



# EQUITY DIVERSITY & INCLUSION *report*

AUGUST 2024



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## CONTEXT

Healthy Aging Alberta (HAA) is dedicated to creating an inclusive and equitable environment where older adults across Alberta can age with dignity, connection, and choice. Recognizing the vital role of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in achieving this vision, HAA has embarked on a journey to embed EDI principles into our structures, strategies, and partnerships.

In February 2024, HAA engaged More Than Enough (MTE) Consulting to support this critical work. Their experience in guiding organizations to integrate EDI principles into design processes, coupled with HAA's commitment to collaborative leadership, allowed us to connect with 247 community organizations through regional gatherings and 126 individuals through focus groups. These engagements uncovered insights into the needs and priorities of Alberta's diverse older adult population.

HAA wishes to express its gratitude to MTE Consulting for providing time and expertise, ensuring a strong EDI foundation upon which to build. This report is based on MTE Consulting's report to HAA and all insights and conclusions shared in this report are based on MTE Consulting's findings. "This report not only provides a roadmap for addressing current challenges but also lays the foundation for ongoing collaboration and advocacy supporting the diverse needs of older adults across the province."

## ABOUT HEALTHY AGING ALBERTA

Healthy Aging Alberta is a 'by community for community' initiative working to make Alberta one of the best places to grow older. We connect, strengthen, and amplify a network of community-based seniors serving (CBSS) organizations and community allies—supporting older adults to age on their terms.

### Our Mission

Healthy Aging Alberta builds upon and advances the work of the CBSS sector through collective action, system change, and integration with allied sectors to benefit older adults.

### Our Vision

Every older adult is empowered to age how they choose, ultimately improving their well-being and the well-being of their communities.

# ABOUT MORE THAN ENOUGH CONSULTING

More than Enough Consulting helps organizations align their who, what, why, and how with EDI principles. Through partnership with communities, voices are not only aligned but deeply integrated throughout an organization. Our work involves embedding EDI across various aspects of organizations by examining their structures, policies, and practices through an equity lens. Denyelle Fraser is the Founder of More Than Enough Consulting.

## ENGAGEMENTS

Through review of HAA's strategic plan and evaluation summary report, key EDI priorities and insights were identified and provided a foundation for HAA and MTE Consulting's approach. As outlined in the plan of action, engagements were designed to explore and answer key questions, including, "How can we integrate equity into the structure that informs the who, what, why, and how of Healthy Aging Alberta?" The additional questions are as follows:

### Regional Gatherings

- Where do CBSS organizations or groups currently stand in terms of understanding and implementing equity?
- What does diversity look like within CBSS organizations?
- How can HAA align its equity-related strategic priorities with the needs of CBSS organizations?

### Focus Groups

- What do older adults value in a healthy aging experience?
- How do we increase belonging and what are the barriers?

From April to July 2024, we engaged 247 organizations through eleven regional gatherings and 126 individuals through eight focus groups, to answer these key questions and gain valuable insights to inform HAA's work. Our approach was based on a dedication to maintaining progress and development, expanding on the foundational work that had already been set in motion.

## METHODOLOGY

HAA and MTE Consulting undertook a collaborative and equity-focused methodology to gather insights, identify systemic barriers, and co-create actionable recommendations that reflect the diverse realities of Alberta's older adults. This process was guided by a participatory narrative approach and included input from older adults and community-based senior-serving (CBSS) organizations across the province.

### Data Compilation

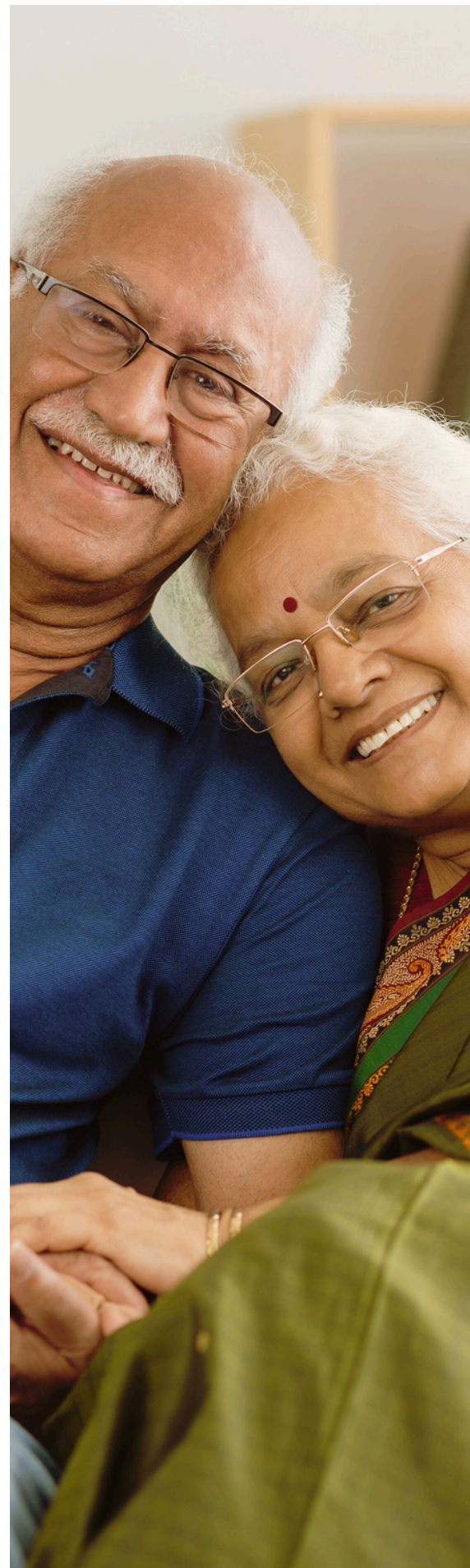
HAA's Regional Community Developers (RCDs), collected notes from each regional gathering and focus group conducted between April and July 2024. These sessions provided valuable insights into the lived experiences and challenges faced by older adults and their communities.

### Theme Identification

The collected data was reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns. These themes were categorized into "buckets" that reflected the shared stories and experiences of participants.

### Collaborative Analysis

The HAA's RCDs and MTE Consulting, held collaborative meetings to align on the interpretation of these themes. This ensured that the findings accurately reflected the voices of older adults and CBSS organizations, fostering a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities identified.





# UNDERSTANDING HEALTHY AGING

## Key Themes, Findings, and Opportunities

In this section, we dive into the core themes and key findings that emerged from our focus groups and regional gatherings. By analyzing the experiences and perspectives of older adults, we uncover the essential ingredients for healthy aging and identify both opportunities and challenges to inform our work. We will explore various aspects including access to support, barriers to engagement, and the role of partnerships, offering actionable insights for enhancing the effectiveness and impact of HAA's initiatives.

## Transportation as a Barrier

Transportation emerged as a significant problem with every focus group and regional gathering speaking to it as a barrier affecting connection and independence. Many participants highlighted how the loss of transportation options (ie. driving independently) significantly limits their ability to engage in activities and maintain social connections. They also pointed out that current transportation systems often fail to accommodate those with varying abilities or financial constraints, exacerbating the sense of isolation for older adults. Working to address this barrier proves to be essential for healthy aging.

# FOCUS GROUPS

## Importance of Representation

Focus group discussions revealed that representation plays a crucial role in older adults' willingness to engage with various spaces, including places of worship and cultural associations. Participants emphasized the significance of seeing others who share similar backgrounds, which fosters a sense of belonging and reduces feelings of isolation. When asked what they look for to determine if a space is safe and respectful, one participant from the Fort McMurray Métis group expressed, "There are people who look like me, and I don't feel like the 'only Indian.'" For marginalized individuals, particularly racialized, the importance of representation is profound.

They often face systemic barriers, including racism, alienation, microaggressions, and accent discrimination, which can deter them from accessing certain spaces. The sense of commonality found in cultural groups becomes a critical factor in creating welcoming environments. Negative experiences in predominantly non-diverse spaces can further alienate these individuals, reinforcing the need for spaces where they feel acknowledged and valued.

Dr. Rose Joudi's research highlights that "ethno-cultural communities are more likely to seek support within their own communities," illustrating the necessity of establishing trust and familiarity in these environments. Spaces that reflect diverse backgrounds and experiences, including LGBTQ+ folks or those living with Dementia for example, not only promote inclusion but also provide a sense of safety for marginalized individuals to connect and access resources.

**"For marginalized individuals, particularly racialized, the importance of representation is profound."**



## Reality of Unwelcoming Spaces

A significant theme that emerged among equity-deserving older adults was their perception of some spaces as unwelcoming, with these perceptions often rooted in lived experiences of exclusion and alienation. This was not a distant or abstract concern but a reflection of recurring barriers to access, connection, and inclusion. For instance, pickleball was repeatedly mentioned as a sport perceived as “white,” and the spaces where it is played were seen as unwelcoming to non-white people. In one focus group with African and Caribbean older adults, two women—initially strangers—bonded over their shared love for pickleball. They explained that many people close to them avoid participating in the sport because it is perceived as a “white” activity. Some participants who do attend such spaces end up going alone, and once there, they feel alienated and disconnected, deepening the sense of exclusion. The issue of unwelcoming spaces extended beyond this.

Participants from the Aging with Pride group highlighted the importance of visible symbols like Pride flags to indicate safety and inclusivity. However, they also noted that these symbols can be misleading if the staff or environment within the space isn’t educated or committed to the values those symbols represent. One participant shared their experience of uncertainty about accessing a city swimming pool as a trans person, unsure of whether they would encounter acceptance, discomfort, or even hostility. Such experiences underline how surface-level displays of inclusivity can sometimes mask environments that are, in reality, unwelcoming or even harmful. As a result, many LGBTQ+ older adults rely on word of mouth within their community to determine which spaces are genuinely safe.

Further compounding this reality of exclusion are the experiences of Indigenous older adults. In one instance shared by a member of the Métis community, they recounted how, during a recent trip, they were denied a hotel room when the receptionist realized they were Indigenous. However, when their wife—who appears whiter—attempted to book the same room, it was suddenly available.

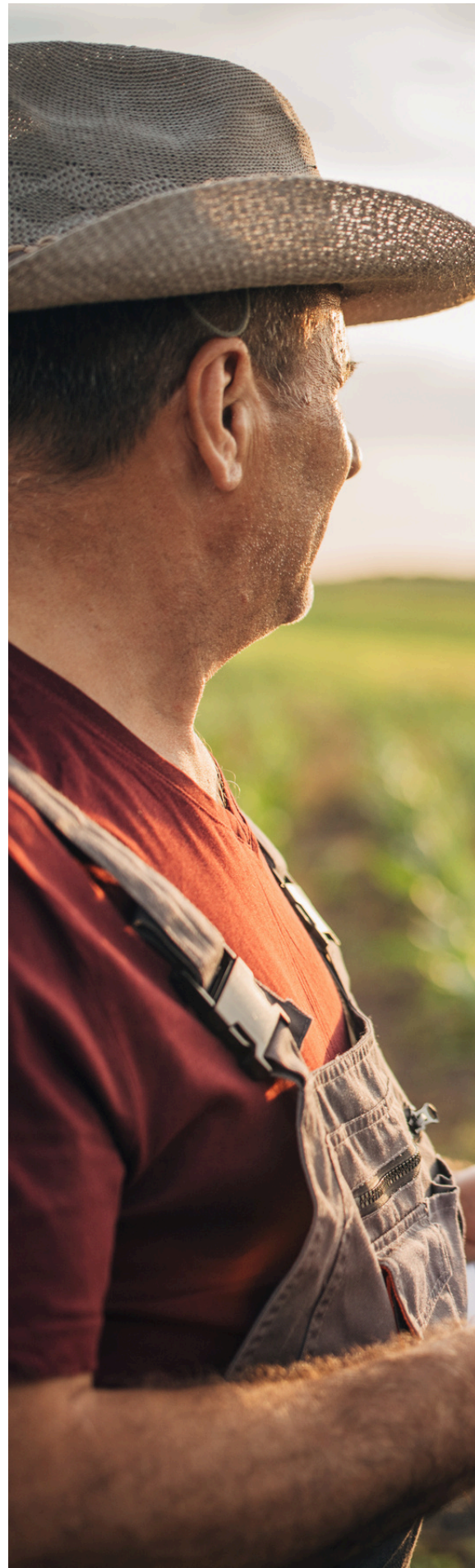
The same participant shared how a similar situation occurred when booking a room over the phone for a relative from an Indigenous Reserve—once the receptionist learned where they were from, the room that was initially available was no longer offered. This type of discrimination, where sending the “Indian first comes at a risk,” demonstrates the pervasive nature of exclusion faced by Indigenous older adults in public spaces

## Need for Effective Community Outreach

Effective outreach is a key component in connecting with older adults, particularly those living alone or without immediate family support. Participants stressed the importance of proactive engagement from community organizations, family, and friends. For instance, one participant apart of our focus group noted the value of having a persistent and caring program leader who actively reaches out and maintains contact with community members. This highlights the need for organizations and groups to not only provide services but also to build and sustain relationships through consistent outreach efforts.

Outreach can also work to address another gap identified, awareness of programs, resources and support. Participants shared sentiments like, “We don’t know where to go outside of help from our children” and “organizations seem to expect us to know they exist”. This gap would especially compound for older adults who are newcomers or those with English as their second language, for example. Our findings indicated that outreach has direct implications on feelings of independence and ability to meet basic needs.

**“...outreach has direct implications on feelings of independence and ability to meet basic needs.”**



## Impact of Technology

Technology's role in connecting older adults with support services was a mixed topic. While some participants expressed frustration with the usability of digital platforms and service websites, others suggested that traditional methods, like posters, could still be effective. This illustrates a need for a balanced approach that incorporates both digital and non-digital communication strategies to ensure broader accessibility.

## Funding Resources and Gaps

Funding remains a significant challenge for many CBSS organizations and groups. Despite the high demand for culturally specific and relevant programs, financial constraints often lead to long waitlists or program closures. The critical need for a more equitable distribution of resources and support to sustain effective programs is evident. Addressing these funding gaps is essential to ensure programs are accessible and adequately supported.

A notable example of impactful community work is Men's Sheds, a group designed for and led by older men. Participants from Men's Sheds contributed valuable insights during regional gatherings and focus groups. Their experiences illustrate how such peer-led groups and initiatives can benefit from partnerships with Healthy Aging Alberta and other CBSS organizations. These partnerships could provide the necessary support and resources, enhancing the reach and effectiveness of Men's Sheds.

Partnerships can take many forms, depending on the specific needs of the community. For instance, during our focus group discussion with Men's Sheds, it became clear that men's health is often stigmatized. By fostering mutually beneficial collaborations, we can enhance awareness of Men's Sheds while also facilitating connections to men's health organizations and initiatives. Such partnerships support Men's Sheds and similar groups, enabling them to continue providing vital services and connections for older men.

These insights highlight the importance of a collaborative approach to funding and resource allocation across HAA. By addressing these gaps through strategic partnerships and equitable resource distribution, we can better support the diverse needs of CBSS organizations and the older adults they support.



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## Intersectionality

Understanding the complexities of healthy aging requires recognizing the unique identities that shape older adults’ experiences. Older adults possess multiple, intersecting identities—such as race, ethnicity, culture, ability, sexual identity, and geographical location—that significantly influence their perspectives, interests, and priorities. These intersecting identities can compound to create specific barriers and shape their definitions of healthy aging.

For example, the Métis group emphasized connection to land as a crucial ingredient for healthy aging, while Aging with Pride participants consistently spoke to safety. This comparison illustrates how unique identities and experiences inform differing values of healthy aging. Participants across focus groups shared the difficulties of navigating the medical system, which is often inaccessible for older adults.

This issue is compounded for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, who reported a lack of knowledgeable medical professionals. They expressed challenges related to intersex hormones and aging, with some professionals refusing to serve trans-identifying individuals or use their preferred pronouns, further limiting access to necessary healthcare services.

Similarly, newcomers from our Muslim community focus group and individuals from our people living with dementia focus group shared how relying on family for financial support and resource access—along with language barriers—deepens their vulnerability. Leading to isolation and dependence, which undermines the ingredients for healthy aging.

These stories demonstrate that an intersectional lens is central to healthy aging, as it highlights the complex realities that must be addressed to create truly inclusive environments for older adults.

## Desire to be Included

Older adults who participated in focus groups expressed a strong desire to be included in meaningful activities and decision-making processes. As one focus group participant put it, “We bring value. We are caregivers, professionals, and deserve dignity and a place at the table when decisions are being made.” Each Regional Community Developer (RCD) noted similar feedback from the groups they facilitated. Core ingredients to healthy aging—such as purpose, respect, inclusion, and connection—commonly emerged and were easily identified in each focus group discussion.





A human-centred co-design approach, which involves collaborative design was highlighted as an effective way to foster a sense of belonging and engagement. Ensuring that older adults have a voice in the development of initiatives, programs and services is key to meeting their needs and enhancing their overall well-being.

In particular, participants noted the importance of creating safe spaces for those living with dementia. For example, people with dementia may make comments or exhibit behaviours that reflect outdated norms or societal standards due to memory loss, which can result in occasional outbursts or seemingly inappropriate remarks. These behaviours are a symptom of the disease rather than a reflection of the individual's character. Despite these challenges, individuals with dementia expressed a strong desire to continue participating in community activities without facing judgment or stigma.

Communities that cultivate empathy and understanding toward dementia can play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity, recognizing that behaviours associated with dementia stem from the condition itself. By fostering awareness, communities can ensure that people living with dementia feel respected, accepted, and able to engage meaningfully without fear of social exclusion.

**“Communities that cultivate empathy and understanding toward dementia can play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity...”**

## Additional Barriers and Needs

Participants identified several additional barriers that impact their ability to access support services. These include issues related to financial constraints, familial dynamics, and a deep desire for intergenerational connection. Interestingly, nearly every focus group mentioned the desire for intergenerational connection, with the Metis, Afro-Caribbean, and rural/remote focus groups mentioning its importance extensively. Making space to recognize and address these barriers or needs is essential for improving access and ensuring that supports are effective, meaningful, and inclusive.

## Embedding Equity for a Sustainable Transformation

Sustainable transformation requires embedding equity into the core systems, policies, and practices of an organization. While meaningful work often thrives through the dedication of individuals, turnover for example, is an inevitable reality. For instance, a focus group participant highlighted this challenge, noting that the departure of a program leader who had been deeply involved in community outreach negatively impacted engagement and attendance in programming.

Note that we've previously established how effective outreach and connection work together to contribute to healthy aging. The participant's experience suggests that the impact of turnover could have been mitigated by examining and sustaining the program leader's effective outreach practices by capturing it in the program's logic model or manual for the next leader to implement.

Equity work must be woven into the organizational structure to ensure both sustainability and effectiveness. This means aligning operations with equity principles and embedding these principles into everyday practices. For HAA, this process started with the strategic plan, which provided a solid foundation. Applying an equity lens should extend across all areas, including governance, human resources, marketing/communications, programming, partnerships, finance, and fund development.

**“It is important to understand that our communities are dynamic, constantly changing and evolving.”**

# REGIONAL GATHERINGS

## Leadership Commitment

The commitment from leadership within the network was evident and played a crucial role in the success of this process. The Community Leadership Council (CLC) and HAA staff team demonstrated ownership and creativity, contributing to our collective impact framework that was both meaningful and relevant. This strong leadership commitment is vital for sustaining equity efforts and ensuring continued progress.

It is important to understand that our communities are dynamic, constantly changing and evolving. Commitment from leadership means continually striving to engage and center the voices of those with lived experience in visioning, planning, and decision-making.

This involves establishing systems of accountability that both evaluate successful practices (e.g., regional gatherings) and integrate equity components (e.g., accessibility, diverse engagement, and equity capacity building). Additionally, it requires fostering a culture of discovery to collaboratively uncover and address opportunities for enhancing and reinforcing equity. Systems of accountability might include mechanisms such as annual audits to ensure ongoing progress and adaptation.

## Education and Awareness

Regional gatherings highlighted the need for greater education and awareness about the benefits of EDI. CBSS organizations generally expressed a desire to learn how to make their spaces more accessible and inclusive for older adults. There was also clear interest in understanding how an equity approach can benefit everyone, not exclusive to race or gender for example.

It was interesting to observe that understanding of EDI varied across different geographic locations. This observation was based on the types of questions asked, small group discussions, and insights shared by RCDs during our collaborative review. One RCD noted, “Different groups had different reactions, some felt forced while others challenged the understanding of ‘equity isn’t relevant for us’.”





In our gatherings, we observed a range of engagement styles and stages regarding EDI. Some discussions were more exploratory, with participants expressing curiosity and engaging in dialogue to better understand EDI's relevance. Others involved individuals and communities with experience in EDI initiatives, actively strategizing how the network could leverage collective efforts to foster inclusion. This presents an opportunity for Healthy Aging Alberta to tailor future EDI-related activities to meet communities where they are in their journey, recognizing the unique approaches and strengths that each group brings to the conversation.

A specific takeaway from these discussions was the prevalence of a "one size fits all" approach in group conversations. During our collaborative review, we identified a recurring theme: the way organizations and groups commonly described their approach—"we proudly serve all cultures, all races, and all religions, etc."—did not match the experiences of older adults, particularly those from diverse equity-deserving backgrounds who engage with senior-serving organizations.

This approach, which assumes one lens can serve all cultures, races, and religions, has been proven harmful and inaccessible. It highlights the need for more intersectional and responsive strategies. Here is where equity lives in HAA's mission and vision: capacity-building. Future Regional Gatherings, Bi-Annual Provincial Summits and the CORE platform can be leveraged to share very specific, practical and relevant tools or insights on how to support specific communities.

## Partnership Development and Community Engagement

Partnership development and community engagement emerged as significant opportunities from the regional gatherings and the evaluation report developed by PolicyWise for Children and Families. CBSS organizations expressed a strong desire for more collaboration to address identified gaps in resources, funding, outreach, and engagement. By encouraging and formalizing mutually beneficial partnerships, we can collectively better support community needs.

Engaging with diverse communities is a key focus of the strategic plan, the evaluation summary, and was also identified as a gap in focus groups and regional gatherings. Our engagement revealed that ethno-cultural groups often receive more support from places of worship and cultural associations. Perhaps exploring formalized partnerships with these groups, leveraging their proven ability to support their communities effectively despite limited funding and resources. Such partnerships could provide valuable organizational expertise, enhance community trust, connection, increase awareness of senior sector support and offer opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Note, however, that it's also essential to apply a critical lens to our definition of "diverse" groups. Which communities is HAA hoping to engage? Avoiding a "one size fits all" approach here requires us to clearly identify and name these underrepresented groups and tailor our strategies accordingly.

For example, conducting a survey focusing solely on gathering quantitative demographic data might substantiate our assumptions of Indigenous peoples being underrepresented, among other equity-deserving groups, within HAA. From there a data-informed decision could be made to collaborate with leaders or consultants from Indigenous groups to inform a competent and appropriate engagement plan.

Lastly, clarity is crucial for effective collaboration. People can not connect to what they don't understand. A clear mission and vision allow partners to connect with the work, contribute thoughtfully, and establish a sense of ownership and accountability. The impact of this was demonstrated throughout Phase 1: Hear, where we followed the collective impact framework. The evaluation summary revealed challenges in understanding HAA's governing structure and engagement methods. Introducing practical tools to enhance clarity will directly impact collaboration and engagement.

# CONCLUSION

This report reflects the collective insights and efforts of older adults, CBSS organizations, and partners who participated in regional gatherings and focus groups. Together, we have identified actionable strategies to address systemic barriers, foster inclusion, and build stronger connections across communities.

The findings outlined in this report serve as a roadmap for HAA, our partners, and funders. Collaboration, intentionality, and a sustained commitment to EDI are essential as we continue this work. Moving forward, HAA and its partners must:

- Listen to the voices of older adults to ensure their needs and experiences guide decision-making.
- Align strategies with EDI principles to promote sustainable, systemic change.
- Leverage partnerships to bridge gaps in resources, access, and representation.

HAA recognizes that equity work is an ongoing journey, not a finite goal. To maintain progress, we will continue to refine these recommendations, integrate them into our strategic planning, and collaborate with CBSS organizations to implement meaningful change. Assigning priority levels, timelines, and measurable outcomes will ensure accountability and track our collective impact.

Our commitment to equity extends beyond this report. HAA aims to foster a culture of continuous learning and discovery, ensuring that older adults across Alberta can age as and where they choose.

Healthy Aging Alberta invites community organizations, funders, and policymakers to join us in building a future where equity and inclusion are at the core of healthy aging.

**“This presents an opportunity for Healthy Aging Alberta to tailor future EDI-related activities to meet communities where they are in their journey”**

# EXPANDED INSIGHTS ON INGREDIENTS TO HEALTHY AGING

## Independence and Choice

Older adults consistently highlighted the importance of maintaining independence and having the freedom to make choices. This is closely linked to their sense of autonomy and self-worth. The ability to make decisions about their daily lives and future is crucial to their overall well-being. However, barriers such as lack of accessible transportation and limited service options often challenge their independence.

## Mobility and Transportation

Mobility is a critical factor impacting older adults' ability to participate in community activities and access necessary services. Discussions revealed that transportation challenges can lead to decreased participation in activities and a reduced quality of life. One participant shared, "When you lose access to your driver's license, the world becomes very small." The need for reliable and accessible transportation services was emphasized, with mobility issues often affecting other areas like access to healthcare and social connections.

## Navigating Society Confidently

Older adults expressed a desire to navigate society with confidence. This includes feeling secure in their interactions and understanding how to access various services. Issues such as language barriers and lack of cultural competency in services can undermine this confidence, making it harder for them to engage fully in their communities.

## Access Outside of Natural Support's Help

Access to support services should not solely depend on assistance from close connections, such as family members, friends, care partner(s) or neighbours. Older adults voiced the need for community resources and services that they can learn of and access independently. As one participant noted, "We don't want to rely on our children for everything. Having access to support on our own terms is important."

## Confidence

Confidence plays a significant role in how older adults engage with their surroundings. Feeling respected and valued contributes to their confidence. Negative experiences in certain spaces, such as feeling judged or excluded, can diminish their confidence and willingness to participate.

## Cultural Competency

Cultural competency was frequently mentioned as essential for feeling understood and respected. Older adults from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Indigenous and other ethno-cultural communities, emphasized that services need to be culturally-competent to foster a sense of belonging and trust. Which illustrates the reason ethno-cultural communities are more likely to seek support within their own communities.

## In-person Connection

The value of face-to-face interactions was a recurring theme. Many older adults expressed that in-person connections are vital for emotional support and social engagement. Virtual or impersonal interactions often fall short in providing the same level of connection and support.

## Greater Access to Support, Resources, and Services

Access to basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare was highlighted as fundamental. Participants stressed that without adequate access to these essentials, other aspects of healthy aging become challenging. One participant mentioned, "We need support that addresses our basic needs first before we can focus on other aspects of life."

## Respect and Empathy

Respect was emphasized as a key ingredient in healthy aging. Older adults want to be valued and acknowledged for their life experiences and contributions. A participant shared, "Remember that when we see an older person in a wheelchair, they were once like me - someone who lived a full life. Respect and appreciation are crucial." Older adults want to feel understood and supported, not judged. This includes recognizing their vulnerabilities and providing support that acknowledges their experiences and needs.

## Inclusion

Being included in community activities and decision-making processes is important for older adults. They want to be involved and have their voices heard in matters that affect their lives. Most participants shared the importance of being volunteers or board members, noting that, "Being involved in decisions that affect us makes us feel valued and connected."

## Purpose

Having a sense of purpose is crucial for older adults. They want to stay active and engaged in meaningful activities that give them a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. This includes maintaining a schedule and participating in activities that interest them.

## Safety

Safety encompasses both physical and emotional aspects. Older adults want to feel protected and secure in their environments. Protection from harm, discrimination, fraud and neglect is essential. Older adults need assurance that they are safe from abuse and exploitation. Concerns about safety often relate to the broader sense of trust and protection within their communities. As one participant reflected, "As a young man, I felt I could defend myself, but now I rely on others for protection. The world has changed, and so have my needs."

## Intergenerational Connection

The desire for intergenerational connection was evident in almost every discussion. Older adults value programs and spaces that encourage connections across generations, promoting mutual understanding and support.