

Editorial

As the world stood still, some of the most pervasive problems in our society were exacerbated by the mere fact that they thrive in the shadows and behind closed doors. Most of us were required to stay indoors and kept away from public spaces and social places. Some of us in solitude and some of us with the people we share our homes. These conditions made vulnerable individuals more at risk of experiencing abuse and violence, from children whose oasis are the few hours that they are at school, to the older adults who rely on social connections not only to keep active and engaged, but also to remain safe and mentally healthy.

Elder abuse is a concern that has been in the radar for quite some time. The Ontario Human Rights Commission reported ten per cent of all elder abuse is related to neglect, highlighting that neglect occurs in all contexts and settings where any kind of care is provided for older adults. Whether at home, in hospitals, in long-term care facilities, and in retirement homes, seniors are subjected to abuse and neglect very often. In 2015 Statistics Canada reported that over 154,000 Canadians aged 55 and older have been the victim of a violent crime and that the rate of violent victimization of seniors remained unchanged since 2009.

Preventive measures suggested by the Region of Peel to reduce the spread of the virus throughout the senior population required people over 70 to stay home and leave the house only for essentials like groceries, medicines and medical appointments. With deaths occurring mostly within this demographic group, understandably the geriatric population was isolated for their protection. Unfortunately, this social isolation made room for neglect and abuse. Physical distancing measures intended to protect the elderly population subsequently led to neglect by health care workers, family members and the government.

Elder abuse is deeply rooted in our societies' prejudices, stereotypes and discriminatory practices towards older people have existed for far too long affecting more seniors every year. The pandemic has shown that seniors are the *most* vulnerable not only with the risk of developing most severe symptoms and worse outcomes for their physical health, but also increasing their risk for experiencing abuse and neglect.

It is very risky to cluster all seniors sharing the same language and some cultural background as a homogeneous group with the same needs and interests. Populations from all different target groups can be very diverse within their own communities, however, in looking at circumstances that put seniors at risk, it is very clear that they are vulnerable across all communities. The Social Tables for Seniors project accomplished something very important, reduce isolation resulting from the very measures that meant to keep them safe.

The Social Table for Seniors Program

COVID-19 forced us to modify our way of life, our routines and all we took for granted had to suddenly change. The safety measures that were put in place to prevent the spread of the virus kept us away from our friends and family. In order to maintain connections with others, we had to rely more on technology. The older adult population was more acutely affected by these circumstances: 1) seniors were more at risk to suffer severe consequences if contracting COVID-19; 2) many people 65 and older live alone which made self-isolation a risk factor for

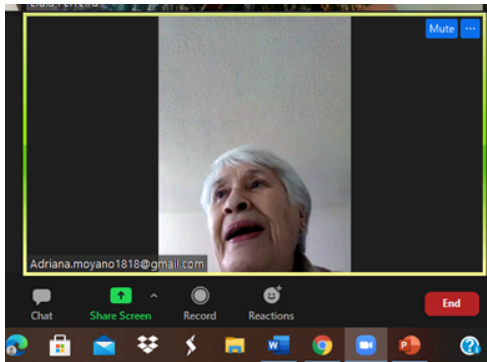
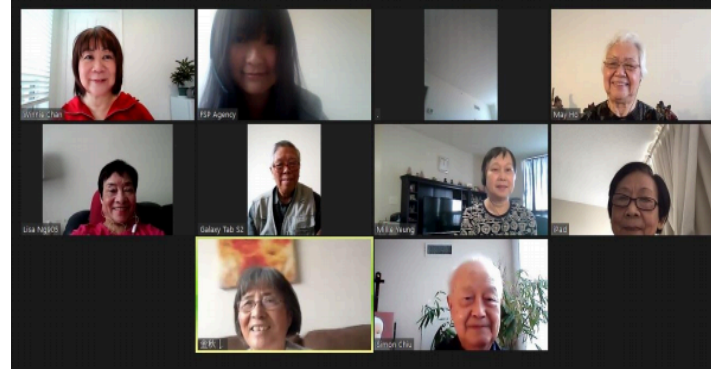


developing mental health conditions; and 3) a high percentage of seniors are not familiar with the use of technology to keep them connected while self-isolating.

To tackle these emerging issues, Family Services of Peel (FSP) launched a *Social Tables for Seniors* program, an online meeting place where seniors can interact with each other and the outside world integrating the feelings and emotions of seniors during these uncertain times.

The communities engaged in the project are: Arabic, Chinese, Hispanic, and South Asian. This pilot project used community engagement strategies to outreach seniors in self-isolation due to COVID-19; using media tools, as a medium to 'get together'. Through the weekly Zoom sessions, the program achieved the main goal of alleviating the sense of isolation that the seniors faced during this pandemic. When running the program there was particular focus on developing the seniors' digital literacy skills. When the program started, many seniors were feeling overwhelmed or slightly awkward with meeting virtually. Later in the program, participants shared that they were joining many other virtual events too.

The pandemic has brought grief, loneliness and fear into our lives. With extreme and terrible change comes the simultaneous opportunity for positive and impactful growth. FSP and its Community Connectors have tirelessly fought to re-connect seniors in novel ways resulting in often new and unexpected relationships being built.



Testimonial

"I am 80 years old, living alone in Mississauga, in a high-rise building with my 18 years old cat 'Cochina'. My husband passed away 22 years ago, and we have 2 children and 3 grandchildren. When Covid-19 started, I coped terribly, all alone and stuck at home. I was very scared to go out and get infected. Accompanied only by my concern about the future of my grandchildren. The only thought that brought me happiness was to talk by phone with my 101-year-old mother living in Chile. I dreamed of flying back to see her one last time. My mother had a great and strong spirit, she resisted everything with an impeccable character. A truly extraordinary woman.

Unfortunately, I could not make my dream come true because she passed away early this year.

Before the pandemic, I was a very social person, going out to meet my friends. I was part of the Club de los Abuelos and the Alce Club (Hispanic seniors clubs in Mississauga)

One day, I got a phone call from Family Services of Peel, inviting me to be part of the senior's virtual club. The only tool to communicate with the exterior world was my landline phone, I did not have a cell phone, computer, or internet, neither any skills in navigating the internet.

The FSP Hispanic Coordinator donated me a new tablet, set it up for me getting me connected to the internet and with great patience trained me for several weeks on how to join their virtual group on Zoom. Needless to say, it was incredible. The day we were able to see each other faces through the screen was unforgettable!

Before I joined this group, I was very isolated and without any possibility to have a social life during the pandemic, I am incredibly grateful that I was given the chance to be a member of such a wonderful program. The tablet that was given really helped me to do that which I could not have done before such as allowing me to connect with friends and family. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity!" - **Adriana Moyano, Hispanic Social Table for Seniors'**