organizations which focus on healthy aging and aging-in-place, it may be an ideal online space to bring together academic, clinical and community-based settings for collaborative research and research collaborations involving and including older persons. There is also potential for the CORE platform to be seen as a virtual space for academic and university



recruitment for research participants, and community-based participatory action research which aligns with community based senior service organizations.

## **5. LIMITATIONS**

This research study has several limitations including a lack of data analytics of CORE members who are registered users of the platform but are inactive participants, lack of data for CORE members who joined a CORE group (open or closed) but are not participants, and lack of information about CORE members who belong to a closed group or community of practice.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Online platforms, such as Healthy Aging CORE Canada, are effective vehicles for connecting older persons, as well as community-based senior serving organizations which serve them. This research study has shown that including older adults in their governance structure, especially older people with lived experience of social isolation related to the social determinants of health, can promote their sense of agency, a sense of virtual community, and the efficacy of these virtual platforms. Blending virtual connections with in-person contact provides support for older persons to create and sustain relationships, address social isolation, and support their wellbeing and independence.

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## **Appendices**

Focus Group Information Letter

Focus Group Consent Form

Focus Group Interview Guides (Men's Sheds, CORE Admin)

Interview Information Letter

Interview Consent Form

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