WATERLOO'S ANNUAL AGE-FRIENDLY CITIES MAYOR'S FORUM

Summary Report   2016

THE CITY OF
Waterloo

THE AFC FORUM

On the 2nd of December 2016, the City of Waterloo's annual Mayor's Forum on Age-Friendly Waterloo featured a lively series of discussions and presentations on the theme of diversity and inclusion in an age-friendly community. Mayor Dave Jaworsky opened the event with an affirmation of Waterloo's commitment to enhancing the City's age-friendliness. Mayor Jaworsky acknowledged Waterloo's growing reputation as a destination for new Canadian residents and, in particular, for refugees from Syria seeking a new life and opportunities. Jassy Narayan, an active member of the Waterloo community and member of the Immigration Partnership of Waterloo Region, provided the keynote address. Her words to the Forum focused the audience's attention on the challenges of social respect and inclusion for older adults in a community that is undergoing, and will increasingly experience, significant ethno-cultural change.

Two events capped the Forum's proceedings. The first was a series of short enactments delivered by 'Crossing Borders,' a team of youth performers who presented the challenges of newcomer integration through presentations, drama and music, and often base their messages on first-hand accounts. The second event provided Forum participants an opportunity to reflect on the messages from the keynote, youth performers, and City of Waterloo staff representatives who presented age-friendly initiatives from selected Waterloo departments. Through facilitated round table discussions, participants dialogued about the meaning of age and cultural inclusivity, and how to build a more inclusive community.

The Forum was well attended by 188 registered participants (86 participants attended in 2015). On average, participants rated the Forum 3 on a 4-point scale, with the highest score (4/4) given to Question 5 of the evaluation form – "I learned more about age-friendly cities today."

In general, Forum participants strongly appreciated the contribution of the Crossing Borders group, and underscored the power of the message that they conveyed:

- "Crossing Borders – Great"
- "Excellent contribution of the youth. We have so much to learn from them."
- "Would have enjoyed students mixing in at all tables and knowing they were here!"
- "The student presentation was so powerful – I was brought to tears." & "I sure enjoyed and appreciated the students' presentation."

Participants did, however, convey that too many speakers may have been packed into the morning's agenda, which compromised the time given to the roundtables to have meaningful discussions:

- "More time needed to discuss in roundtable discussions!"
- "I wish there was more time for the roundtable discussions."
- "Overwhelming amount of information. Could slides be sent to participants?"
- "Roundtable discussions were too rushed."
- "Excellent morning! Could use a bit more time."
- "Student facilitators were not used effectively, which could have been a good demonstration of intergenerational activities."

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

Discussions from the roundtables elicited four general themes:

- Accessibility (Physical)
- Digital Inclusion
- Respect and Social Inclusion
- Communication

ACCESSIBILITY (PHYSICAL)

Participants spoke of the infrastructure changes that the City has implemented in recent years to improve access for active transportation – i.e. walking and cycling – and for people with impairments. In particular, the addition of segregated bike lanes and 'complete streets' enhancements were singled out as necessary improvements, and the City was encouraged to implement similar changes where possible throughout Waterloo. Additional improvements recommended by the participants included:

- Providing more transit routes to local destinations frequented by older adults such as Waterloo Memorial Recreation Complex, as well as regional destinations (i.e. Toronto).
- Provide accessibility ramps to UpTown businesses.
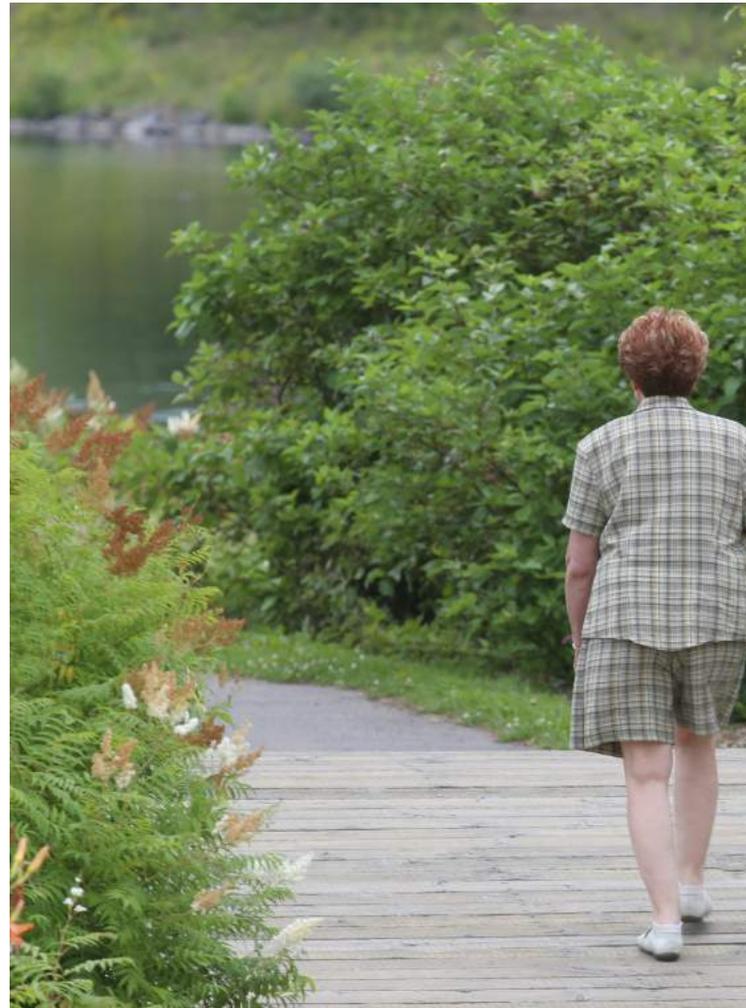- Address the distances between LRT stops.

DIGITAL INCLUSION

Discussions focused on the mistaken assumptions that are often associated with the use of digital technologies by older adults. In this regard, the conception that all people are equally comfortable and adept at using digital technologies for the communication of municipal information needs to be openly challenged. A common message from these roundtable discussions was the need to contest the misconception that older adults are unwilling participants in the use of digital communications technologies. Through the age-friendly committee, the City of Waterloo ought to consider how to connect people digitally that are not connected, and how to help those that are connected keep pace with rapidly shifting technologies.

RESPECT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Inclusivity was addressed through the need to instill an age-friendly lens among City of Waterloo staff in terms of how programs and services are delivered, and how planning initiatives are reviewed. More concretely, participants spoke of the need for more intergenerational programming that would bring youth and older adults together in social, non-academic settings to exchange knowledge, stories and life experiences. In this regard, older adults could fulfill a role as informal educators for Waterloo's youth, which could break down the barriers and misconceptions that often exist between generations, and can lead to ageist attitudes and behaviours.

COMMUNICATION

Participants recommended developing a formal or explicit older adult communications strategy, in part, to address the challenges of communicating digitally with older adult residents. The roundtables recognized the need for several communication methods to provide information in formats and outlets that will be broadly familiar and accessible to Waterloo's older adults. Taking stock of how older adults are currently reached, surveying preferred communication methods and examining best practices were identified as key tasks that could be pursued.

Following from the roundtable discussions, recommendations for future action included the following for Waterloo's age-friendly committee:

- Liaise with all levels of government to clearly communicate accessibility and transit needs.
- Develop courses based on a reciprocal intergenerational teaching model, where older adults and youth are equipped to exchange knowledge – i.e. both generations are empowered to be both instructors and learners.
- Outreach programs for newcomers, refugees and senior populations at risk of social isolation due to language, culture, gender, accessibility needs, and age.
- Address barriers to connectivity through a communications strategy that explores Waterloo's existing resources, barriers and best practices for overcoming barriers in an increasingly diverse community.

If you would like to learn more about Waterloo's Age-Friendly Cities Committee, visit the following website:

http://www.waterloo.ca/en/government/agefriendlycitiescommittee.asp