GRC NEWS

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

The Simon Fraser University Gerontology Research Centre (GRC) is pleased to present the July Volume 44, Issue 1 of the GRC NEWS. This newsletter highlights the activities and accomplishments of the GRC and department, including faculty, community partners, and students. One of our primary events is the annual John K. Friesen Conference. This year's highly successful conference (June 5 & 6, 2025) was entitled: Research, Practice and Policy to Enhance Community-based Senior Services. I wish to thank all of the presenters, who contributed to a stellar program, as well as the organizing committee, gerontology staff, and student volunteers for their assistance. I also want to pay special tribute to Kelly White, who gave a heart-warming and engaging Indigenous welcome. Kelly is Coast Salish of the White Owl Clan, born in Snuneymuxw. You can find the Conference Program and the video recording of this year's conference, as well as prior ones on our website (https://www.sfu.ca/grc/events/friesen.html).

The conference aimed to provide information enabling our society to address cutting-edge issues and new opportunities to enhance community care and support systems targeting a rapidly aging population. Program highlights included: keynote addresses; topical panel discussions, symposia, and poster displays presented by local, national, and international speakers representing community organizations, and academic sectors. Some of the emerging themes included age-friendly initiatives, social prescribing, integration of community and health care systems, and several GRC and department projects (AIRP - Aging in the Right Place & Connect!Âge: Connecting Organizations to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Marginalized Populations of Older Adults). These sessions revealed numerous issues underlying community care, such as sustainable funding and grant writing, volunteerism, client monitoring, evaluation, as well as a host of systemic problems, including ageism, declining economic security, government funding models, marginalization, and fragmentation of community and health care systems. The keynotes delivered by Tine Buffel, University of Manchester, UK and Isobel Mackenzie, past Seniors Advocate of BC and Adjunct Professor, Gerontology, SFU set the stage for the two days of the Friesen conference. Anthony Kupferschmidt, City of Vancouver, delivered the Public Lecture this year from the vantage point of municipalities. Several other symposia and panel sessions are showcased in the program. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to John Friesen and his family, who are the original benefactors of this event. Several other benefactors of the GRC and department in attendance were recognized at the conference, including Lorna Court, Gloria Gutman, Barbara Mitchell and Andrew Wister.

The GRC continues to generate collaborative community and health research, practice, and policy in its six thematic areas: Aging and the Built Environment; Changing Demography and Lifestyles; Culture and; Population Health and Aging; Prevention of Victimization and Exploitation of Older Persons; & Technology and Aging. Numerous research and community-based projects connect organizations, academics, government, older adults, and private sectors to advance knowledge and practice. The GRC is led by the Director (Andrew Wister) and Associate Director (Habib Chaudhury), with core members: Research Associate & Prof. Emerita Dr. Gloria Gutman, several prolific post-doctoral fellows (Drs. John Best, Jennifer Ferris, Julie Beadle, Mohammadjavad Nouri, Boah Kim and Eireann O'Dea), and a highly supportive staff (Sarah Qiu, Dora Lau, and Sasha Gill), plus a strong supporting cast of approximately 25 researchers and affiliate members that has been expanded to 35 members. The GRC Steering Committee guides the strategic initiatives and governance of the GRC and is comprised of university-wide experts in aging research as well as community leaders in the field. You can read about these in this issue and visit our website https://www.sfu.ca/grc.html, and other social media outlets.

Under the GRC Director (SFU, PI) and Theresa Pauly (Co-lead) the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA) remains a cornerstone of the GRC research activities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Heather Stewart, Manager of the SFU CLSA Data Collection Site at the Surrey Campus, and Dr. Eireann O'Dea, Manager of the SFU Computer Assisted Telephone Interview site at the Vancouver Campus for their leadership roles on the CLSA at SFU. I also want to thank the SFU CLSA research staff comprised of 18 committed researchers. The CLSA is following over 53,000 Canadians over 20 years who were aged 45 to 85 in 2011 at the start of the study, with a collection of physiological, psychological, and social data that are being analyzed by over 250 researchers across Canada and internationally (see https://www.clsa-elcv.ca/). Numerous other projects comprise a vibrant interconnected body of strategic research and outreach initiatives and can also be found on the GRC website (https://www.sfu.ca/grc.html).

We are also proud to showcase all of the recent Gerontology Department graduates who convocated this June 2025. As a small department, we were extremely well represented at this FASS convocation. Of the total of 4 doctoral candidates, we had 3 at the event (who were hooded on stage at convocation by Drs. Mitchell and Wister), and another 5 Masters students who convocated among the MAs. The full list of PhD and Masters graduates and their respective supervisors can be seen in this issue along with a collage of celebratory pictures of our students at convocation.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the GRC News!

ANDREW WISTER
DIRECTOR, GRC &
SFU DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Congraulations to Our June 2025 Graduates!

Sarah Qiu

Pictured (l-r): Esther Yuwono, Eireann O'Dea, Sandeep Dhillon, Andrea Wadman, Boah Kim.

We are proud to celebrate the achievements of our graduates who crossed the stage this past June!

As a small department, it is especially rewarding to see our students complete their degrees and embark on the next chapter of their lives. At the June 2025 convocation, several Master's and Doctoral students graduated, including:

- Sandeep Dhillon, PhD, supervised by Dr. Barbara Mitchell
- Boah Kim, PhD, supervised by Dr. Andrew Wister
- Eireann O'Dea, PhD, supervised by Dr. Andrew Wister
- Gracen Bookmyer, MA, supervised by Dr. Atiya Mahmood
- Hailey Ford, MA, supervised by Dr. Atiya Mahmood

- Rojan Nasiri, MA, supervised by Dr. Atiya Mahmood
- Andrea Wadman, MA, supervised by Dr. Habib Chaudhury
- Esther Yuwono, MA, supervised by Dr. Andrew Sixsmith

This accomplishment reflects years of dedication, hard work, and meaningful research. Our graduates have contributed to advancing knowledge in the field of aging, with a strong commitment to improving the health, well-being, and quality of life of older adults. Their research addresses critical issues facing aging populations and will have a lasting impact in both academic and community settings.

We are excited to see how they will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of older adults and wish them all the best in their future endeavors!

Pictured (l-r): Gerontology Doctoral students Eireann O'Dea, Boah Kim, and Sandeep Dhillon walking in.

Pictured (1-r): Barbara Mitchell hooding Sandeep Dhillon.

Pictured (right): Hailey Ford.

Pictured: Esther Yuwono and Boah Kim.

Pictured (l-r): Barbara Mitchell, Eireann O'Dea, Boah Kim, Andrew Wister.

Pictured: Eireann O'Dea.

32nd John K. Friesen Conference

Sarah Qiu

Pictured: Tine Buffel presenting the opening keynote for the conference.

At this year's John K. Friesen Conference held from June 5-6, 2025, nearly 150 participants, including municipal, provincial, and international researchers, scholars, students, and representatives from community organizations came together to explore the theme, "Research, Practice and Policy to Enhance Community-Based Senior Services."

The two-day conference was filled with engaging presentations, dynamic panels and thoughtful conversations that bridged disciplines and sectors. Attendees shared insights, built connections, and examined innovative approaches to strengthening services that support aging in the community.

A central theme that emerged throughout the conference was the critical role of community in supporting older adults. Community-based services not only help meet practical needs like housing, transportation, and healthcare access, but also foster social connection, dignity, and a sense of belonging. By prioritizing community voices and collaboration across sectors, we can create more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable systems of care that truly reflect the diverse experiences and needs of older adults.

We extend our sincere thanks to all of our speakers, moderators, and attendees whose expertise, curiosity, and collaboration made this year's conference a success. Your contributions continue to advance critical dialogue and inspire action in the field of aging.

We look forward to continuing this important work together.

Pictured: Kelly White.

Pictured (l-r): Jacky Leung, Alison Silgardo, Shelley Jorde, Annwen Loverin, Leslie Gaudette, Anthony Kupferschmidt.

Pictured: Tine Buffel.

Pictured (l-r): Mélanie Levasseur, Gloria Gutman, Andrew Wister.

Pictured: Beth Mansell.

Pictured: Rebeka Mahaffey.

Pictured: Anthony Kupferschmidt.

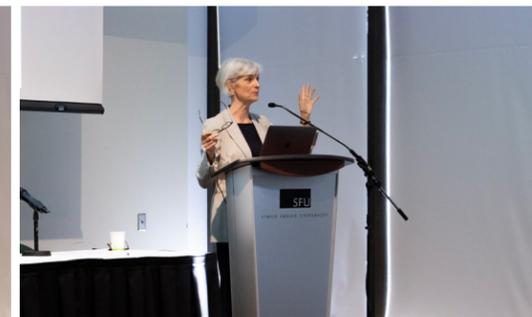*Pictured: Mélanie Levasseur.*

Pictured: Catherine Donnelly (orange).

Pictured: Mariam Larson.

Pictured (l-r): Claudine Malto and program participant.

Pictured: Isobel Mackenzie.

Elder Abuse Before and After COVID-19

Gloria Gutman

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) was conceptualized by the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) in 2004 with the first public event sponsored by that organization taking place on June 15, 2006 in an anteroom of the UN in New York City. Several years later it was designated an official UN day. It was an idea whose time had come as evidenced by the fact that large and small organizations worldwide began hosting events each year on June 15 drawing attention to the plight of older adults who are subject to five internationally recognized forms of elder maltreatment (psychological, physical, sexual, financial abuse and neglect). Elder abuse was first described as a social problem, it was later recognized as a public health issue and, more recently as a human rights issue. Studies were conducted and reports, articles and books written about risk factors for victimization and about characteristics of perpetrators. While some of us had written about the potential for elder abuse to be exacerbated in disaster situations (see Gutman and Yon, 2014) our focus was on natural disasters – floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, wild fires, ice storms. For years, the focus of the gerontological and geriatrics communities and public health officials and agencies was on chronic diseases when it came to older adults. None of us anticipated a pandemic of the likes of COVID-19.

Sitting Ducks and Unintended Consequences

In the first wave of the pandemic, statistics began to appear indicating high death rates in nursing homes. Chronically understaffed and with many homes with multi-bed units, poor HVAC system, and little in the way of Personal Protective Equipment, the infection ran rampant. News reports began to appear of neglect of residents; and of the mental health consequences of social isolation from family and friends. There were descriptions of families gesticulating to frail elders from the gardens surrounding the homes, of unanswered phone enquiries, of being turned away at the door of care facilities that had been visited prior to COVID-19 on a daily basis, and of loved ones dying alone.

Other Unintended Consequences

Aside from providing loved ones with assistance with activities of daily living and with companionship one of the key roles played by regular visitors is surveillance and to act as advocates for the residents when they observe neglect or abuse. There has been little mention of staff abuse of residents in the popular press nor of resident-resident aggression – a form of institutional abuse that has come to the attention of anti-abuse advocates in recent years. A recent literature review I conducted reveals that this is also the case when it comes to the technical literature. While over 70 articles were found from searching health and social science databases using key words such as elder abuse, disasters, COVID-19, IPV, approximately half were warnings that abuse rates could escalate and the bulk of these warnings were directed towards community-dwelling older adults rather than the about 5% who are residents of institutions.

What about community-dwelling older adults who constitute the majority?

The rationale for some authors for a rate increase was that rates of child abuse and domestic violence were known to increase during disasters. Others focused on the traditional risk factors for elder abuse: social isolation, frailty and physical dependency, cognitive incapacity, caregiver stress. It was argued that the 24/7 proximity of family members some of whom had not lived with the older adult pre-COVID could prove toxic; on the other hand, one could argue that co-habitation could be beneficial – reducing loneliness and providing help with shopping and meal preparation, housekeeping and providing the home care that pre-COVID had been the purview of public or private pay care aides.

What does the data show?

Early reports suggested a broad array of frauds and scams that targeted older adults were being perpetrated online, via telephone, by people coming to the door offering fake PPE, assistance with grocery shopping from which once given cash or worse, a credit card, they didn't return, etc. Our studies provide some data on prevalence and risk factors. In the first of these, conducted between Aug. 10 and Oct. 10, 2021, we analyzed data from a national online survey of 4380 Canadians aged 55+ that explored their current experiences and future care plans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on a sub-sample that reported experiencing frequent family discord involving physical violence (FFD/PV) during COVID-19 which we considered to be a proxy for elder abuse. The sub-sample reporting FFD/PV (n=76, 1.8%) was compared with other survey respondents regarding socio-demographic characteristics, negative and positive emotions, difficulty accessing basic needs, food, health care and support. The FFD/PV were found to be significantly younger and less educated and were more likely to be non-white and not working than other respondents. The subgroup sustaining FFD/PV reported significantly higher rates of feeling depressed, lonely, isolated, anxious, sad, and judged/shamed and felt less happy, relaxed and accepted in their community. They also reported higher rates of challenges in accessing basic material needs such as food, support, medical care, mental health treatment and experienced more changes in life routines. Although only a small percentage reported FFD/PV, our results highlight a disturbing pattern that merits serious attention of adult protection agencies, seniors advocates and disaster response organizations.

In the second study (Gutman, Karbakhsh & Stewart, 2022) we analyzed data of participants in the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA), aged 55+ who participated in a CLSA COVID-19 sub-study (n=24,306). The outcome variable was experiencing increased verbal or physical conflict (+VPC) during COVID-19 which we also took to be a proxy for elder abuse. The overall weighted prevalence was 7.4%. Further analysis revealed that the most vulnerable group were gay or bisexual men

and adults aged 55-65, as well as CLSA participants with mental health issues at baseline (i.e. before COVID) and/or a history of elder psychological abuse.

The strongest evidence that there was an increase in elder abuse during COVID-19 comes from analyses of help line agency data. Both American (Weissberger et al. 2022) and Canadian (Seniors First BC, 2023) studies show an increase in calls both generally and in calls concerning abuse.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the COVID-19 elder abuse research literature. Among these is the need to disaggregate the data not just by abuse type but also by sexual orientation and gender identity. Work in progress suggests that vulnerabilities vary within and across these groups as do coping strategies.

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How SFU Researchers are Advancing Brain Health in Aging Canadians

Andrew Wister

A collaboration between SFU Gerontology and the SFU ImageTech Lab drives research in brain health and healthy aging in CLSA-Weston Healthy Brain, Healthy Aging (HBHA) study.

The Gerontology Research Centre (GRC) led by Andrew Wister, Director and SFU CLSA principal investigator, is partnering with Carolyn Sparrey (SFU, Mechatronic Systems Engineering) and the Director of the SFU ImageTech Lab at Surrey Memorial Hospital Alex Wiesman (SFU, BPK). Their work involves collecting sophisticated brain imaging (MRI) scans and biological samples from a subset of participants taking part in the 20-year Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA).

The CLSA is a major 20-year research platform initiative that began in 2011 and follows over 51,000 Canadians aged 45 to 85. It gathers extensive data, including questionnaires, physical assessments, and biological specimens, to explore how various factors influence aging.

The CLSA-Weston Healthy Brains, Healthy Aging study, supported by $12M in funding is a sub-study of over 6,000 CLSA participants from across Canada. It aims to integrate detailed brain health data with a broader CLSA dataset. "Brain health is receiving increasing attention," says Wister, "as the number of older adults experiencing Alzheimer's Disease and related neurological disorders (ADRD) continues to rise,

placing enormous pressures on our already stretched healthcare system."

This initiative will provide researchers with new insights into how genetic markers, preventive health behaviours, socio-demographic factors, and other influences shape brain health. It also strengthens the CLSA's role as a global research platform and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration on aging and cognitive resilience to address ADRD and brain health resilience over the life course of Canadians.

The SFU Surrey-based CLSA Data Collection site, managed by Dr. Heather Stewart, is actively working with the ImageTech team to complete the HBHA data collection. Wister adds, "stay tuned for this data's availability for research."

As part of the HBHA study, participants are asked to provide stool samples for metagenomics and metabolite profiling–an important step in exploring the gut-brain health relationship. Cognitive functioning tests further help capture brain health outcomes.

Ultimately, the HBHA sub-study offers a valuable opportunity to deepen our understanding of the neural and biological factors that contribute to brain resilience from mid to late life, and to drive innovation in the prevention and treatment of ADRD.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

International Consortium on Ethics in Technology and Aging (ICE-TEA) Project - A Collaboration between Silver Harbour Seniors Activity Centre and Simon Fraser University

Mei Fang and Becky White

411 Seniors partnered with the Science and Technology for Aging Research (STAR) Institute at Simon Fraser University on a research project funded by AGE-WELL Canada. The project explored the ethical dimensions of technologies designed for older adults - also referred to as 'AgeTech'— and involved seniors in conversations about how these technologies can better reflect their needs, values, and the reality of everyday life.

Findings from the research project underscore the importance of designing technology that reflects the everyday needs and values of older people.

They also highlight the need for proper training - particularly around understanding the ethical - for those involved in the design, development, and implementation of AgeTech, along with the meaningful involvement of older adults throughout the process. As next steps, the project calls for providing older adults with the training and support needed to use technology effectively, as well as offering preparation for those who wish to take part as advisors or active partners in technology projects.

More information about the project can be found on the SFU website: ICE-TEA Project Report

Working with the Aging Community: A Toolkit for Building a Collective of Older Adult Researchers (COAR)

Mei Fang, Becky White, Atiya Mahmood

Developed through a collaboration between 411 Seniors Centre and Simon Fraser University (SFU), the COAR Toolkit is a practical resource for engaging older adults as active partners in community-based research. It is the result of efforts to establish the Collective of Older Adult Researchers (COAR), supporting 411's vision of becoming a hub for community-led research.

Through hands-on, intergenerational workshops, COAR members and SFU graduate students built research skills together —from shaping questions to sharing find-

ings—using a citizen science approach. Their collaborative project focused on mobility barriers in local neighbourhoods, applying their training to a real-world issue directly affecting older adults.

Informed by the lessons and successes of this project, the toolkit offers clear steps, tools, and strategies for anyone committed to inclusive, community-engaged research with older adults. Access the toolkit: Collective of Older Adult Researchers Initiative (COAR).

Co-Creating Housing Solutions for Older Adults: Reflections from a Community Forum on Aging in the Right Place

Jean Paul Ramírez Echavarría, Nosaiba Fayyaz, Nushaiba Nanjiba, Atiya Mahmood

On April 24, the Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) project—led by Dr. Atiya Mahmood, with Project Coordinator Nushaiba Nanjiba and Research Assistants Nosaiba Fayyaz and Jean Paul Ramírez—hosted a community forum on Co-Creating Housing Solutions for Older Adults.

Pictured: Dr. Atiya Mahmood kicking off the event and presenting on the Aging in the Right Place project processes and results.

The event brought together over 30 community members, including housing providers, healthcare professionals, representatives from community organizations and government, as well as lived experts. The purpose was to engage in meaningful dialogue, share perspectives and collaboratively envision inclusive housing for individuals aging in the right place.

The four-hour afternoon forum highlighted the work of the Aging in the Right Place (AIRP) project. "Aging in the right place" refers to supporting older adults to live as long as possible in their homes and communities, recognizing that where an older person lives impacts their ability to age optimally and must align with their unique lifestyles and vulnerabilities. (https://www.sfu.ca/airp/research.html).

The forum showcased eight photo-voice boards, which summarized and thematically organized insights gathered from the project's research studies. These studies involved the participation of co-researchers—older adults with lived experience of housing precarity. The boards displayed photos taken by participants, capturing elements of their homes and surrounding environments (both built and natural) that either supported or challenged their ability to age in place.

In addition, the forum shared findings from interviews with housing providers, outlining themes and challenges that either support or hinder their efforts to assist residents in aging in place.

Pictured: Materials provided at each table included photos taken by participants and themes identified from service provider interviews.

Participants engaged in discussions at six different tables, each with its own facilitator and note-taker. The conversations followed four structured stages:

- **Discovery** encouraged participants to reflect on the lived experiences of housing-precarious older adults and to identify key challenges.

- **Dreaming** invited imaginative thinking about solutions, unconstrained by current system limitations or financial barriers.

- **Designing** focused on generating innovative strategies to promote aging in the right place.

- **Destiny** aimed to translate ideas into actionable steps that could drive meaningful and lasting change.

Pictured: Table discussion.

Key Takeaways

In the Discovery phase, participants wove together a rich tapestry of insights reflecting the complexities of aging in the right place. Trust—both in systems and in personal relationships—emerged as a foundational need, alongside the ongoing challenges posed by bureaucracy, gentrification, and systemic disconnects. A recurring theme was the gap between housing and healthcare systems, often leaving older adults unsupported when trying to navigate one or both.

Participants also noted the absence of diverse cultural narratives in the stories and visuals shared, highlighting a need to better reflect Indigenous, racialized, and other underrepresented perspectives. Discussions emphasized that housing is not just about shelter, but about creating spaces that foster connection, dignity, and independence.

Accessibility was a central concern, whether in the physical design of units, the availability of digital resources, or opportunities for social connection. Ideas like universal design, culturally informed staff training, on-site health services, and community connectors were shared as crucial supports.

Pictured: Facilitator and Research Assistant Jean Paul Ramírez leads the discussion in his table

In the Dreaming session, participants shared many thoughtful ideas about creating supportive and dignified housing for older adults. They highlighted the importance of green spaces for well-being, accessible public transportation, and having community members act as "building champions" to help neighbors connect. Sustained funding was seen as essential to retaining staff, building trust, and offering

consistent programs. Designing homes with universal accessibility and pet-friendly policies was also emphasized, along with the need for walkable neighborhoods and breaking down barriers between housing, health, and government services for better coordination.

There was a shared vision that aging in place should be a normal expectation, with supports coming to people rather than forcing disruptive moves. Finally, participants stressed the importance of fair wages and adequate staffing to reduce burnout and ensure quality care. These ideas together point toward creating homes and neighborhoods where older adults can truly thrive.

Looking Ahead

In the Design phase of the session, participants explored a wide range of creative and practical strategies to support aging in the right place. A key theme was the importance of universal and adaptable design; housing units that can evolve with people's needs over time. This can help avoid costly and disruptive moves. There was also strong interest in embedding medical and supportive services directly into housing, such as having on-site clinics or dedicated spaces for health staff. Walkability, public and nonprofit transit options, green spaces and community gathering areas were all highlighted as essential features. Participants emphasized that development decisions should be rooted in the perspectives and priorities of older adults themselves.

Other innovative ideas included intergenerational housing models, transitional units and flexible care that can adjust as needs change. Some participants suggested hallway houses, co-housing, or simple for-

ms of everyday support like check-ins and rides. They also identified gaps in policies, especially around income management during health crises or aging transitions. The conversation reinforced the importance of intentional, people-focused planning—bringing health and housing together from the start and creating spaces that foster both independence and connection.
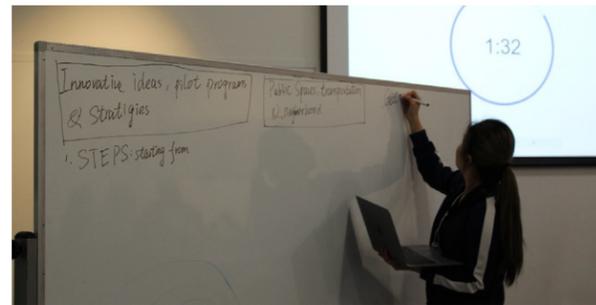
Pictured: Notetaker Tianci Dong writing takeaways from the discussion on the white-board.

In the Destiny phase, the focus shifted to implementation and collaboration across different systems and sectors. Participants called for stronger connections between housing providers, frontline workers, policymakers, and older adults. One challenge highlighted was how often valuable insight remains at the local level and never reaches provincial or federal decision-makers. Participants emphasized the need for meaningful participation from older adults, especially those with low incomes, in advisory roles and community planning processes.

The group also talked about the need to shift cultural attitudes around aging. Many participants spoke to the importance of positive messaging, lived expertise, and intergenerational learning, through things like school engagement or community storytelling. They suggested making better use of existing community spaces like churches

BUILDING COMMUNITY

and investing in outreach teams and services tailored to seniors. The Destiny discussions reinforced that change is possible when information is shared widely, when older adults are included in decision-making, and when collaboration is at the heart of every step forward.

By holding space for collective dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration, the forum demonstrated the power of community-led solutions in addressing the challenges of aging in the right place. Continued efforts in knowledge mobilization—sharing insights and amplifying lived experiences—are essential to driving meaningful change for older adults and building more inclusive, supportive housing systems.

Pictured: View of the Community Forum in Session.

For a digital glimpse into our Community Forum, watch the video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBvVsuMQuhU.

Neighbourhood Safety Issues and Mobility: Insights from Older Adults as Community Members

Siding Wang (Sandy)

According to the 2020 West End Social Indicator Profile, 37% of West End residents experience limitations in daily activities, which is 6% higher than the city average. This limitation is particularly pronounced among older adults and seniors aged 65 and above, among whom the rate of activity limit is 60%. In terms of geographical location, the West End neighbourhood is located south of Stanley Park and east of English Bay, with a population density five times higher than the city average. The large tourist stream near the sightseeing sites, especially the prevalence of cycling near the park, complicates its traffic conditions (West End Social Indicator Profile, 2020). Such demographic and geographic characteristics suggest attention should be paid to the neighbourhood's walkability for seniors. During my Globalink internship as a research assistant in the Department of Gerontology at Simon Fraser University, I participated in a community-based research project at West End Seniors Network. This project was funded by the British Columbia Vision Zero in Road Safety Grant Program (Vision Zero BC, 2021). This grant funds innovative projects aimed at improving vulnerable road user safety in communities. Westend Seniors Network received funding to assess environmental challenges to older adults' walkability in the West End neighbourhood and provide guidance for local intervention to improve the street network.

The project employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. Quantitative data were collected using the Stakeholders' Walkability/Wheelability Audit in Neighborhoods (SWAN) tool (Mahmood et al. 2025, 2020) to evaluate the walkability of seven key locations in West End neighbourhood, while qualitative data came from two sources. The first source was an online pre-survey questionnaire, in which West End neighbourhood's older adult residents (n=82) were asked some questions around walkability and road safety to help select locations for audits. The key question in the survey was "Where are some areas we should audit?" Participants were prompted to be specific about the locations by listing exact intersections or providing detailed descriptions of specific areas within the neighbourhood. They were also requested to indicate what type of mobility and road safety the issues they faced while walking in the areas they noted in their responses. Each participant could identify up to 4 areas or intersections within their neighbourhood for audit. Seven key locations to audit were identified based on responses to the pre-survey. The second source of qualitative data were collected through a series of focus group discussions held immediately after each outdoor audit, where participants were asked to identify problems they observed during the audit, as well as their past experiences around

walkability and road safety in the neighborhood. Older adult residents and volunteer RAs audited the selected key locations within the neighbourhood. Figures 1 to 3 show residents and RAs being trained to conduct the audits and conducting audits at street intersections and sidewalks.

Pictured: Volunteer and Participant conducting SWAN audit at a crossroad.

Pictured: Volunteer research assistant and participant conducting SWAN an audit of the sidewalk section.

Pictured: Training session: Westend Seniors Network staff and SFU Gerontology student Introducing the SWAN audit to volunteer RAs and older adults.

In this newsletter article, themes emerging from the focus group discussion and pre-survey are presented to demonstrate the quality of the street network within their neighbourhood are linked to their daily mobility experiences. Although the research project's main focus was identification of road safety issues using a quantitative audit tool, qualitative data from the pre-survey and the first focus group discussion in which I participated provided an inspiring illustration of how older adults in the West End neighborhood perceive, analyze, and may contribute to solving these problems—all rooted in their experiences as members of a constantly changing community. Studies have noted that older adults are often perceived as either individuals or members of an institution, whereas older adults themselves are more accurately seen as participants in a dynamic group process that is continually constructed and reconstructed (Bookman 2008). The qualitative data informed the following sections of my writing, where I will discuss the issues mentioned by the participants and share how their way of articulating these issues impressed me, shedding light on the design and implementation of an age-friendly community.

1. Physical obstacles on the sidewalk: "I wish I would Do it myself"

The pre-survey reported some sections of the sidewalk to be narrow, uneven, cracked, or bumpy, with safety hazards exacerbated by certain weather conditions. Some places were described as "slippery in icy weather", and some areas accumulated pools of water "too deep to walk through when it rains". In addition to these surface problems, participants noted a lack of street amenities, frequently mentioning the need for benches, shelters at transit stops,

and other seating options. Poor street lighting at night was also reported, diminishing participants' sense of security. It is important to note that the lack of safe physical features affects not only the immediate experience of walking on certain roads, but also shapes residents' walking behavior in terms of route selection, as a participant in the focus group discussion commented, "I think the biggest issue is the lighting, and so I try to avoid certain places".

In the focus group discussion, while discussing the root system under the sidewalk, which had raised uneven sections and created a "life-affecting situation", one participant mentioned that they did not receive a positive reply when submitting the issues to the city and requesting paint warnings. "Sometimes I wish I would just take a can of red paint to do it myself," said the participant. This sentiment was echoed by several other participants. As participants reported, repairing sections of the sidewalk is often not a priority for the city, indicating a discrepancy between what the city does and what the elderly actually need. Moreover, the idea of marking hazards themselves highlights a critical aspect of older adults as community builders, suggesting a collaborative approach to community management in which the older adults are not just passive recipients of resources.

2. Ambiguity in traffic: The need for standardized regulations for all

Aside from the physical features of the sidewalk, another set of factors hindering pedestrian safety is concerned with traffic. In the pre-survey, several participants reported "undifferentiated spaces" shared by both cyclists and pedestrians. More than 10 participants mentioned scooters and bicycles on the sidewalk. This situation is exacerbated for seniors with poor hearing, who "cannot hear the cyclists approaching". While some are caused by people intentionally violating the rules, others are caused by ambiguity regarding the right of way. As explained by one respondent who reported themself as an urban planner, "What pedestrians do not know is that this route is part of a much wider bikeway route and having it on the map, creating the impression for the cyclists that they do really have the right of way." Additionally, more than ten participants mentioned problems in detecting traffic situations, the most dangerous of which is the cars' blocked vision. One respondent noted, "Drivers have trouble seeing pedestrians crossing from the park side due to the distraction of the middle lanes of cyclists". Distractive noises, such as horns and sirens, were also mentioned as a concern.

In the focus group, when discussing the problem of traffic safety, participants soon reached to the core problem– "Pedestrians and drivers are both confused, and cyclists, because no one knows what to do". According to the discussion, the collective confusion results in chaos on the road, generating frustration and aggression, which is exacerbated by the time limitations. The ambiguity in traffic regulation is further compounded by the absence of accountability. One participant in the focus group expressed that many traffic signs are not mandated by law. "But you ask a policeman, what is this red line here? What is this red square? Do I get a ticket if I park here? He hasn't got a clue. There's no law applicable to it, they're just making these things up".

Participants agreed that inconsistency in traffic design has contributed significantly to this problem. Not only is there inconsistency within the neighborhood, but inconsistency with other areas in terms of traffic regulation can also be an issue, especially when it comes to the West End. "I think what we are challenged within our community is that we have a lot of people that aren't from here, and where they're from, the traffic, the roundabout was managed in a different way... it would be nice if we could get some more support at that stage where driving a car is different experience". The participant mentioned that the advanced green (a type of traffic light signal) is specific to British Columbia, which might confuse people from other places. Later in the discussion, another participant also noted the wayfinding problem "for strangers to the neighborhood". As the West End becomes a multicultural neighborhood, it is encouraging to see that participants are genuinely concerned with the experiences of people who are new to the area. The participants are not just complaining about the obstacles they themselves faced but are genuinely considering people from different groups as stakeholders. I believe that this also sheds light on what equal accessibility means within a community.

3. Worries about social safety and interaction: The complex dynamics of community and active Engagement

Most quantitative evaluative tools measure how the built environment supports a sense of community by the availability of public amenities and street furniture that fosters social interaction (Kan & Molinsky 2020). This, however, is not the only dimension where the social aspects of a neighborhood are embodied. The West End neighborhood had an overall high evaluation in terms of facilities, as commented by one participant in the focus group, "(West End is) probably one of the best places in the world in terms of peace and amenities". Nevertheless, as the place changes over time, more problems regarding socializing in the neighborhood, including concerns on safety and interaction have arisen.

When discussing t interactions with people that made them feel unsafe, one participant shared their experience of hearing hate speech and addressing the problem with a call to 911. This was followed by another participant, "What do you do if it doesn't warrant a 911 call? Like, people are yelling and creating a feeling that it's a bit hostile?" The situation of encountering unfriendly behavior in the community was experienced by another participant, who commented, "But we don't have anything in our society that says, 'Excuse me', that's not allowed in this way of living... that's not how we work with each other". This raised a critical point to the norms of interaction that shape the mezzo-level community, namely, how does community dynamics address circumstances that are insufficient to trigger police intervention but also beyond the control of individuals? The phenomenal approach to place emphasizes that people's everyday experiences are integral to the place (Rowles 1983), and the impression of unfriendliness could negatively affect elderlies' walking experience. "I think you always have to make a judgment when you're coming up to somebody to whether you're going to avoid or stop". Everyday micro-interaction with pedestrians serve as an important source of social engagement, as studies on social interaction have shown that positive affective reaction could be elicited by brief exchanges such as eye contact (Hietanen 2018).

Also related to social engagement in a mul-

ticultural community is the language barrier. In explaining her experience of hearing languages she didn't understand, one participant expressed that while "it's neat to hear all the other languages" in the cosmopolitan community, she felt that when she tried to interact with people speaking different languages, "it's almost like it's a wall around them". A second participant then recommended a translation application, which "is wonderful and does make that connection". While some studies have shown that population turnover may increase older people's sense of losing control over their environment (Buffel & Phillipson 2018), it is encouraging to see that participants are actively trying to connect with others in the neighbourhood.

Rather than viewing the situation as static and simply identifying what is lacking, they aimed to uncover the complex origins of the problem. A typical case discussed was a former gathering place on a street corner, which had been "taken over by a group of people that lead different lifestyles" and was described by one participant as "very disconcerting". Another participant explained that the city removed the area due to concerns over undesirable gatherings, "In dealing with the non-desirable grouping of people, (the city) removed some of the support sitting places for people who generally need them". Recounting a friend who walked with canes and used to rest there, they commented, "who are suffering here are the people who could use the spaces". This phenomenon was documented in the pre-survey as well, where a participant mentioned "people openly drinking, sprawling on benches which no one else can use". This case suggests that some problems may not have simple solutions that can be resolved solely by adding physical resources, echoing recent criticisms on

age-friendly design regarding an objected-focused, solution-driven approach where older people's need is generically presumed (Handler 2018).

What is needed is an alternative approach where older adults are consulted and engaged in an age-friendly urban design. The multifaceted nature of safety is reflected in the problems regarding physical safety, traffic regulation and social integration in a changing neighborhood. Beyond these challenges, we have also seen how the participants of Safe Steps for Seniors perceive problems in their neighborhood from a relational, context-specific way. They view other stakeholders in the city, and which may inform further approach with a more agent-focused community building and management.

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Project Sidewalk and the SWAN Collaboration: Exploring Accessibility Through Technology and Community

Samna Sadaf Khan, Rojan Nasiri, Atiya Mahmood

Project Sidewalk is a web-based platform designed to virtually audit sidewalks and crosswalks for accessibility issues. Originally launched in 2012 by a team of computer scientists at the University of Washington, the platform integrates remote crowdsourcing, online mapping, and machine learning to produce detailed, annotated maps highlighting accessibility barriers. Its mission is to transform how cities collect and present accessibility data to enable better urban planning, create interactive accessibility visualizations, and promote more transparent governance.

To date, Project Sidewalk hosts data from 18 cities and has amassed over one million accessibility labels—precisely 1,163,413—across more than 21,000 kilometers of urban pathways.
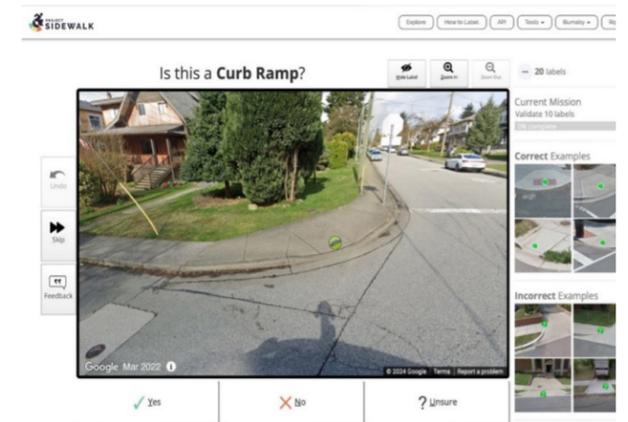

Figure 1 & 2: Interface of Project Sidewalk Online tool for marking indicators and validating data.

A Collaborative Step Forward: Project Sidewalk & SWAN

The Stakeholder Walkability/Wheelability Audit in Neighbourhoods (SWAN) project collaborated with Project Sidewalk to analyze sidewalk infrastructure in 7 neighbourhoods of Burnaby. This collaboration brought together a dynamic coalition of institutions and civic organizations, including Simon Fraser University, University of Washington, University of Illinois Chicago, Burnaby Neighbourhood House, Civic Innovation Lab, and the City of Burnaby.
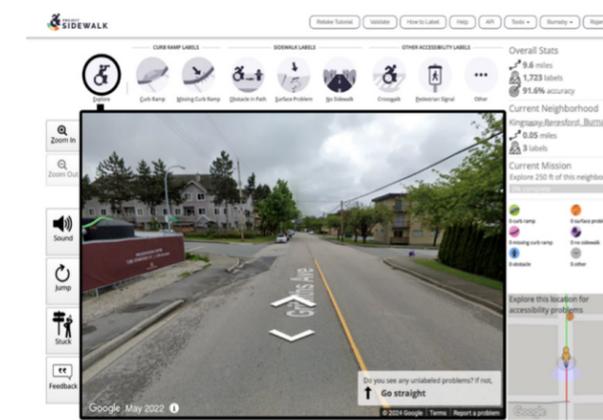
Both Project Sidewalk and SWAN share a common objective: evaluating neighborhood accessibility to better understand and improve urban mobility. While Project Sidewalk helps identify potential problem areas—known as "hotspots"—the SWAN tool provides deeper insight by validating and expanding on the digital findings for older adults.

This collaboration not only combined technological application with a community-driven approach, but it also gave the research team an opportunity to develop a unique intergenerational model that actively engaged both youth and older adults in data collection gathering diverse perspectives. This method enabled the project to capture a wider range of insights, experiences and solutions. While youth participated in the first stage of data collection using the online Project Sidewalk tool, older adults were recruited to conduct ground truthing using the SWAN tool.

The Method

Youth volunteers were introduced to the project through a short-term program developed in partnership with Burnaby Neighbourhood House in the summer of 2024. They participated in two training sessions: the first focused on the critical role of accessibility for aging populations and individuals with disabilities; the second provided hands-on experience using the Project Sidewalk tool.

Following the training, youth and research assistants took part in three map-a-thon sessions, virtually labelling accessibility features and issues throughout Burnaby. The annotated data was then validated and analyzed using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which enabled the creation

of heat maps pinpointing 3–4 key hotspots in each neighborhood—areas where sidewalks were frequently rated as "not passable."

In the final stage, older adults were recruited to conduct on-the-ground validation of these hotspots using the SWAN tool which gathers both, qualitative and quantitative data. Their involvement brought lived experience into the research process - enriching the findings with real-world context.

"My involvement in project sidewalk increased my knowledge of existing civic issues affecting my local community. ...., I was not entirely aware of how inaccessible sidewalks within my neighbourhood were, nor of the care and attention that should go into their design to ensure that they are accessible." – (Quote from Youth Participant)

Figure 3: Training Sessions for Youth in Burnaby Neighbourhood House.

"After participating in this project, I know more about inclusive environments and my rights!" – (Quote from Older Adult Participant)

Figure 4: Older Adult participants for ground-truthing.

What's next

With data collection wrapped up in the summer of 2024, the research team has since compiled, cleaned, and organized the dataset, which is now undergoing in-depth analysis. The map in figure 5 shows how the data looks like with the location of all labels placed in Burnaby. Feature types can be checked in the legend for a selective preview as well.
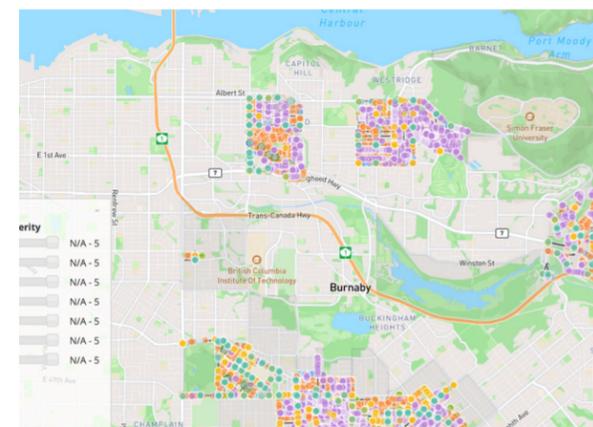

Figure 5: Sidewalk accessibility labels in Burnaby collected through Project Sidewalk.

This data set has the potential for enabling further analysis for cities. An example of this is shown in Figure 6, where Project Sidewalk's accessibility data is overlaid with the locations of educational institutions that residents commonly walk to, including schools, libraries, and community centres. The map indicates that some of these destinations are located in inaccessible areas, which correlates with a higher number of traffic collisions.
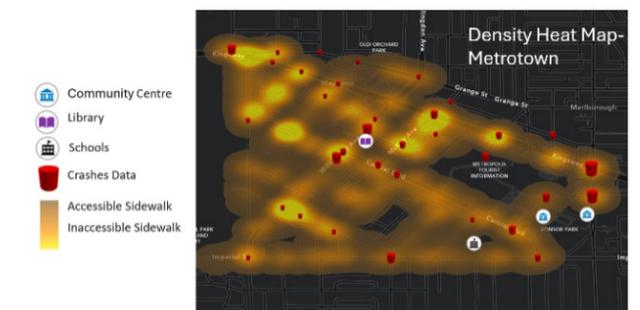

Figure 6: Overlay of Project Sidewalk's accessibility data with educational and community destinations to identify areas of inaccessibility and potential safety concerns.

The emerging insights will be translated by the research team into a range of knowledge mobilization outputs—including academic publications, opinion pieces, and research dissemination through both scholarly conferences and community-based presentations.

The fusion of digital tools, intergenerational engagement, and collaborative research exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to urban accessibility. By bridging technological innovation with community participation, the Project Sidewalk and SWAN collaboration is paving the way for more inclusive, data-informed cities.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONTINUED GROWTH

New Award for Gerontology Students

The Department of Gerontology and Gerontology Research Centre would like to thank Isobel Mackenzie for her generous donation for an award for minor students in Gerontology. This support for students makes a significant difference in their education journey to continue learning and advancing their careers.

Gloria Gutman Awarded the King Charles III Cornation Medal

The GRC is delighted to congratulate Gloria Gutman on being awarded the King Charles III Coronation Medal. This prestigious honour recognizes her outstanding contributions to gerontology communities locally, provincially, nationally, and on the international stage.

Andrew Wister Recognized as a SFU Distinguished Professor

Andrew Wister, GRC Director has been recognized as a SFU Distinguished Professor for his achievements and dedication to teaching and research for over three decades.

Habib Chaudhury Receives SFU Research Excellence Award

We are thrilled to announce that GRC Assistant Director Habib Chaudhury, has been awarded the prestigious SFU Research Excellence Award for his team's work on dementia-inclusive environments.

International Society for Gerontechnology 15th World Conference

Vancouver, Canada | March 26-29, 2026

An invitation to submit an abstract for ISG2026

By Gloria Gutman and Shannon Freeman (Co-chairs)

Scope & Topics

The International Society for Gerontechnology (ISG) 15th World Conference of Gerontechnology (ISG 2026), which will take place at SFU's Harbour Centre campus, is a platform for persons interested or working in the area of gerontechnology. The conference aims to explore how technology can enhance older adults' quality of life and well-being, preserve autonomy and feelings of security, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of health and social care services. Participants will share their knowledge and experience through lectures, symposia, workshops, papers, and posters. Also, the Conference will feature the 10th Gerontechnology masterclass. This is a unique opportunity for individuals at the Master's, Doctoral, Postdoctoral, and early professional levels who are currently conducting or planning to conduct research in the area of aging and technology to interact face-to-face with world-class experts in gerontechnology and benefit from their advice.

Topics for the ISG 2026 Conference include: aging and disability, application fields and innovative technology for an aging society (e.g., AI, robotics, sensors, augmentation), healthy inclusive environments and architecture, dementia and technology, ethics and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), health and self-esteem, housing and daily living, governance, social policy, communication, transportation and personal mobility, work, leisure and social participation, and many more.

Abstract Submission
Authors are invited to submit abstracts for symposia, free papers, and posters, . All accepted abstracts will be published in a special issue of the ISG peer-reviewed journal Gerontechnology.

Important Dates
Submission Deadline: December 1, 2025
Authors Notification: Rolling
Conference Date: March 26 – 29, 2026

Contact us:
ISG 15th World Conference Secretariat Centre for Technology Adoption for Aging in the North
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Remembering Sandra Cusack

In Memorium — Dr. Sandra Cusack July 14, 1941 - December 12, 2024.

Dr Sandra Cusack (Fedorak) died peacefully and suddenly at AgeCare Royal City in New Westminster at the age of 83. Sandra received a PhD from SFU under Special Arrangements, and held an appointment as a Research Associate of the Gerontology Research Centre for several years. She was also an instructor for the Faculty of Education. Her book entitled Mental Fitness - For life was one of the first books addressing the importance of reducing dementia risk through mental activities. Sandra was a great colleague and friend of several current Gerontology faculty and will be missed.

DR. SANDRA CUSAK

JULY 14, 1941 - DECEMBER 12,, 2024

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