

Creating Connections

Engagement through partners
delivering public services

by Sapna Goel

In picturesque Picton, Ontario, on a cool and windy first day of spring, when the staff of the Prince Edward County Fire Department and Paramedic Services talk about safety, the 20 or so seniors in the room listen intently. In turn, they share their questions and curiosities—some more animated than others—with the experts in the room.

“I live alone,” says one woman in the crowd. “If I call from upstairs and the doors are locked. How the heck do you get in?” She asks Paramedic Services Chief Doug Socha.

Pointing to the firefighters in the room, Socha responds, “I’ve never met a door they can’t get in.” And referring to the battering ram, Fire Chief Scott Manlow quips from the back of the room, “We have a ‘four-foot key!’”

The gathering of seniors with the firefighters and paramedics is part of Prince Edward County Community Care for Seniors Association’s project that addresses social isolation among county seniors. The idea for the project was inspired in part by the Age-Friendly Community (AFC) consultations held in summer 2016, along with Prince Edward County’s status as being home to the second highest concentration of those aged 65 and over in Ontario and sixth highest in Canada.

In developing the grant application for the project—at the urging of Margaret Merkhoven, RTO/ERO District 19 member and past president of Community Care—Debbie MacDonald Moynes, executive director of Community Care, thought, “Why not engage with non-traditional partners in a new way, and encourage them to engage with socially isolated county seniors?”

Funded by an RTO/ERO Foundation grant, and in partnership with five county organizations—police, fire, paramedics, rural mail couriers and library personnel—the project has empowered frontline staff to identify seniors who would benefit from deeper engagement in the community.

“We’ve learned that seniors prefer social activities close to home so we decided to hold events in community halls,” says MacDonald Moynes. As both



On a tour of the combined fire and paramedic services station.

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a social event and learning opportunity for seniors, the five supporting partners agreed to give four presentations each during the course of the year, with each of the nine municipal halls and the Community Care office located in Picton serving as local venues.

“We found that seniors wanted to learn about fire prevention from the fire prevention officer; about personal safety and frauds from an OPP constable; about para-medicine from the Chief of EMS; and about library programs from the library CEO,” says MacDonald Moynes. Indeed, topics of the presentation series have ranged from frauds and scams to tips on being tech savvy, from personal safety to fire safety, and more.

A champion of the project, Socha has appreciated the opportunity to “connect directly” and speak one-on-one with citizens.

“Most of the time, EMS sees people during emergency situations,” says Socha. “You can see from their questions that they have concerns, especially living alone. These interactions are almost always about alleviating their stress.”

Project manager Laura McGugan is thrilled with the outcomes. “This project has been a wonderful opportunity to engage with seniors in a different way,” she says. “By offering presentations in rural areas of our geography, we’ve been able to bring new seniors to the agency and introduce them to Community Care’s non-traditional partners.

“The partners have stepped up to the challenge and have provided a wealth of information on services available to seniors in Prince Edward County. These efforts have increased the number of seniors who are registered for the Rural Route Reassurance program and, indeed, for