

# RURAL OLDER VOLUNTEERS & THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

REPORT FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

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PREPARED BY: AMBER COLIBABA, ELIZABETH RUSSELL & MARK SKINNER  
RURAL AGING RESEARCH PROGRAM  
TRENT UNIVERSITY  
[WWW.TRENTU.CA/RURALAGING](http://WWW.TRENTU.CA/RURALAGING)

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Sincerely,

Amber Colibaba, M.A.  
Project Coordinator  
acolibaba@trentu.ca

Dr. Elizabeth Russell  
Co-Investigator  
elizabethrussell@trentu.ca

Dr. Mark Skinner  
Principal Investigator  
markskinner@trentu.ca

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During large-scale global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to understand the experiences of those living and working within it. A study from Trent University's Rural Aging Research Program, *Rural Older Volunteers and the COVID-19 Pandemic* examined the experiences of older volunteers from three volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township, representing a diverse set of rural services (Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, Selwyn Fire Department and Selwyn Public Library). Between June and September 2020, the study conducted telephone and/or Zoom interviews with 34 volunteers and administrators across the three programs to determine what it was like to volunteer during the first wave of the pandemic. Our key findings revealed 1) the vulnerability and resiliency of older volunteers, and 2) the adaptability and uncertainty of volunteer programs. Insights from this project provided a way to understand how to establish personal, program and community dimensions of sustainable rural aging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Project Title:** Addressing the need to understand how volunteer-based programs and older volunteers in rural communities are coping with the impacts of the physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic
- **Funding:** Trent University's Office of Research & Innovation Special Call COVID-19; Canada Research Chairs Program
- **Ethics:** This project was approved by the Trent University Research Ethics Board (file no. 26559)
- **How to cite:** Colibaba, A., Russell, E., & Skinner, M. (2021). *Rural Older Volunteers and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Trent Centre for Aging & Society, Trent University.

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## Rural Aging Research Program

 [www.trentu.ca/ruralaging](http://www.trentu.ca/ruralaging)

 [acolibaba@trentu.ca](mailto:acolibaba@trentu.ca)

 [Aging During COVID-19: Older Voluntarism](#)

# INTRODUCTION

## Project Overview

Led by Trent University's Rural Aging Research Program, Mark Skinner (Canada Research Chair Rural Aging, Health & Social Care and Dean, Humanities & Social Sciences), Elizabeth Russell (Associate Professor, Psychology, and Director, Trent Centre for Aging & Society) and Amber Colibaba (Coordinator, Trent Centre for Aging & Society and Rural Aging Research Program), the *Rural Older Volunteers and the COVID-19 Pandemic* project explores how older voluntarism has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project presents a case study of three volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township, Ontario, which is comprised of recreation, agricultural and small town communities in Peterborough County on the traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig Anishnaabeg. The three programs represent typical voluntary initiatives found in rural and small town Canada, and have pre-existing relationships with the Rural Aging Research Program, having participated in previous rural aging research (for more information, visit [www.trentu.ca/ruralaging](http://www.trentu.ca/ruralaging)).

Preliminary findings from *Rural Older Volunteers and the COVID-19 Pandemic* were featured in the Trent Centre for Aging & Society's video series *Aging During COVID-19*. Watch our video, [here](#). Click [here](#) to watch all videos in the series.



Trent University's Rural Aging Research Team  
Amber Colibaba, Mark Skinner, Elizabeth Russell  
At Young's Point, Selwyn Township

# RESEARCH APPROACH

## Case Study of Selwyn Township

The project sought to understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the volunteer-based programs and aging rural communities of Selwyn Township.

The Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield (AHSL) is a volunteer-run organization mandated to provide affordable co-housing accommodation and companionship for older residents of Lakefield. Comprised of eight volunteer board members, their collective goal is to implement a co-housing initiative for seniors in the village of Lakefield.



The Selwyn Fire Department is a volunteer-run fire department, providing emergency services to Selwyn Township. The department consists of five halls within the major settlements of the township and provides fire and emergency medical services and fire prevention and education. The Department is comprised of three full-time township employees and 92 volunteers.

The Selwyn Public Library is a volunteer-based rural public library that serves Selwyn Township, with one branch in each of the three wards (Bridgenorth, Ennismore and Lakefield). Its operations are run by six full-time township employees and 174 volunteers.



# RESEARCH APPROACH

## Participants

The study conducted interviews with 34 participants from the three volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township, including both volunteers and program administrators (AHSL = 5; Selwyn Fire Department =16; Selwyn Public Library =13). Participants were an average age of 65 years old, 62% were male and had volunteered with their respective organization for an average of 18 years.



## Interviews

With ethics approval from the Trent University Research Ethics Board, and with informed consent from participants, interviews were conducted between June - September 2020. Due to the physical distancing measures in place in Ontario at the time of data collection, interviews were conducted virtually, either on the telephone or using Zoom. Interviews covered topics ranging from participants' experience volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges their program was facing in responding to the changes brought on by the pandemic and the implications of the pandemic on the communities of Selwyn.

## Data Analysis

Following an iterative collaborative qualitative analysis (ICQA) process, a sample of interview transcripts were reviewed and a code list was collectively developed and revised to create a finalized code manual. Transcripts were then coded by the research team according to the code manual. Code summary documents were then created for each code, which detailed writing about emergent themes and key findings.

# FINDINGS

A series of key themes emerged from the analysis concerning older volunteers and volunteer-based programs. Findings demonstrated interconnected themes of the vulnerability and resiliency of individual volunteers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the adaptability and uncertainty within programs as they attempted to sustain their services.

Vulnerability & Resiliency of Older Volunteers	Adaptability & Uncertainty of Volunteer-Based Programs
<p>Vulnerability related to additional risk (age, pre-existing medical conditions, compromised immune systems) during the COVID-19 pandemic</p>	<p>Changes at the program level help with rural service sustainability</p>
<p>Volunteers remain resilient and continued to volunteer, or wished to resume volunteering post-pandemic</p>	<p>Volunteers and volunteer-based programs are uncertain of what post-pandemic voluntarism will mean for them</p>

# FINDINGS

## Vulnerability & Resiliency of Older Volunteers

**“ I miss it terribly. [Volunteering] is very high on the list of things that I miss. I miss the involvement with the greater community...I really feel cut off from that. ”**

- Selwyn Public Library Volunteer

Volunteers across the three programs in Selwyn Township expressed feelings of vulnerability related to volunteering during the pandemic. Due to age, pre-existing medical conditions and compromised immune systems, many volunteers experienced an enhanced risk of contracting and experiencing serious complications from COVID-19. For many volunteers, the pandemic and not being able to volunteer brought on feelings of isolation and a disconnect from their community.

Despite the vulnerabilities and risks, the volunteers displayed a sense of resiliency, as many continued to volunteer, or wished to resume volunteering post-pandemic to ensure services remain within their community. Many volunteers were resourceful at maintaining community connections, which was described as helping them take their mind off the negativity surrounding the pandemic.

**“ We could have just thrown our hands up and given up but we didn't. ”**

- Abbeyfield Lakefield Volunteer

# FINDINGS

## Adaptability & Uncertainty of Volunteer-Based Programs

**“It's a complete rethinking and change in protocol and experience...Many different areas suddenly become things we have to think about because we can't stop doing our job.”**

- Selwyn Fire Department Volunteer

Adaptability at the program level helped participants to continue to navigate the changes in volunteering brought on by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some changes were considered to be minor (e.g., increased PPE such as masks) and some were major (e.g., temporarily ceasing in-person library services). However, volunteers described the importance of continually adapting and evolving with the changes to ensure their organization would remain active in the community in some capacity.

Volunteering during COVID-19 represents the next phase of voluntary adaptation observed in Selwyn Township. According to many participants, volunteering would never be the same (e.g., a new normal was being established). Personal safety, for many, was at the forefront of making decisions during, and for post-pandemic, especially regarding the safety and vulnerability of the volunteer base. Individuals who were unable to volunteer during the pandemic described a sense of uncertainty of what post-pandemic voluntarism would mean for them.

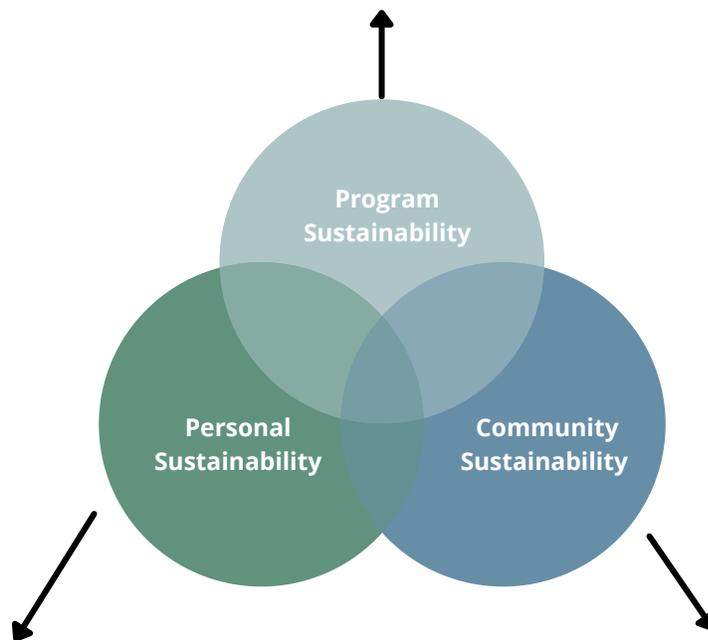
**“I do miss it and will be glad when it starts again...I might be a little nervous at first.”**

- Selwyn Public Library Volunteer

# IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL AGING

The key findings from the study illustrate the ways that a diverse set of volunteer initiatives catering to an aging rural population are able to maintain levels of personal (individual volunteers), program (volunteer-based organizations) and community (aging rural places) sustainability through a global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To promote sustainability of volunteer-based services, adaptations to operational policies (e.g., PPE, physical distancing) and program delivery (e.g., virtual) are crucial in ensuring services remain viable within the community



Individual, volunteer sustainability can be maintained through continued support at the program level (e.g., change in policies to ensure volunteer safety).

Ensuring personal and program sustainability allows for essential services to remain present in the local community to help support its aging rural population

# FURTHER INFORMATION...

## Rural Aging Research Program

 [www.trentu.ca/ruralaging](http://www.trentu.ca/ruralaging)

 [acolibaba@trentu.ca](mailto:acolibaba@trentu.ca)

 (705) 748-1011 ext. 7978

Our video, *Aging During COVID-19: Older Voluntarism*, as well as the other videos in this series, can be viewed [here](#).

