



The Rural Route to Active, Healthy Aging

by Jennifer Dechaine

In February 2005 the Alberta government released a report called, A Place to Grow: Alberta's Rural Development Strategy. The report talked about engaging and supporting seniors through a series of priority actions. Two actions that the Alberta Centre for Active Living decided to address through a physical activity lens were:

- To work with communities to ensure that a range of services and supports is available for seniors to remain in rural Alberta;
- To work with communities to encourage seniors to play an active role in providing mentorship to young people, maintaining their volunteer activities, and continuing to be active participants in their communities.

The Centre's project will try to raise awareness among rural community practitioners and decision makers about the importance of physical activity for older adults, and how they can create a supportive environment for their seniors. The two-year project will develop new resources for rural physical activity promotion and do some capacity building in the communities. We have done focus groups across the province to hear what rural seniors have to say about active living. We are using that information to guide the development of the resources and sharing it with decision makers to help them create an environment that enables their seniors and others in the community to engage in regular physical activity.

The ultimate goal is to improve the health of older rural Albertans through education, facilitating community action, and promotion of lifelong engagement in physical activity.

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ALCOA has been successful in acquiring funding for two projects through The Healthy Living Unit, Public Health Agency of Canada.

Creating Multi-Level Communication & Collaborative Mechanisms for Improved Physical Activity Level in Older Adults"

This project will further strengthen ALCOA's effectiveness by looking at meaningful communication between ALCOA's community based members and other agencies within the community, e.g., health agencies and civic authorities.

Research Update on physical activity, aging and cancer

This issue will focus on cancer and physical activity because the information is desperately needed by health practitioners and older adults. There is solid evidence for physical activity as a preventative measure for some very commonly occurring types of cancer (e.g., colon), and it is not clear that the public has understood this message.

VON Smart

"I am building muscle and strengthening my arms and shoulders - legs as well"... "I have noticed more flexibility in my shoulders, I'm less short of breath"... "Walking is easier"... "Generally feeling stronger"

These comments are from participants who are receiving VON Canada's SMART (Seniors Maintaining Active Roles Together) In-Home Program; a new service providing volunteer led in-home exercise visits. Initiated in April 2005, through funding received from the Ontario Trillium Foundation and from The Population Health Fund of Health Canada, VON Canada is addressing a gap in service for homebound, potentially frail community dwelling seniors who are most at risk and most underserved, many suffering from chronic illness and/or disability.

The VON SMART In-Home and The VON SMART Group Programs (implemented in 2003) create a national innovative, progressive model of physical activity interventions to reach isolated, homebound, non-participating seniors. Working with established community partners and supporters at the community level, the initiative builds a continuum allowing all community dwelling older adults to begin, progress and maintain functional fitness, regardless of their current level of ability/mobility.

Seniors participating in VON SMART Groups report a strong sense of accomplishment and achievement through reaching personal goals as well as thorough enjoyment of the exercises, interaction with peers, and personal attention from certified

volunteer fitness instructors. 78% indicated their health condition had improved. The 2004 evaluation study, conducted by the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging, demonstrated statistically significant improvements in upper and lower body strength and flexibility as well as in agility, dynamic balance and aerobic endurance - after just 16 weeks of participation!

Expansion of these services enables seniors to move through a 'Functional Fitness Continuum', maximizing their individual abilities. By 2008, twelve VON branches across Ontario as well as VON Manitoba, two communities in Alberta (Medicine Hat and Edmonton); Sackville, New Brunswick; Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and St. John's, Newfoundland will have the continuum in place, with a long-term goal of having the program in place in all branches.

A positive change in communities across Canada will be evident, as the initiative advances the documented research regarding physical activity's vital role in promoting healthy aging and maintaining independence.

For more information
on this project please contact:

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