

Information Access is Vital for Older Adults

Hamilton Council on Aging and partners working to publicize information about services

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In order to learn about health and community services, housing options, transportation choices, recreation and leisure activities, or just about any other services or resources, one needs to be able to know how to locate this information. Further, Information needs to be up-to-date, accurate, reliable and easy to find.

Working together the Hamilton Council on Aging with its partners The City of Hamilton and the Seniors Advisory Council are preparing the second Hamilton's Plan for an Age-Friendly City (2020—2026). To inform the development of the plan we reached out to the community to ask older adults "what were the barriers and obstacles to accessing information" and their suggestions for improving access to information. A total of 4100 citizens and 76 service providers and City of Hamilton staff shared their views through focus groups, on-line or printed surveys and community events.

Communication and Information is the third age-friendly goal and over the past five years much has been accomplished. A community resource guide for older adults was developed, the City of Hamilton has a new landing page for comprehensive information on services and supports for older adults (www.hamilton.ca/seniors), and many organizations have established digital literacy programming. The City of Hamilton and the Hamilton Public Library now offer translation services. But much more work needs to be done to ensure older adults have ready access to information.

In our current community consultation, we found that access to information and knowledge about where to go for assistance continues to be a gap among both older adults and service providers. Participants told us to keep the diverse needs, interests and preferences of all individuals in mind when providing information. Information should be available in different formats – e.g. print, online, telephone, local television stations. Increasingly, the Internet is used to communicate important information, sometimes with little thought given to the reality that not everyone has access to technology or the Internet. The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the inequities in digital literacy and in access to technology; this is something that must be addressed going forward.

Further, information should be available in the dominant languages spoken in Hamilton. 15% of Hamilton residents 55 years and older speak a language other than English or French at home.

It is important to ensure that information is available to and accessible for individuals who may be living with a cognitive impairment, vision and/or hearing challenges or who may have low literacy skills. Information must be made available in compliance with minimal AODA standards.

In terms of the type of information needed, around one-third of participants wanted information on health and wellness, housing options, recreation and leisure, and end of life care. About one quarter mentioned government forms, estate planning and wills, and healthy eating and meals.

Multiple sources of information exist but the problem is that there is a lack of connection between existing systems and information is not kept up-to-date. We asked participants “Where would you prefer to get information about resources/activities for older adults and seniors”. Many sources were mentioned but the most frequent answers were the City of Hamilton website, the City of Hamilton 55+ Recreation Guide, the local newspaper, the Hamilton Public Library, seniors’ organizations or clubs, over the internet, doctor’s office or community health centers or through email. Citizens should be able to access information via one portal that connects to other information systems. Ontario 211 is a telephone or on-line information source on government and community based services but unfortunately very few older adults use this source to get information about resources or activities, pointing to the lack of awareness of this service. Similarly, Hamilton’s information source, “The Red Book” which is an on-line or print format information source to services in Hamilton offered through the Hamilton Public Library is not well known among older adult.

The restrictions imposed because of COVID-19 has exacerbated the ability of older adults to obtain information. So much vital information is only available on-line and shockingly Hamilton does not have complete internet coverage. Fortunately, residents may access the internet through the libraries in these areas without even having to enter the buildings. However, it is important that the City of Hamilton and the Telecommunication companies collaborate to ensure reliable and consistent internet service throughout the geographic area of Hamilton

As we move forward in the planning to make Hamilton age-friendly, we will be recommending that existing information systems are better connected, are available in different formats and accommodate the needs, preferences and abilities of individual, including language and accessibility.

Margaret Denton is the Co-Chair of Hamilton Council on Aging’s Education and Advocacy Committee. For more information, to join our membership or make a donation please see www.coahamilton.ca