Communication Mechanisms for Delivering Information to Seniors in a Changing Small Town Context

Laura Ryser and Greg Halseth

Introduction

The landscape of northern BC consists of many resource towns that were designed to attract young workers and their families. Since the 1980s, industrial restructuring, labour shedding technologies, and resource frontier aging has increased the share of seniors in these places.

The relatively limited flow of information about rapid changes in services, however, has impacted seniors’ access to supports and quality-of-life.

Overview

• Resource Frontier Aging
• Rural and Small Town Restructuring
• Methodology
  – Terrace, BC
• Results
• Discussion

This presentation explores ways to improve communication strategies for seniors in a resource town in transition. We begin by exploring the concept of resource frontier aging, as well as how restructuring processes have impacted these places. After reviewing our methodology, we briefly describe demographic and service restructuring pressures in Terrace, BC.

Drawing upon 74 key informant interviews, we then explore factors impacting awareness of seniors’ supports, and discuss recommendations to enhance communication strategies that can link seniors with needed services.

Resource frontier aging

Post 1980s

• Resource frontier aging (Hanlon and Halseth 2005)
• Non-seniors leave at faster rate than seniors
• Industry consolidation / labour shedding technologies
• Job losses and population decline
• Out-migration of young families / residents
• Aging workforce / greater retention of seniors

Since the early 1980s, many resource towns in northern BC have experienced ‘resource frontier aging’. This occurs when a larger share of non-seniors leaves a place at a faster rate than seniors.

Industrial restructuring processes and labour shedding technologies have driven job losses and the out-migration of younger residents. The workforce has been aging with a greater presence of workers over the age of forty-four. More seniors are also choosing to retire in these places.
These changes will have important implications for resource towns that may not be equipped with the infrastructure and services to address the needs of older residents.

**Service restructuring**

- Large distances / low population density
- Neoliberal policies to reduce government expenditures
  - Downsizing, offloading, regionalizing, closing services (Halseth and Ryser 2006; Lowndes 2004)
- Information / communication strategies
  - Key to help seniors understand complexities and changes

Service restructuring has also posed challenges for communities to respond to seniors’ needs. Large distances and low population densities already make it difficult for small places to retain services that have high delivery costs. At the same time, neoliberal policy decisions aimed at reducing government expenditures are downsizing, offloading, regionalizing, or closing supports. For services that remain, reduced government funding has prompted changes in the hours of operation, and the types and levels of services provided.

In this context, communication strategies are critical to help seniors navigate and re-navigate the increasingly complex and constantly changing service environment.

**Methodology I**

- Exploratory, qualitative methodology
- Purposeful sampling
- 74 key informant interviews
  - Community groups
  - Services providers
  - Local government
- Seniors

An exploratory, qualitative methodology was used to examine ways to improve communication strategies to link seniors with supports in Terrace, BC. Using purposeful sampling, 74 key informant interviews were conducted with community groups, service providers, local government, and people actively engaged in seniors’ issues.

**Methodology II**

**Questions**

- Awareness of seniors’ supports
- Factors limiting awareness
- Communication tools used by service providers

**Content analysis**

- Responses coded and categorized to identify patterns / themes

Questions were used to explore:

- Awareness and factors limiting seniors’ awareness of supports,
- Communication strategies used by service providers, and
- Recommendations to improve communication strategies to link seniors with appropriate programs.

Content analysis was used to code and categorize responses to identify patterns and themes from the data.
Our study site, Terrace, is located in the northwest region of BC, approximately 150 kilometres from Prince Rupert, 575 kilometres from Prince George, and over 1,350 kilometres from Vancouver.

The central location of Terrace helped it to transform from a town impacted by forest restructuring into a service centre.

Demographic Trends: Terrace I

Terrace Population (Municipality and CA), 1981-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Terrace (City) Over Last 5 Years</th>
<th>Terrace (CA) % Change</th>
<th>Terrace (City) Over Last 5 Years</th>
<th>Terrace (CA) % Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>10,915</td>
<td></td>
<td>17,850</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>10,532</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td>17,390</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>11,433</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>18,908</td>
<td>8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>12,779</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>20,941</td>
<td>10.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>12,109</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>19,980</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>11,320</td>
<td>-6.5</td>
<td>18,581</td>
<td>-7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A typical pattern found in most resource towns, the population of Terrace grew until 1996, reaching almost 13,000 people. This growth was also experienced in the surrounding areas as the population of the Terrace Census Agglomeration had reached almost 21,000 by 1996.

**Demographic Trends: Terrace II**

**Terrace Population (Municipality and CA), 1981-2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (City)</th>
<th>Terrace % Change Over Last 5 Years</th>
<th>Terrace % Change Over Last 5 Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>


By 2001, the population of Terrace had declined by 5.3%. Over the next five years, the town would lose another 6.5% of its population.

Successive periods of decline were also experienced in the Terrace CA. Difficulties in the forest sector during the late 1990s and early 2000s have meant limited opportunity for population growth.

**Terrace: Aging-in-Place I**

Using population pyramids, we can see how resource frontier aging has been taking place in Terrace. This first population pyramid for 1981 shows a pattern typical of resource towns in northern B.C.

With a large share of the population in the 25 to 40 year age groups and the corresponding 0 to 20 year age groups, the community is dominated by young families attracted to jobs in the forest sector and growing service base.
By 2006, the population has aged-in-place. The labour force is now older and concentrated in the 35-55 year age groups AND…

There is a larger share of people over age 50.
An aging workforce,

An out-migration of younger people in the 20-24 and 25-29 year age cohorts
Terrace - 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td></td>
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<td>10-14</td>
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<td>15-19</td>
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<td>20-24</td>
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<td>25-29</td>
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<td>40-44</td>
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<td>50-54</td>
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<td>55-59</td>
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<tr>
<td>60-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>65-74</td>
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<tr>
<td>75+</td>
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</table>

And the presence of fewer families with young children clearly demonstrates this phenomenon.

Terrace: Service Restructuring I

As a regional centre, Terrace has obtained some of the infrastructure and services to support an aging population, including a range of health care diagnostic and treatment services and seniors’ housing options. Each facility has different qualification criteria, assessment and admission procedures, costs, and service supports.

Terrace: Service Restructuring II

Service restructuring pressures
- Uncertainty
- Reduced / changing hours of operation
- Services offered seasonally / temporary
• Consolidated operations
• Temporary / permanent closures
• Need a collaborative communications strategy to support seniors’ wellness

Government policies aimed at reducing expenditures, however, have also meant that service providers have faced:

• uncertainty surrounding financial resources that support operations,
• reduced or changed hours and days of operations,
• seasonal or temporary delivery of services,
• consolidated operations, or even
temporary or permanent closures.

It can be difficult for seniors to re-navigate supports in which they must identify new locations, new hours of operation, acquire new contact information for personnel, and learn about changing processes and criteria to access services. In this context, it will be important for service providers to deploy a collaborative, comprehensive communications strategy that will support seniors’ wellness.

Results

• Awareness of Senior Supports
• Current Communication Strategies Used by Service Providers
• Recommendations to Improve Communication Strategies

We begin our findings by exploring factors limiting seniors’ awareness of programs and services. We then examine communication tools used by service providers before discussing recommendations to improve communications strategies to link seniors with needed supports.

Awareness of Seniors’ Support I

• 65% felt seniors’ unaware of supports

Service providers

• Lack of communication
  – With seniors
  – Between service providers
• Out-of-date information
• Lack of time to do promotion
• Benefits not promoted
• Lack of interest in seniors’ needs
• Physical barriers

When participants were asked if they felt seniors were aware of available supports, about 65% said ‘no’. Reasons for limited awareness were linked to both service providers and seniors. In terms of service providers, participants felt there was a lack of information circulated to both seniors and other groups. When information was provided, it was often out-of-date and no longer reflected the programs and services offered. Others felt that service providers had limited time to promote their programs. Such issues signify larger problems with organizational capacity and resources.

Some felt that benefits associated with programs were not widely promoted. A lack of interest in seniors’ needs was cited as an additional problem, indicating that organizations must become more aware of these aging trends and their implications for planning and investing in infrastructure and services. Furthermore, physical barriers prevented seniors from accessing information and library resources.
Awareness of Seniors’ Support II

Seniors
- Information not pursued until needed
- Limited community involvement
- Fears / uncertainty
- Don’t know where to get information
- Lack of supports to pursue / sift through information
- Limited use of technology

In terms of senior clients, some felt that seniors will not pursue information about services until needed, while others felt that limited community involvement prevented seniors from being exposed to information. Senior fears of asking the right questions in order to obtain useful information was also noted. Some felt that seniors do not know where to go to obtain information about available supports. There is also an absence of family supports to assist with pursuing and sifting through information.

Seniors’ limited use of computers was cited as a reason why they were unaware of programs and services. Such assertions, though, do not consider the full range of mechanisms required to reach seniors.

Given the diverse needs, interests, education, mobility challenges, incomes, and lifestyles of seniors, agencies will need to draw upon multiple communication tools.

Current Strategies Used I

Informal Methods
- Personal contact, word of mouth, churches, and bulletin boards
- Build relationships and trust, but
- Limited time → sporadically used
- Inconsistent messages
- No tangible materials

Given the limited awareness of seniors’ supports, we explored the communication strategies currently used by organizations. Four general approaches were used. The first involved informal communication, such as personal contact and word of mouth. In a small town setting, informal communication can be beneficial to develop service provider-client relationships and trust.

There can be challenges, however, ensuring the consistency and quality of information shared – especially if they are sporadically used. Inconsistent ‘messages’ about services and programs can result in confusion. Informal methods also do not provide seniors with tangible materials to refer to when needed.

Current Strategies Used II

Printed Materials
- Newspaper articles and ads, newsletters, booklets, brochures, pamphlets, letters, posters, and signs
- Provides reference materials, but
- Must be collected from multiple places
- Information must be relevant / current
- Does not offer two-way dialogue

The second strategy involved the use of printed materials, such as newspapers and brochures. While printed materials provide seniors with a tangible product to refer to when needed, seniors with limited mobility may not collect materials from multiple places. Information must also be relevant and current in order to be useful. Printed materials also do not provide a two-way dialogue with service providers to help seniors understand the complexities associated with accessing services.
Current Strategies Used III

Formal Methods

- Referrals and assessments, public presentations, awareness campaigns, booths, fundraising events, public events, and workshops
- Build relationships and trust
- Facilitate two way dialogue and learning, but
- Require time and resources

Formal methods of communications ranged from referrals to presentations and workshops. Like informal methods, they can help to build client-service provider relationships and trust. They can also facilitate two-way dialogue and learning to alleviate confusion about accessing services. Given the time and resources required to deliver such mechanisms, however, it may not be possible for overburdened organizations to offer them on a routine basis.

Current Strategies Used IV

Technology

- Radio, television, and e-mail
- Websites / Internet not used
- But…
- No tangible product for reference
- Complicated by:
  - Types of information sought will change
  - How seniors seek information will change

Technology was the final approach used to promote available supports to seniors. Radio, television, and e-mail were used. None of the service providers used the Internet to promote their services to seniors. Research is needed to understand if this stems from a lack of training with Internet applications, limited financial supports to acquire expertise, or a response to client preferences or cost concerns.

Radio and television, however, cannot provide seniors with a tangible product to refer to when needed. Making this more complicated is that the types of information sought by seniors (and the way they want to access that information) may change over time as new generations age locally.

Recommendations I

- Collating information
  - Seniors’ newsletter
  - Community directory
  - One-stop information centre
  - Outreach at natural gathering places
  - Doctor’s offices, seniors’ centre, library, public functions, mall, etc.
  - Outreach via professionals / volunteers
  - Public health, home care, book delivery service

Finally, participants were asked to recommend ways to improve communication strategies that target seniors. First, there were calls to collate information to ease seniors’ access to information about a range of supports. Suggested tools to collate information included a seniors’ newsletter, a community directory, and a one-stop information centre. Outreach programs were supported through natural gathering places for seniors, such as doctor’s offices and senior centres, and through home visits by service providers, such as public health nurses.
Recommendations II

- Two-way dialogue
  - Education and information programs
  - Meetings and presentations
  - Workshops
  - Counselling
- Websites
- Letters by civil service / local gov’t
- Addressing capacity issues
  - Free advertising for non-profits
  - Pool resources for mail-out campaign

To help seniors learn about processes to access services, participants called for two-way dialogue sessions, such as education and information programs, meetings, presentations, workshops, and even counseling. Websites were also recommended to compliment existing strategies. This must be accompanied with routine general literacy and computer literacy programs to enable seniors to become comfortable with technology – a current need that will likely fade away over the next two decades.

Letters written by the civil service and city council were also recommended. Finally, to address concerns with limited organizational resources, free advertising for non-profits and a collaborative mail-out campaign were suggested.

Discussion I

- Services have been rapidly changing
- New pressures from aging population
- Seniors struggling to connect with support

Resource towns have experienced a rapid change in services. Despite pressures from an aging population, neoliberal policies and ongoing service restructuring decisions have left many places ill-equipped to cope with a different set of pressures posed by an older population. Seniors are also struggling to navigate and re-navigate changing service supports.

To develop responsive organizational capacities to address seniors’ needs in rapidly changing places, we need to address problems with communication strategies by developing multi-faceted communication approaches that are grounded in place-based solutions.

Discussion II

Communication strategy should include:
- Diverse set of communication tools
- Opportunities for two-way dialogue
- Mechanisms to collate and distribute information

With a diverse seniors population, it will be important for service providers to use multiple communication tools, engage in two-way dialogue activities to facilitate learning and build client-service provider relationships, and work collectively to be cost efficient and collate information about seniors’ supports in one location as part of an effective communications strategy.

Discussion III
• Communication and information management must be a formal responsibility
  – Supported with sufficient resources
  – Information must be routinely updated
  – More strategic and comprehensive planning
• Greater cooperation and sharing information across groups

However, our findings indicate several issues that inhibit the effective communication of seniors’ supports in Terrace, BC. Information management needs to become a formal staff responsibility that is supported with adequate resources. To be relevant and useful, information must be routinely updated.

More strategic planning must also be done concerning the type of information that is communicated to seniors. Contact information for personnel, details concerning available services, costs, benefits, qualifying criteria, and admission requirements are just some of the key pieces of information that should be distributed. Greater cooperation and sharing of information across service providers is also needed.

Discussion IV

• Include communication component in training programs
• Senior governments must provide supportive policies and programs that create synergies
• Local government can provide logistical / infrastructure support

Professional training programs also need to pay more attention to developing communication skills amongst graduates who will be working with more constrained budgets in small places. Senior government policies aimed at reducing financial support for service providers need to be reconsidered. These resources are critical to develop comprehensive communication strategies to link seniors with programs and services.

Such policies should also be designed to create greater synergies in the development, delivery, and communication of seniors’ supports. Local governments can also provide logistical and infrastructure supports to facilitate cooperation across groups.

Summary

In this presentation, we have explored some of the ways to improve communication strategies for seniors in a resource town in transition. Developing an effective communication strategy is a key component to developing a supportive living environment that can enhance seniors’ quality of life in small places. By investing wisely and purposefully in our senior support services, communities can take advantage of a new opportunity for economic diversification and community renewal.

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