



# **BEYOND THE REFERRAL:**

## Strengthening Community Systems that Support Aging Well

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## Executive Summary

**COMMUNITIES ACROSS CANADA ARE WORKING TO SUPPORT A GROWING POPULATION OF OLDER ADULTS. INCREASINGLY, HEALTH AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE EXPLORING APPROACHES SUCH AS SOCIAL PRESCRIBING, NAVIGATION SERVICES, AND REFERRAL PLATFORMS TO CONNECT PEOPLE WITH NON-MEDICAL, COMMUNITY-BASED RESOURCES AND SUPPORTS THAT IMPROVE THEIR HEALTH AND WELLBEING.**

While these efforts help identify social needs and guide people toward assistance, an important challenge is emerging: **In many places, significant investment has gone into building referral pathways, but far less investment has been directed toward strengthening the community programs that people are referred into.**

This imbalance creates what Calgary Seniors refers to as the **Community Support Gap**.

When referral systems grow faster than the community supports that receive those referrals, programs can become overwhelmed, navigators struggle to find appropriate (or sometimes even any) options, and individuals may not receive the meaningful connection they are seeking, or require.

**REFERRAL PATHWAYS MATTER, BUT THEY ONLY WORK WHEN COMMUNITIES ALSO INVEST IN THE PRACTICAL, RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORTS PEOPLE ARE REFERRED INTO.**

Through more than three decades of operating volunteer-powered programs, Calgary Seniors has observed that **strong communities rely on more than individual services**. They function as **interconnected systems** where **community participation, program infrastructure, operational capacity, and shared values work together to support wellbeing**.

### **The Community Support Gap:**

In many places, significant investment has gone into building referral pathways that help identify social needs and connect people to community supports.

These pathways often include:

- Link workers
- Navigation programs
- Referral platforms
- Clinical partnerships

These systems play an important role in helping people access support. However, far less investment has gone into strengthening the community programs that receive those referrals.

This imbalance creates what we refer to as the **Community Support Gap**.

This gap occurs when referral systems are developed faster than the community supports people are being referred to.

Bridging this gap requires strengthening the Wellbeing Infrastructure: the practical, relationship-based supports that people are referred into, and which help them remain connected, supported, and engaged in their communities.

In the **Connected Community Model**, addressing the Community Support Gap means investing in the Wellbeing Infrastructure and community participation that allow referral systems to function more effectively.

The **Connected Community Model** has been developed to describe this ecosystem.

**The model identifies four interconnected layers that help communities support aging well:**

**COMMUNITY POWER**

The participation of volunteers, neighbours, families, and community organizations who contribute to collective wellbeing.

**CAPACITY ENABLEMENT**

The systems, coordination, and operational tools

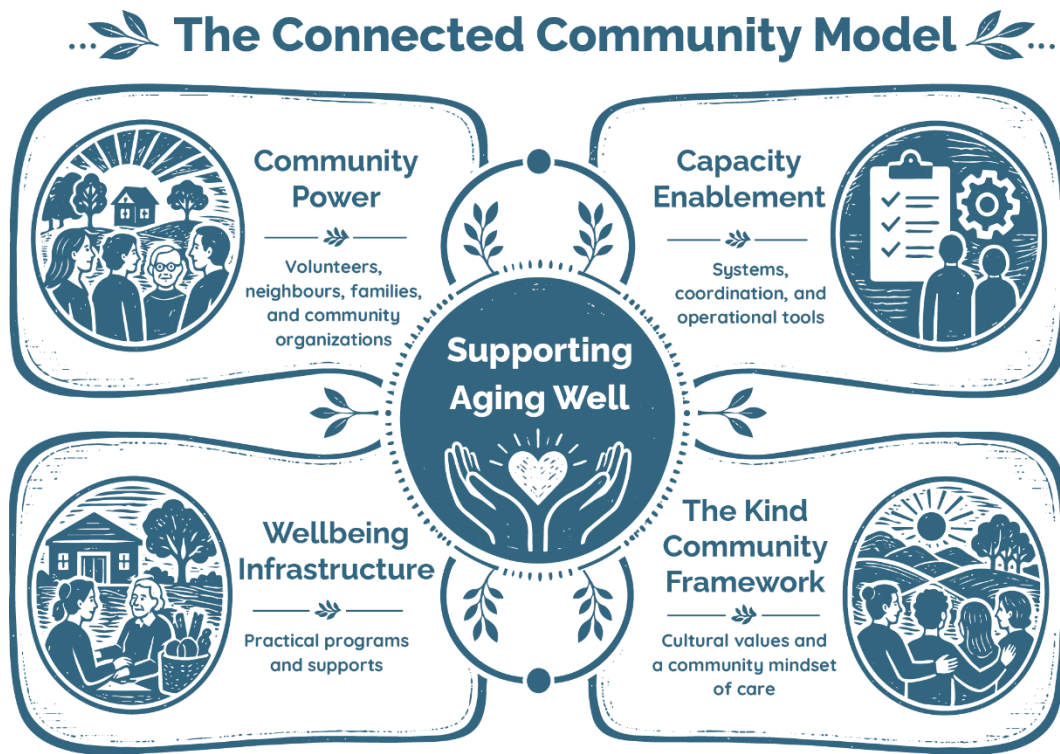
that allow community programs to function effectively.

**WELLBEING INFRASTRUCTURE**

The practical programs and supports that people are referred into, and which help them remain connected, independent, and engaged in their daily lives.

**THE KIND COMMUNITY FRAMEWORK**

The cultural values and community mindset that encourage people to care for one another and participate in community life.



**TOGETHER, THESE FOUR LAYERS FORM THE FOUNDATION OF A STRONG COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEM.**

By strengthening these elements and addressing the **Community Support Gap**, communities can create environments where older adults remain connected, supported, and valued members of society.

**THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL OFFERS A PRACTICAL WAY TO UNDERSTAND HOW COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, PROGRAMS, SYSTEMS, AND CULTURE WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT HEALTHY AGING.**

## Definitions

**Connected Community Model** – an interconnected framework where community participation, programs, systems, and culture work together to support healthy aging.

**Social Prescribing** – a process where individuals are referred to non-medical, community-based resources or activities to improve their health and wellbeing. This approach is designed to address social determinants of health, such as loneliness and social isolation, by connecting people with local services that cater to their interests and needs.

**Community Support Gap** – the imbalance that occurs when referral systems grow faster than the community supports that receive those referrals

**Community Power** – The participation of volunteers (formal and informal), neighbours, families, and community organizations who contribute to collective wellbeing.

**Capacity Enablement** – The systems, coordination, and operational tools that allow community programs to function effectively.

**Wellbeing Infrastructure** – The practical programs and supports that help people remain connected, independent, and engaged in their daily lives.

**The Kind Community Framework** – The cultural values and community mindset that encourage people to care for one another and participate in community life.

**Referral Pathways** – formal channels or processes that enable access to programs and services by guiding people from one point to another.

**Link Worker** – a trained person who helps connect individuals (often those facing health, social, or practical challenges) to appropriate services and support. They help people access community programs and services through referral pathways to improve their health and wellbeing.

### **Social Prescribing - Wikipedia:**

Social prescribing is a process where individuals are referred to non-medical, community-based resources or activities to improve their health and wellbeing. This approach is designed to address social determinants of health, such as loneliness and social isolation, by connecting people with local services that cater to their interests and needs.

### **Key Features**

- Non-Medical Referrals: Social prescribing focuses on connecting individuals to community resources rather than medical treatments.
- Community-Based Activities
- Personalized Support: A Social Prescribing Link Worker often assists individuals in creating a personalized care plan that aligns with their specific needs and goals.

### **Goals of Social Prescribing**

- Improve Health and Wellbeing: By addressing social needs, social prescribing aims to enhance overall health outcomes.
- Reduce Healthcare Costs: It seeks to alleviate pressure on healthcare systems by addressing social issues that lead to medical consultations.
- Enhance Social Connections: The process encourages individuals to engage with their communities, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing isolation.

Social prescribing is increasingly recognized as a valuable component of holistic healthcare, bridging the gap between clinical and community support.

# The Idea Behind the Connected Community Model

**COMMUNITIES ACROSS CANADA ARE EXPERIENCING A PROFOUND DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT AS THE NUMBER OF OLDER ADULTS CONTINUES TO GROW. ALONG WITH THIS SHIFT COMES AN IMPORTANT QUESTION:**

How can communities ensure that older adults remain connected, supported, and able to live well in the places they call home?

While healthcare systems focus primarily on medical care and often respond to needs as they arise, many of the factors that shape wellbeing later in life exist outside of clinical settings. Social connection, transportation, practical assistance, neighbourly support, and community participation all play a critical preventative role in helping people maintain independence and quality of life.

For more than three decades, Calgary Seniors has worked alongside older adults to address these everyday needs. Through volunteer-powered programs and community partnerships, we have seen how meaningful connection and practical help can dramatically improve wellbeing.

Over time, this work has revealed something important.

Strong communities do not rely on a single program or service. They function as interconnected systems made up of people, culture, programs, and supporting infrastructure.

This insight led us to articulate a framework that helps explain how these elements work together.

We call this the **Connected Community Model**.

The model reflects a simple idea: **communities that support aging well are built through multiple connected layers that reinforce one another.**

When these layers work together, communities become places where people look out for one another, practical supports are available when they are needed, and older adults remain active and valued members of community life.

**THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL ILLUSTRATES HOW THESE ELEMENTS INTERACT TO CREATE STRONG COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEMS.**

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*Communities that support aging well are built through multiple connected layers that reinforce one another.*

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## Our Experience

**CALGARY SENIORS HAS SPENT MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS DEVELOPING AND OPERATING VOLUNTEER-POWERED SUPPORTS THAT ADDRESS THE EVERYDAY CHALLENGES OLDER ADULTS FACE.**

**These programs include:**

- Volunteer transportation to medical appointments
- Friendly visiting and check-ins
- Shopping companions
- Pet assistance
- Practical help during both difficult and thriving times
- Informal neighbour-to-neighbour support

Each year, thousands of older adults connect with these programs. Through this work, we have seen how small acts of support, when coordinated effectively, can significantly improve quality of life.

We have also learned that successful community supports depend on more than individual programs. They require a broader ecosystem that includes community participation, supportive culture, operational systems, and well-designed services.

**THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL GREW OUT OF THESE OBSERVATIONS. IT REFLECTS THE LESSONS LEARNED THROUGH DECADES OF PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE BUILDING AND SUSTAINING VOLUNTEER-POWERED SUPPORTS.**

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*Successful community supports require a broader ecosystem that includes community participation, supportive culture, operational systems, and well-designed services.*

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## How the Model Works

**THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL IS STRUCTURED AS A SERIES OF INTERCONNECTED LAYERS. EACH LAYER SUPPORTS THE ONE ABOVE IT, CREATING THE CONDITIONS THAT ALLOW COMMUNITY WELLBEING SUPPORTS TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY.**

At the foundation of the system is **Community Power**: the willingness of people to participate, volunteer, and care for one another.

Above this sits **Capacity Enablement**, the systems and tools that organize and sustain community programs.

These supports allow communities to build the community's **Wellbeing Infrastructure**, the

practical programs that help people remain connected and supported in daily life.

At the top of the model is the **Kind Community Framework**, the shared values and social norms that encourage people to care for one another and participate in their communities.

Together, these layers form the ecosystem that allows communities to support aging well.

## The Connected Community Model

At Calgary Seniors, we think about strong communities as systems made up of several connected layers. We call this the **Connected Community Model**. Each layer supports the one above it, and together they create the conditions that allow older adults to remain connected, supported, and active in their communities.

When all these layers are working well, communities become places where people look out for one another, practical supports are available when they are needed, and older adults can continue to live full and meaningful lives.

# The Connected Community Pyramid:

## The Kind Community Framework

### Culture, shared values, and community mindset

- Inspiring people to care for one another
- Promoting positive narratives about aging
- Encouraging neighbourly support and participation
- Creating volunteer opportunities built on mutual benefit



## Wellbeing Infrastructure

### Community programs and support networks

- Volunteer transportation
- Friendly visiting and check-ins
- Shopping companions
- Pet assistance
- Practical support in both difficult and thriving times
- Semi-Formal community well-being supports: Men's Sheds, She Sheds, Maker Spaces, Men's/Women's groups
- Informal neighbour-to-neighbour support

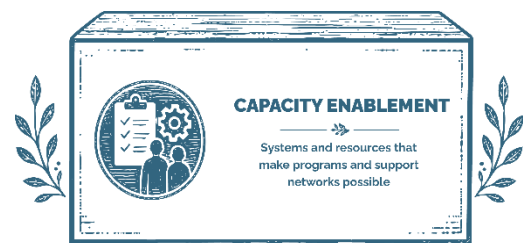


These supports form the community ecosystem that helps people stay connected and independent.

## Capacity Enablement

### Systems and resources that make programs and support networks possible

- Volunteer recruiting, training and screening
- Program templates and operational guides
- Scheduling and coordination systems
- Safety policies and procedures
- Intake and referral processes
- Evaluation and learning tools



## Community Power

### The foundation of the entire system

- Volunteers
- Neighbours
- Families
- Community organizations
- Local partnerships



Without people choosing to participate in their communities, none of the other layers can exist.

## How Social Prescribing Connects

Social prescribing is a pathway that connects people into community supports.

Healthcare providers and navigators identify social needs and help individuals access programs that improve connection, wellbeing, and independence.

These programs are the places where social prescriptions are filled, and people are connected to the services and support they need

### ... The Pathway Looks Like This ...



# The Community Support Gap

IN MANY PLACES, SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENT HAS GONE INTO BUILDING REFERRAL PATHWAYS THAT HELP IDENTIFY SOCIAL NEEDS AND CONNECT PEOPLE TO COMMUNITY SUPPORTS.



## These pathways often include:

- Link workers and outreach workers
- Navigation programs
- Referral platforms
- Clinical partnerships

- community organizations struggle to absorb growing demand
- navigators have difficulty identifying meaningful supports
- individuals may not receive the connection or support they require

These systems play an important role in helping people access support. However, far less investment has gone into strengthening the community programs that receive those referrals.

**AT ITS CORE, THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT GAP REFLECTS A LACK OF INVESTMENT IN THE WELLBEING INFRASTRUCTURE THAT SUPPORTS DAILY LIFE.**

This imbalance creates what we refer to as the **Community Support Gap**.

Bridging this gap requires strengthening the practical, relationship-based supports that help people remain connected, supported, and engaged in their communities.

The Community Support Gap occurs when referral systems are developed faster than the community supports people are being referred to.

In the **Connected Community Model**, addressing the **Community Support Gap** means investing in the Wellbeing Infrastructure and the community participation that empowers referral systems to function effectively.

Without strong Wellbeing Infrastructure in place:

- referrals may lead to limited or overburdened programs

## Beyond the Referral

Many systems have focused on building referral pathways that connect people to community supports. While these efforts are important, **referrals alone do not guarantee meaningful connection.**

**WHAT MATTERS JUST AS MUCH IS THE STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND NETWORKS THAT RECEIVE THOSE REFERRALS. THIS IS WHERE MANY COMMUNITIES ENCOUNTER THE COMMUNITY SUPPORT GAP.**

# What is Needed

FOR SOCIAL PRESCRIBING TO SUCCEED, INVESTMENT MUST STRENGTHEN BOTH SIDES OF THE SYSTEM:

## Referral Pathways AND Wellbeing Infrastructure

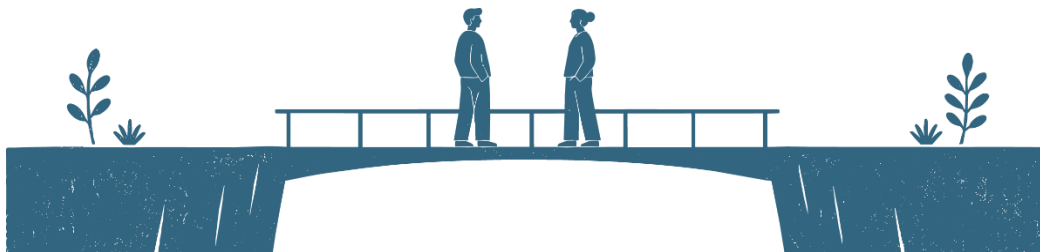
Communities benefit from investing in the culture and participation that empower these supports to thrive.

For social prescribing to succeed, communities must address the **Community Support Gap** by strengthening both referral pathways and Wellbeing Infrastructure.

(Kadowaki, et al., 2024) argues that “[t]he need for a strong nonprofit and voluntary service

sector to support social prescribing programs” is necessary.

(Hamilton-West, Milne, & Hotham, 2020) highlights the need for funding and support for the programs that are being linked to by social prescription. They emphasize that there is often a lack of funding for services that are offered on the other end of the referral.



## THE CALGARY SENIORS APPROACH

At Calgary Seniors, our work focuses on strengthening all layers of the community wellbeing system.

- Encouraging kindness and community participation
- Designing volunteer-powered supports
- Building practical programs that reduce isolation
- Developing tools and systems that allow programs to grow

**TOGETHER, THESE EFFORTS HELP CREATE COMMUNITIES WHERE OLDER ADULTS REMAIN CONNECTED, SUPPORTED, AND VALUED.**

# DETAILED CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL

...  **The Connected Community Pyramid**  ...



# The Kind Community Framework



## The Idea

**STRONG COMMUNITIES ARE SHAPED NOT ONLY BY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES, BUT ALSO BY THE VALUES AND CULTURE THAT GUIDE HOW PEOPLE TREAT ONE ANOTHER.**

At Calgary Seniors, we refer to this cultural layer as the **Kind Community Framework**.

The Kind Community Framework reflects the belief that communities thrive when people see themselves as part of a shared network of care. It encourages individuals, organizations, and institutions to recognize that small acts of support and connection can have a profound impact on their own, and others, wellbeing.

This layer influences how communities think about aging, neighbourliness, and mutual support.

## What is the Kind Community Framework?

The Kind Community Framework refers to **the culture, shared values, and social norms that encourage people to care for one another.**

### It helps shape a community where:

- Neighbours check in on one another
- Volunteers see their role as meaningful and valued
- Older adults are recognized as important members of the community
- Helping others is seen as a normal and positive part of daily life

This cultural layer often operates quietly, but it influences how people respond when they see someone who may need support.

## Why This Matters

### Without a culture that values kindness and mutual care:

- Volunteer participation can decline
- Community supports may feel transactional rather than relational
- Older adults may experience increased isolation
- Opportunities for connection can be overlooked

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*communities thrive when people see themselves as part of a shared network of care. It encourages individuals, organizations, and institutions to recognize that small acts of support and connection can have a profound impact on wellbeing*

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**When the Kind Community Framework is strong:**

- People are more likely to step forward to help others
- Communities become more welcoming and supportive
- Volunteer participation grows
- Programs built on connection and care are more sustainable

In this way, culture acts as a multiplier for the Wellbeing Infrastructure that exists within a community.

## The Calgary Seniors Approach

**At Calgary Seniors, we intentionally work to strengthen this cultural layer by:**

- Promoting positive narratives about aging and community
- Encouraging neighbourly support and participation
- Creating volunteer opportunities built on mutual benefit
- Highlighting stories that demonstrate the impact of kindness

**BY NURTURING A CULTURE OF KINDNESS, COMMUNITIES BECOME PLACES WHERE SUPPORT FLOWS MORE NATURALLY BETWEEN PEOPLE.**

# Wellbeing Infrastructure

## The Idea

ACROSS THE HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SECTORS, THERE IS GROWING MOMENTUM AROUND SOCIAL PRESCRIBING. MANY SYSTEMS ARE INVESTING IN REFERRAL PATHWAYS THAT CONNECT SENIORS TO NON-MEDICAL SUPPORTS SUCH AS SOCIAL ACTIVITIES, TRANSPORTATION, AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS.

These systems often focus on **how referrals happen**: Doctors identify a need → a link worker or navigator connects the person to community supports.

But there is an important question that is often overlooked:

### What happens after the referral?

The success of social prescribing depends on the **strength and availability of the community programs that people are referred into**.

At Calgary Seniors, we think of these programs as part of any given community's **Wellbeing Infrastructure**.

## What is the Wellbeing Infrastructure?

Wellbeing Infrastructure refers to **the spectrum of community-based supports primarily offered by nonprofit and community organizations that help people stay connected, supported, and engaged in their daily lives**.

Just as roads and transit systems help people move through a city, the Wellbeing Infrastructure helps people move through life with connection, belonging, and practical support.

### Examples include:

- Volunteer-driven transportation
- Friendly visiting and check-ins
- Shopping support
- Pet care assistance
- Practical help during both difficult and thriving times
- Informal neighbour-to-neighbour support

Research consistently links social connection, social capital, and social participation with better wellbeing and quality-of-life outcomes for older adults. (Holt-Lunstad J, 2010) found a **50% survival**



**advantage from strong social ties;** (Buja & Akhtar, 2025) meta-analyzed 13 studies and confirmed that **higher social capital predicts better life satisfaction in older adults;** and (Dehi Aroogh & Shahboulaghi, 2020) note that **social participation is a core determinant of elderly health and is strongly linked to longevity.**

These supports may seem simple, but they are often the **difference between isolation and connection, crisis and stability, or independence and decline.**

## Why This Matters

### Without strong Wellbeing Infrastructure:

- Social prescribing referrals have nowhere meaningful to go
- Navigators struggle to find appropriate supports
- Community programs become overwhelmed or inconsistent
- Seniors fall through the cracks

### When Wellbeing Infrastructure is strong:

- Seniors have meaningful ways to stay connected
- Communities become more supportive and resilient
- Volunteers play an active role in strengthening social wellbeing
- Health and social systems work better together

## The Calgary Seniors Approach

At Calgary Seniors, our volunteer-powered programs are intentionally designed as part of this Wellbeing Infrastructure.

### OUR APPROACH FOCUSES ON:

#### Human-Centered Design

Programs are shaped around the real needs and experiences of seniors.

#### Mutual Benefit

Volunteer opportunities are designed to create value for both seniors and volunteers.

#### Connection First

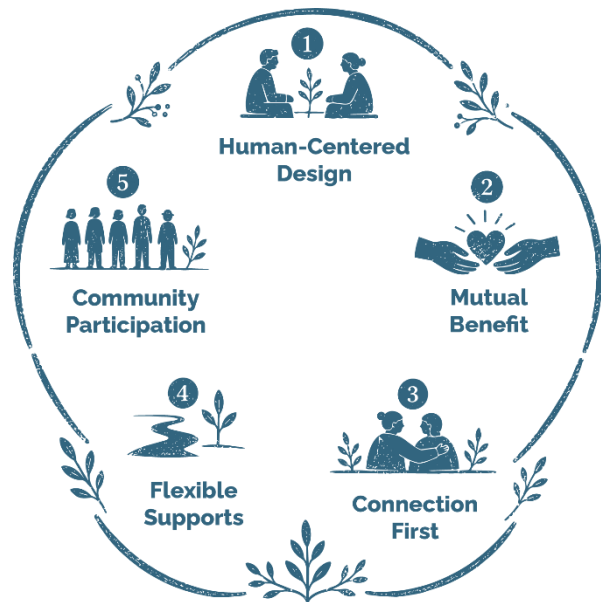
Many of our programs prioritize relationship-building and social connection.

#### Flexible Supports

Programs respond to real life situations rather than rigid service models.

#### Community Participation

Volunteers (both, informal and formal), neighbours, and local partners are part of the support network.



## Why It Matters for Our Work

Thinking about our programs as Wellbeing Infrastructure helps us:

- Understand the **broader role** Calgary Seniors plays in the community
- Design volunteer opportunities that create **real social impact**
- Strengthen the **community ecosystem that supports aging well**
- Contribute meaningfully to conversations about **social prescribing and community health**

In simple terms:

**WE ARE NOT JUST RUNNING PROGRAMS.**

**WE ARE HELPING BUILD THE COMMUNITY SUPPORTS THAT MAKE AGING WELL POSSIBLE.**

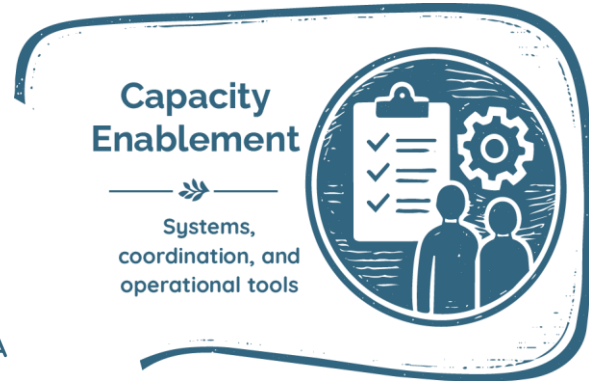
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*Research consistently links social connection, social capital, and social participation with better wellbeing and quality-of-life outcomes for older adults.*

*Just as roads and transit systems help people move through a city, the Wellbeing Infrastructure helps people move through life with connection, belonging, and practical support.*

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# Capacity Enablement



## The Idea

**BEHIND EVERY STRONG COMMUNITY PROGRAM IS A NETWORK OF SYSTEMS, TOOLS, AND RESOURCES THAT ALLOW IT TO OPERATE EFFECTIVELY.**

These supports often work quietly in the background, but they play an essential role in helping programs grow, remain reliable, and respond to the needs of the community.

At Calgary Seniors, we refer to this operational layer as **Capacity Enablement** because it focuses on strengthening the ability of people, programs, and organizations to deliver meaningful support.

## What is Capacity Enablement?

Capacity Enablement refers to **the systems, training, coordination, and resources that allow community programs to function well and sustain their impact over time.**

These supports help ensure that volunteer-powered initiatives are safe, organized, and able to meet the needs of the people they serve.

### Examples include:

- Volunteer recruitment, screening, and training
- Program templates and operational guides
- Scheduling and coordination systems
- Safety policies and procedures
- Intake and referral processes
- Evaluation and learning tools

While these elements may not always be visible to the public, they are essential to maintaining strong and dependable community supports.

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*Capacity Enablement strengthens the systems that allow the Wellbeing Infrastructure to function effectively*

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## Why This Matters

### Without strong capacity enablement:

- Programs can become inconsistent or difficult to sustain
- Volunteers may feel unsupported or unclear about their roles
- Community initiatives may struggle to grow or reach those who need them
- Organizations may lack the tools needed to learn and improve

**When this layer is strong:**

- Programs operate smoothly and reliably
- Volunteers feel prepared and supported
- Community initiatives can expand to meet growing needs
- Organizations can continuously improve their work

In this way, **Capacity Enablement strengthens the systems that allow the Wellbeing Infrastructure to function effectively.**

## The Calgary Seniors Approach

**At Calgary Seniors, we invest in capacity enablement by:**

- Developing clear program models and operational guides
- Providing training and support for volunteers
- Building systems that make participation easy and accessible
- Strengthening coordination between programs and partners
- Continuously learning and improving through evaluation

(Brudney, 2016) outlines key pillars to a successful functions of a volunteer program including the following: *“Establishing the rationale for volunteer involvement; Involving paid staff in volunteer program design; Integrating the volunteer program into the organization; Creating positions of program leadership; Preparing job descriptions for volunteer positions; Meeting the needs of volunteers; Recruiting and retaining volunteers; Managing volunteers; Evaluating and recognizing volunteer effort.”*

**THESE EFFORTS HELP ENSURE THAT VOLUNTEER-POWERED SUPPORTS REMAIN STRONG, SUSTAINABLE, AND RESPONSIVE TO THE EVOLVING NEEDS OF SENIORS.**

# Community Power

## The Idea

**AT THE HEART OF EVERY STRONG COMMUNITY IS THE WILLINGNESS OF PEOPLE TO SHOW UP FOR ONE ANOTHER.**



Programs, systems, and strategies all depend on the energy and participation of individuals who choose to contribute their time, care, and attention.

At Calgary Seniors, we refer to this human foundation as **Community Power**.

## What is Community Power?

Community Power refers to the **collective participation of people who contribute to the wellbeing of their communities.**

### This includes:

- Volunteers
- Neighbours
- Families
- Community organizations
- Local partnerships

Together, these individuals and groups create the relationships that make communities feel supportive and connected.

## Why This Matters

### Without active participation from community members:

- Programs struggle to reach people who need support
- Opportunities for connection remain limited
- Communities become less resilient

### When community energy is strong:

- Volunteers step forward to help others
- Neighbours form supportive relationships
- Organizations collaborate more effectively
- Communities become more connected and compassionate

This layer represents the **human force that powers the entire Connected Community Model.**

## The Calgary Seniors Approach

**At Calgary Seniors, we work to cultivate community power by:**

- Creating meaningful volunteer opportunities
- Encouraging neighbour-to-neighbour support
- Partnering with community organizations
- Celebrating the contributions of volunteers and community members

At the foundation of the system is Community Power: the willingness of people to participate, volunteer, and care for one another. This capacity is not just theoretical. **According to Statistics Canada, close to three in four Canadians aged 15 and older volunteered formally or informally in 2023, contributing 4.1 billion hours to community organizations and helping build social connections that strengthen wellbeing** (Statistics Canada, 2025).

**BY STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, WE HELP ENSURE THAT SUPPORT FLOWS NATURALLY THROUGH THE COMMUNITY.**

## Looking Forward

**AS COMMUNITIES EXPLORE APPROACHES SUCH AS SOCIAL PRESCRIBING, NAVIGATION PROGRAMS, AND AGE-FRIENDLY PLANNING, IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY CLEAR THAT REFERRAL SYSTEMS ALONE ARE NOT ENOUGH.**

Connecting someone to support is only meaningful if strong community programs exist to receive that connection.

This means communities must invest not only in referral pathways, but also in the broader ecosystem that makes community support possible.

**This includes strengthening:**

- volunteer participation
- community-based wellbeing programs
- operational capacity behind those programs
- the cultural values that encourage people to care for one another

The Connected Community Model offers a way to think about these elements as part of a unified system.

At Calgary Seniors, we continue to explore how volunteer-powered programs, community partnerships, and thoughtful system design can strengthen this ecosystem.

By working together across sectors, communities can create environments where older adults remain connected, supported, and able to contribute meaningfully to community life.

Strong communities are not built through services alone.

They grow through relationships, participation, and a shared commitment to caring for one another.

## Implications for Communities

Communities seeking to strengthen wellbeing supports for older adults may consider several key areas of investment.

**These include:**

**Strengthening Community Participation**

Encouraging volunteerism, neighbour-to-neighbour support, and community engagement.

**Building Wellbeing Infrastructure**

Supporting practical programs that reduce isolation and help older adults remain connected in daily life.

**Investing in Capacity Enablement**

Developing the systems, training, and

coordination that allow community programs to operate effectively.

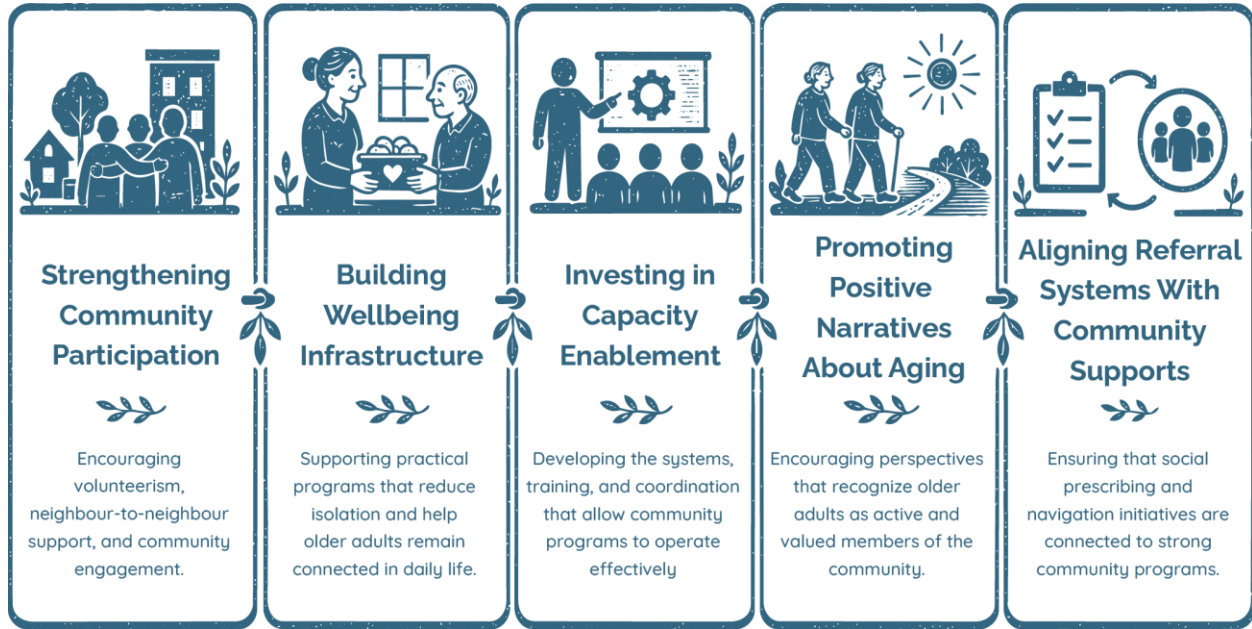
**Promoting Positive Narratives About Aging**

Encouraging perspectives that recognize older adults as active and valued members of the community.

**Aligning Referral Systems With Community Supports**

Ensuring that social prescribing and navigation initiatives are connected to strong community programs.

When these elements are aligned, communities are better positioned to support aging well.



## Calgary Seniors' Perspective

Through decades of designing volunteer-powered community programs, Calgary Seniors has developed a practical understanding of how communities support aging well.

Our experience shows that community wellbeing is not created by services alone. It emerges from the interaction between people, programs, systems, and shared values.

While much attention has been placed on referral pathways and navigation systems, far less focus has been given to the community infrastructure that makes those referrals meaningful.

The Connected Community Model reflects Calgary Seniors' contribution to this conversation. It offers a framework for understanding how community participation, operational capacity, wellbeing programs, and supportive culture work together to create environments where older adults remain connected and supported.

By sharing this model, Calgary Seniors hopes to contribute to a growing movement that recognizes the power of community in supporting healthy aging.

**WHEN COMMUNITIES INVEST IN PEOPLE, PARTICIPATION, AND PRACTICAL SUPPORTS, THEY CREATE THE CONDITIONS WHERE OLDER ADULTS CAN REMAIN CONNECTED, VALUED, AND ACTIVELY INVOLVED IN THE LIFE OF THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

## Next Steps

**THE CONNECTED COMMUNITY MODEL IS INTENDED TO CONTRIBUTE TO ONGOING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HOW COMMUNITIES CAN BETTER SUPPORT AGING POPULATIONS.**

While many systems have focused on building referral pathways and navigation services, this paper highlights the importance of strengthening the community supports that allow those referrals to lead to meaningful connection.

Addressing the Community Support Gap will require collaboration across sectors, including healthcare providers, community organizations, funders, policymakers, and local residents.



### Future work may include:

- exploring ways to measure and map Wellbeing Infrastructure within communities
- identifying sustainable approaches to strengthening volunteer-powered supports (such as our current pilot project made possible by the Government of Alberta Ministry of Seniors - ‘The Kindness Framework’ [kindnessframework.ca](https://kindnessframework.ca))
- developing tools that help communities assess and address the Community Support Gap
- fostering partnerships between health systems and community organizations
- advancing shared understanding of the role community participation plays in supporting healthy aging

At Calgary Seniors, we will continue to explore how volunteer-powered programs, operational capacity, and community culture interact to create strong local support systems.

**WE INVITE PARTNERS ACROSS THE HEALTH, COMMUNITY, AND RESEARCH SECTORS TO JOIN IN FURTHER EXPLORING HOW COMMUNITIES CAN MOVE BEYOND THE REFERRAL AND BUILD THE INFRASTRUCTURE THAT ALLOWS OLDER ADULTS TO REMAIN CONNECTED, SUPPORTED, AND ENGAGED IN COMMUNITY LIFE.**

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## Artificial Intelligence Use Disclosure

In developing this paper, the authors used ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence tool developed by OpenAI, as a writing and thinking support. The tool helped with brainstorming, organizing ideas, refining language, and strengthening clarity. The insights, model description, examples, and final decisions remain grounded in the authors' experience, practice wisdom, and direct knowledge of the connected community model. All content was reviewed, revised, verified, and approved by the human authors, who take full responsibility for the final paper.



## **BEYOND THE REFERRAL:**

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