

# CENTRE FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT

## **Intergenerational Programs in Calgary: Literature Review and Environmental Scan**

October 31, 2005

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Prepared for:  
***LINKages Society***  
***(a.k.a Friends of Seniors)***  
***and the City of Calgary***

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Funded by: FCSS

*"The quality of a nation is reflected in the way it recognizes that its strength lies in its ability to integrate the wisdom of its elders with the spirit and vitality of its children and youth."*

- Margaret Mead

*"The historical perspective and experience of old people and the energy and idealism of young people must be linked to deal with the monumental societal problems that endanger our world."*

- Kuhn, 1989, p. xii

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study was to provide an overview of the current state of intergenerational programming in Calgary. There were two major components to the study: 1) a literature review which aimed to examine current literature in the area, particularly in relation to the identification of definitions of intergenerational programs and best practices in the field, and 2) an environmental scan to help identify current intergenerational programs in Calgary, including needs, gaps and overlaps in service provision. The environmental scan also aimed to compile a detailed resource list of existing programs in Calgary, which will be made publicly available. Ultimately, the research aimed to provide information on intergenerational programs that may help guide the future development of such programs in Calgary. The major findings of the literature review and environmental scan are summarized below.

### **The Potential of Intergenerational Programs**

The aging population is growing faster than all other age groups, due in part to longer life expectancies and lower fertility rates. Increases in the aging population are expected to continue and it is estimated that older people will soon outnumber the young in many countries. Coupled with this increase in the aging population are concerns about the growing age segregation and isolation of older persons and children/youth both within and outside the family context. Intergenerational programs aim to address this generation gap and promote positive interactions between the generations.

The field of intergenerational studies first emerged in the 1960s, with an interest in programs that brought children and seniors together. Since then, interest has grown significantly and has resulted in the proliferation of intergenerational programs and an increased breadth and depth of the field. Currently, intergenerational studies is a multidisciplinary field, and a wide range of programs, organizations, forums, resources, and literature are emerging at local, national, and international levels.

Accordingly, the definition of intergenerational programs has expanded to include programs that bring together different or multiple generations within and outside the family context. While there is no single agreed upon definition of intergenerational programs, common characteristics were found among existing definitions, including: 1) intergenerational programs are the purposeful bringing together of different generations in mutually beneficial, planned activities; 2) the purpose of these activities is to increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between the generations via sharing of knowledge, skills and experiences; and 3) intergenerational programs can benefit both individuals and communities.

A review of existing intergenerational programs found in the literature revealed the broad scope, wide interest, and cultural variation in the field worldwide. It was found that beyond the common purpose of promoting interaction and mutually beneficial contact between generations of people, intergenerational programs vary widely on aspects such as focus, goals, target populations and context. For example, intergenerational programs are found in a wide range of settings such as schools, child/adult day care programs, neighbourhoods, universities, community centers, organizations, and special events.

Given the diversity of intergenerational programming, efforts have been made to classify programs according to typologies. Two different classification systems were found in the literature: by type and by function. The second and more commonly used typology identifies four types of programs: 1) older people supporting youth (e.g., mentors), 2) youth supporting older people (e.g., friendly visitors), 3) older people and youth collaborating to support their community (e.g., environmental projects), and 4) older people and youth engaging together in learning/social activities (e.g., singing).

Intergenerational programs are increasingly being developed to address a range of issues, and particularly those that impact youth and seniors such as poverty, violence, and isolation. Intergenerational programs can contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, for example, by facilitating mutually beneficial relationships, volunteering and community building; increasing social cohesion, integration, and collaboration; and strengthening family relationships.

Intergenerational programs have also been found to relate to positive outcomes for both seniors and youth participants. For example, they have been found to reduce negative stereotypes and attitudes; increase knowledge, skills, personal and social development; and contribute to the health and well-being (e.g., increased self-esteem, reduced isolation) of both populations.

## **Best Practices in Intergenerational Programming**

Best practices are attributes and methods that contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of programs and lead to positive outcomes for individuals and communities. Best practices are grounded in both theory and research, both of which are still emerging in the area of intergenerational programs. Current best practices presented here are based on emerging informal and formal research and evaluations of programs, as well as practice wisdom. It is thus suggested that they can be best conceptualized as emerging guidelines or best practices and as areas for future research and evaluation. These guidelines include that: intergenerational programs have clear objectives and be designed to fulfill a specific, identified need or purpose; potential participants and the larger community have a role in program design and planning; program design take into account contextual factors, including relevant familial, community, and

cultural contexts; and successful activities are purposeful, engaging, developmentally appropriate, meaningful for both senior and youth participants, and stimulate learning, dialogue and interaction. Staff commitment and competency (e.g., skills, flexibility) also appear to be important in the successful development and implementation of intergenerational programs.

Although the field of intergenerational studies is still emerging, it is clear that there is a great deal of excitement about the potential of intergenerational programs for the benefit of individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole.

## **Environmental Scan Methodology**

Guided by the literature review and in collaboration with the sponsors, an eleven question telephone survey was developed to conduct an environmental scan of intergenerational programs in Calgary. The survey included questions on a range of issues relating to the current offering and awareness of intergenerational programs, including gaps, overlaps, and barriers as well as ideas and plans for future programming. The definition of intergenerational programs used in the survey was based on those found in the literature, and conceptualized intergenerational programs as “the purposeful bringing together of seniors and children or youth in mutually beneficial, planned activities. The purpose of these activities is to increase cooperation, interaction, or exchange between the generations via sharing of knowledge, skills and or/experience.”

Phone contact with potential participants started with a script designed to introduce the study and obtain consent. Once consent was obtained, the survey and a template seeking details of any intergenerational programs being offered were completed. Surveys were conducted by trained research assistants and each took approximately 15 minutes to complete. This research project was approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board.

A contact list was compiled with the assistance of the sponsors which included a total of 253 organizations and groups serving seniors and youth. The majority of these contacts were seniors groups and organizations, including lodges, assisted living, care centres, outreach services, day programs, drop-in centres, seniors sports and recreation clubs, and seniors groups or societies. Youth organizations also varied widely in the kinds of services offered to youth, and included mental health, recreation, personal and community development, and volunteering opportunities. Schools were not included in the study due to limited time and resources.

Individuals in charge of programming were targeted as participants for the study, and two attempts were made to contact each participant. A total of 142 of the 253 agencies (56%) were successfully contacted for the study. Of these,

107 (42% of the total sample) completed the survey, while 31 (12%) declined to participate and 4 (5%) withdrew from or did not complete the study. Participants who completed the survey represented a range of organizations. Consistent with the original contact list, about one quarter of completed surveys (28%) were from participants in youth serving organizations. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze the data. The aggregate results are summarized below according to the survey questions.

## Results

Participants were asked if they were familiar with the term “intergenerational program.” Although the majority (74%) of participants were familiar with the term, less than one quarter (23%) of those familiar with the term defined intergenerational programs as programs that bring together seniors and children/youth. Most participants (73%) who were familiar with the term understood intergenerational programs in a broader sense of bringing together different or multiple generations or age groups. Furthermore, only 18% of all participants articulated the purposeful nature of intergenerational programs. Findings also suggested that staff from organizations that offer intergenerational programs have more general awareness about such programs.

Participants were asked if they currently offer intergenerational programs which bring children and/or youth together with seniors. Forty one percent (n= 44) replied “yes,” and a total of 71 different programs were identified by 43 organizations which provided details about their programs (one participant did not know any details about their program). About one quarter (22%) of programs identified had some intergenerational component, but intergenerational contact was not the main goal of the program. In addition, about one quarter (21%) of programs identified were not ongoing programs, but occasional intergenerational activities such as Christmas events. Finally, about one half of the programs identified (51%) were ongoing programs in which the main focus or goal was intergenerational in nature. These included programs with youth supporting seniors, seniors supporting youth, as well as seniors and youth engaging together in learning activities. No programs were identified with youth and seniors working together to support their community.

More than half of participants (61%) stated that their intergenerational program was successful or very successful. Furthermore, over one third of participants (41%) stated that what could be improved in their program was to expand the program or recruit more participants. A second commonly cited improvement (25%) related to having more resources to do this outreach and expansion of programs. Finally, some participants (11%) stated that networking, connections, and relationship building with other organizations and community groups could be improved.

Participants were also asked if they knew of other agencies offering intergenerational programs in Calgary and/or intergenerational programming resources. Awareness of participants about other intergenerational programs in Calgary varied from not at all, to guessing what other agencies may offer, to specific knowledge about other intergenerational programs. Over half of participants (59%) had at least a general idea of agencies that may offer other intergenerational programs.

When asked about current overlaps in intergenerational programming in Calgary, the majority of participants (68%) stated that they did not know enough about intergenerational programs to respond. Of those participants that responded to the question about overlaps, the theme that emerged was that there are no overlaps in services (21% of all participants).

Themes that emerged pertaining to gaps in intergenerational programming include: 1) a lack of awareness, information or knowledge about existing intergenerational programs and resources among both organizations and the general public; 2) the need for a more diverse range of intergenerational programs in the city, including expansion of current programs and the exploration of new possibilities for such programs; 3) the need for more seniors, youth, and children (particularly young children and diverse seniors and youth) to become involved in meaningful, purposeful, and mutually beneficial activities that promote interaction and relationship building among seniors and youth; and 4) a wish for more communication, networking, sharing resources, building connections, partnerships among seniors, youth agencies and communities, including the establishment of an agency, facility or hub for intergenerational programs and networking opportunities.

Three major types of barriers to offering intergenerational programs were identified by participants: 1) resource barriers (41%), 2) accessibility barriers (26%), and 3) barriers relating to knowledge, skills, and attitudes (55%) (multiple barriers were often identified). Resource barriers included difficulties in finding funding, staffing (including volunteers), time, and facilities to develop, implement, and sustain intergenerational programs. Barriers identified that relate to the accessibility of intergenerational programs for participants included transportation, timing or scheduling of programs, language/culture, safety issues (including liability and insurance), and the health of seniors. Finally, several barriers were identified related to the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of organizations, staff, and participants in relation to intergenerational programs. For example, a major organizational barrier identified is the lack of interest, commitment and belief in the potential of intergenerational programs among youth and seniors' organizations and staff. Negative attitudes (e.g., stereotypes, fear) among program participants were found to be additional barriers. In short, multiple barriers to implementing intergenerational programs were identified at the organizational, staff, and participant levels.

Forty-one percent of all participants reported that their organization is planning to offer additional intergenerational programs in the future. However, only about half of these participants articulated specific plans for offering intergenerational programs. Ideas and plans for a wide range of intergenerational programs were articulated. Furthermore, over half of respondents (53%) said they would like to see additional intergenerational programs offered in Calgary. Again, participants articulated a wide range of ideas for what they would like to see in terms of programming as well as what their organization specifically would like to see or needs in relation to offering intergenerational programs.

Finally, participants were asked if they would be interested in being part of an intergenerational programming network. There was considerable interest in being part of a network. A total of 86 participants (81%) consented to be contacted at a later date by the sponsors about networking opportunities.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, there seems to be a great deal of interest in intergenerational programming, both in general and locally. Seventy-one programs were identified by this scan and the majority of respondents identified that they would like to see other intergenerational programs offered in Calgary. The environmental scan also revealed that there are multiple gaps and barriers in intergenerational programming in Calgary that have yet to be addressed. There appears to be a need for leadership in the area of intergenerational programs particularly in supporting organizations to overcome barriers and to develop the skills, commitment, connections, and resources to successfully offer intergenerational programs in the future and thus fulfill the potential for such programs to benefit seniors, youth, and communities.