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Community Report


Empowering seniors & women to
build resiliency & mental wellbeing

Prepared for
**North of McKnight
Communities Society**

Prepared by
Joy Steppacher



North of McKnight
Communities Society



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For any inquiries about this project:

Lalita Singh

NMCS Project Manager

lalita.m.singh2007@gmail.com

Prepared by:

Joy Steppacher

Evaluation Consultant

jsteppacher@outlook.com



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Background

North of McKnight Communities Society (NMCS) is a grassroots organization that serves the communities geographically north of McKnight Boulevard in Calgary, Alberta. There are seven diverse communities that make up the area North of McKnight: Castleridge, Coral Springs, Falconridge, Martindale, Saddle Ridge, Sky View, and Taradale. North of McKnight communities are one of the fastest growing areas in Calgary. These communities are home to 85,785 residents, 81% of which are visible minorities and 57% are immigrants (Community profiles. <https://www.calgary.ca>. (n.d.)).

A year since the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic, it became evident that the effects of the pandemic stretched far beyond the virus itself. Reports from across the globe began to show that extended restrictions on social gatherings and isolation had negative consequences on mental health and psychological wellbeing of individuals doing their part to curve the infection rates. The loss of connection to community, family, and social networks that once offered a coping mechanism to daily stress, anxiety and depression was weighing heavily on many and now being compounded with concerns of economy, health, and safety.

NMCS recognized that the greatest focus and efforts should be placed on seniors who were expected to be most severely affected mentally and physically by COVID-19 (Kessler & Bowen, 2020, as cited in Rodrigues et al., 2021). Seniors were also primarily targeted to socially isolate, since the virus posed greatest threat to their weakened immune systems (Wu et al., 2020 as cited in Rodrigues et al., 2021).



NMCS also recognized that marginalized women, namely those newly immigrated to Canada and faced language barriers to accessing services, were more susceptible to negative mental health and psychological wellbeing due to the added stress of homeschooling and absence of social supports. Lessons from the United States showed that the pandemic affected individuals of minority and marginalized populations disproportionately (Chen et al., 2020). A scientific brief released in March 2022 by the World Health Organization confirmed that women have been found to be most negatively impacted by the pandemic compared to men (World Health Organization, 2022).

NMCS identified the urgency for action to ensure the long-term safety and health of their communities. With little time for many communities to develop a comprehensive contingency plan to manage the health risks associated with extended isolation, NMCS rose to the challenge. Therefore, seniors and marginalized women of minority populations were identified as sub-populations that required support most.





The Project

Empowering Seniors and Women to Build Resiliency & Mental Wellbeing is a project that was designed to reconnect, socialize, and support isolated seniors and marginalized women who are visible minorities and live north of McKnight Boulevard. Through a series of information sessions and socializing activities that include stress reduction exercise, peer support, social media training, counselling, and referral services in the first language of participants, this project seeks to reduce negative consequences of isolation like stress, anxiety and depression. By empowering seniors and marginalized women who are visible minorities with the tools necessary to adapt to the new environment created by the pandemic, this project seeks to build resiliency and promote positive mental health and psychological wellbeing among those potentially most challenged by the pandemic.

Goals

- 1 Help individuals effectively recover from the pandemic by meeting their social wellbeing and mental health needs.
- 2 Engage individuals, families, communities, and civil society to find ways to meet the social wellbeing and mental health needs of individuals challenged by the pandemic.
- 3 Provide additional social infrastructure to support the social wellbeing and mental health recovery of individuals in our communities that have been affected by the pandemic.

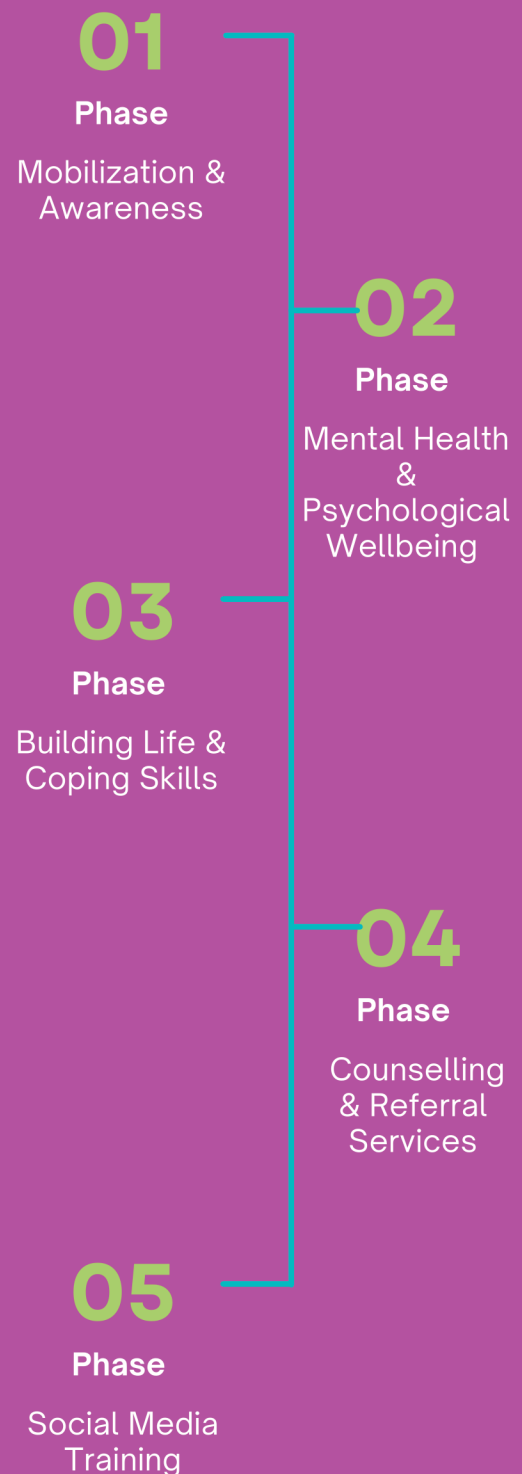
Design

To accomplish the goals outline above, there were 5 phases incorporated within the design of this project.

Mobilization & Awareness

The first phase of this project involved the mobilization of grassroots organizations and community residents through various community outreach efforts by NMCS. 12 grassroots organizations and 6 social service agencies were approached and engaged to collaborate on the design and implementation of this project.

This phase also included community outreach to residents north of McKnight Boulevard to raise awareness about the negative impact the pandemic has had on seniors and marginalized women in the community. Participants were recruited through referrals from partner agencies and outreach efforts.





Mental Health & Psychological Wellbeing

The second phase involved a series of in-class learning sessions on mental health and wellbeing. Group sessions were conducted in collaboration with grassroots community partners, including South Asian Canadian Association, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Women Group, Al-Hiddya and Pashtun Community Association, Calgary Cultural Women Association, Indo-Canadian Community Association, and Global Pravasi Seniors Society. The purpose of these sessions is to build participant's capacity in the subject matter and coping skills to manage stress, depression, and anxiety. Topics included:

- Stress and anger management
- Mental health, aging, and nutrition
- How to cope with depression and anxiety
- COVID-19 fatigue and isolation
- Dementia and How to Cope

Building Life and Coping Skills

The third phase of this project involved applying some of topics learned in the second phase into practical group activities that promoted positive mental health and psychological wellbeing. Individuals participated in sessions with various activities and coping methodologies. Topics incorporated within group activities included:

- Stress reduction
- Prevention of dementia
- Importance of socializing
- Isolation reduction activities



Individuals participated in activities such as:

- Laughter yoga
- Yoga
- Mindfulness
- Mandela art
- Self-expression techniques
- Safe space work

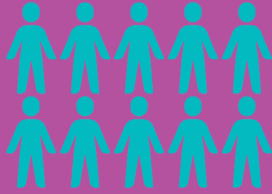
Counselling & Referral Services

The fourth phase of the project provided access to counselling services for participants challenged with mental health and opted for additional supports with a professional psychological or mental health counsellor. Participants were able to confidentially book an appointment and choose to participate in one-on-one private counselling or group counselling. Counselling services were offered in participant's first language and participants were also connected with referrals to community resources.

Social Media Training

The final phase of the project involved a total of 10 sessions on social media training to promote social inclusion and reduce isolation. These sessions were focused on improving participant's skills in computers, smartphones, social media, and internet safety. Topics covered during these sessions included:

- Basic computer skills
- Email basics
- Social media applications: Facebook, WhatsApp
- Video chatting applications: Zoom and Teams
- General cell phone applications



100% SAID THE ACTIVITIES HELPED THEM
FEEL CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED



SAID THE ACTIVITIES HELPED THEM FEEL
CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED



SAID THE ACTIVITIES WERE HELPFUL IN
REDUCING THEIR STRESS

18

AGENCIES MOBILIZED & ENGAGED TO
PROVIDE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS TO
THE COMMUNITY

70

INDIVIDUALS SUPPORTED BY THIS
PROJECT

Results

There was a total of 70 individuals who registered to participate in the project. Between August 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022, individuals participated in a total of 40 sessions and were offered additional counselling services, if requested.

Goal #1: Help individuals effectively recover from the pandemic by meeting their psychological wellbeing and mental health needs.

For Mental Health and Wellbeing Information Sessions:

- 100% of respondents reported that they enjoyed the workshops
- 98% felt the information presented was sufficient
- 55% of respondents reported that they would like more information on the subject

When asked for participant's feedback, some participants expressed their hope and willingness to continue learning and participating in subsequent sessions.



For Life and Coping Skills Building Group Activities:

- 97% of respondents reported that they received helpful information on resources
- 97% of respondents reported that these activities provided the opportunity to meet with peers and friends
- 100% reported that the activities helped them feel connected and supported

For Social Media Session

- 100% reported that the training was effective in teaching them something new about social media
- 93% reported that these sessions provided the opportunity to meet with peers and friends
- 100% reported that the skills learned from the training sessions helped them to connect with their family and friends
- 100% reported that the activities were helpful in reducing their stress

Goal #2: Engage individuals, families, communities, and civil society to find ways to meet the psychological wellbeing and mental health needs brought on by the pandemic.

- 12 grassroots organizations serving visible minorities and 6 social service agencies mobilized and engaged to provide services and supports to the community
- 70 seniors and marginalized women from visible minority groups supported with Mental Health & Psychological Wellbeing sessions and Building Life & Coping Skills activities
- 33 seniors and marginalized women from visible minority groups supported with counselling and referral services



Goal #3: Provide additional social infrastructure to support the psychological wellbeing and mental health recovery of individuals in our communities that have been affected by the pandemic.

- Provided meeting and socializing opportunities for isolated seniors and marginalized women remotely on Zoom and safely in-person
- Provided remote workshops on mental health and psychological wellbeing to seniors and marginalized women
- Provided access to counselling and referral services
- Built participant's toolbox to identify and reduce the effects of social isolation and the pandemic
- Provided the community with a replicable model that can be continued in the communities



Conclusion

The program was successful in achieving its intended goals to provide recovery support to residents north of McKnight Boulevard, mobilize and engage multiple organizations to join the cause, and provided a solution that could be easily replicated to provide continued support to the communities.

Surveys conducted after individuals participated in sessions revealed that 55% of respondents expressed interest in receiving more information on mental health and psychological wellbeing. There were some participants that recommended that more exercise activities be incorporated within phase 3 of the program.

A recurring theme within survey feedback among participants was the hope that the program would continue in their community that will allow others to join and allow themselves to continue receiving supports. Here are some of the participants thoughts from the surveys:



"It was really helpful during COVID."

"It should be continued."

"I like the sessions and I want to come again!"

"This type of session and program should be continued."

NMCS hopes that the program can find continued support from funders and donors so that these essential services can continue to be offered within their communities.



Acknowledgements

A special thanks to the Government of Alberta for providing essential funding to support this project and make these essential services available in our communities.

We are also thankful to our partners and volunteers who dedicated their time and effort to the planning and implementation of this project in partnership with NMCS:

- South Asian Canadian Association
- Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Women group
- Al-Hiddya and Pashtun Community Association
- Calgary Cultural Women Association
- Indo-Canadian Community Association
- Global Pravasi Seniors Society
- Punjabi Community Health Services



Questions? Contact us.

www.nmcs.ca

Lalita Singh, Program Manager

lalita.m.singh@gmail.com

