

UIM Italian Social Services Committee

Report on Needs and Challenges Faced by Italian Seniors in Ottawa

December 2010

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

Purpose:

The purpose of this document is to apprise members of the Italian Community in Ottawa of some very important work that a group of committed citizens and volunteers has undertaken over the past year to help better understand the challenges faced by Italian-Canadian Seniors in Ottawa.

It is hoped that this will help bring our Italian Community in Ottawa more closely together, as ONE COMMUNITY, to help improve the lives of Italian-Canadian Seniors in our community.

The document is organized as follows: first, a brief description is provided on the linkage between UIM and the Italian Social Services Committee including a listing of the members of the Committee. From here, some background is provided on the project along with some observations and comments on the importance of addressing the needs and challenges faced by Italian Seniors in Ottawa. The results of the focus groups along with the major implications and needs as well as potential solution areas suggested by the focus group participants are then summarized followed by a description of the comprehensive environmental scan that was performed to facilitate preparation of a compendium of services available to help Italian Seniors and their families become aware of services that may be accessed in Italian.

UIM and the Italian Social Services Committee:

The Unione degli Italiani nel mondo (UIM) is a not-for-profit organization that deals with the rights and interests of Italians in various parts of the world and which provides support to Italians in various areas including social security and pension matters. Established in 1995 through the Patronato ITAL-UIL, UIM concerns itself with providing assistance to Italian immigrants on matters and issues that go beyond the scope and mandate of ITAL-UIL. UIM is a not-for-profit corporation that is self-financing and that operates within the purview of Canadian rules and regulations.

ITAL-UIL staff members in Ottawa are frequently approached by members of the Italian community who are seeking assistance and help on a wide variety of social issues. However, as ITAL-UIL is not typically equipped or resourced to provide the type of professional assistance being requested on matters outside its scope of operation, it has become increasingly clear that gaps exist in being able to address the types of social service issues and needs faced by some members of the Italian Community.

Two years ago, an announcement was made in L’Ora di Ottawa by a nascent committee of volunteers announcing, amongst other things, a meeting to recruit interested individuals to participate in a committee to be focussed on social service needs of Italian Seniors. The announcement attracted the attention of UIM executives given the frequent requests received from members of the Italian community regarding social services.

Amongst other things, the committee required a way to formalize its existence as a not-for-profit organization so as to be able to make funding requests to further study the needs, issues and challenges faced by Italian Seniors. Given UIM’s interest and experience from its many dealings with community members, UIM proposed to work together with the Social Services Committee given their common interests and objectives. As such, the Italian Social Services Committee was enjoined for both expediency and relevancy reasons under the UIM umbrella, affording both greater abilities to work on issues and challenges that span across the entire Italian Community and without the necessity of forming a separate stand-alone legal not-for-profit entity.

The members of the Social Services Committee are:

Lucio Appolloni | Berardino Carrozzi | Ariella Hostetter | Sal Iacono |
Maddalena Ianitti | Carla Minoli Lappa | Clara Panarella | Giovanna Panico |
Maria Saviane-Chubb

It is important to note that several members of the Social Services Committee have many years of experience in the social and community services fields and we as a committee were very fortunate to be able to draw upon their professional wisdom and expertise as the project was carried out.

Project Background:

By way of background, in the first half of 2009, a brief survey on social service needs in our community was carried out by a group of volunteers to obtain information to begin the process of developing programs to help address challenges faced by Seniors in our community. From this survey, several fundamental issues emerged. However, while the survey was informative, it lacked the detail required to more richly understand the issues, their root causes and areas of required focus to address the challenges and barriers faced by Italian Seniors.

In order to obtain resources to more fully probe the issues and barriers, a funding application was submitted to the Government of Canada “New Horizons for Seniors Program” in June 2009.

Funding approval from “New Horizons for Seniors Program” was received in December 2009.

The Scope of the New Horizons Funding Application and Project covered three main objectives:

1. To involve Italian-Canadian seniors in determining best ways of helping seniors gain access to Social, Health and Recreational Activities and Services;
2. To carry out a scan in Ottawa of Social, Health Care Professionals, Community Health Centres and Recreational Programs that provide services to Seniors in Italian; and,
3. To produce an Information Brochure that will help Seniors and their Families be aware of and gain access to Services in Ottawa that are available in Italian.

Throughout 2010, several communications and meetings including focus groups took place with various members of the Italian Community: articles were published in Italian papers, Tele 30 updates were given and presentations were made to seek assistance and support on various aspects of the project.

This document summarizes the many hours of effort expended by the Social Service Committee members to help understand the issues and to begin the process of finding possible solutions to help improve the lives of our seniors.

Before we turn to the specific research, results and implications thereof, we offer some observations and thoughts on the importance of us coming together as ONE community to help our seniors in their golden years of life.

As we all know, today's Italian Canadian Seniors in Ottawa were once young, vibrant, and hard working members of the community who helped build not only our City but our Country. In coming to Canada many decades ago either alone or with young families, our parents or grandparents or uncles and aunts left their families and friends in Italy to come to this land to help build better futures for their children and families.

They worked very hard; they took numerous and significant risks, both financial and emotional; and, they put their families needs ahead of their own and they gave the next generation the means to achieve their dreams and to succeed in whatever they undertook.

In brief, they gave to most of us what they themselves never really had. They gave their children and families the gift of a more promising and prosperous future for which we all owe them a debt of immense gratitude.

We believe, as we are sure most others do also, that it is our turn to continue to return the gift they gave us by helping them live the rest of their lives as comfortably and as happily as possible. We also believe that as a community, we have a collective responsibility to help our Seniors live their golden years in dignity and in happiness. It is up to us, just as it once was up to them, to help improve their lives by addressing the challenges they face as best as we possibly can.

Focus Group Findings:

The nature and purpose of Focus Groups as a qualitative research tool and technique can be described simply as follows. In the words of Professor and Research Fellow Dr. Jenny Kitzinger of the University of Glasgow:

“Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data. Although group interviews are often used simply as a quick and convenient way to collect data from several people simultaneously, focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. This means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way.”

For our study, separate Focus Group sessions were held with Seniors; Caregivers; Italian Associations; and, Service Providers to obtain information and views on the issues faced by Italian seniors in Ottawa. Within each group, several issues were identified and each will be summarized in turn.

Issues Identified by Seniors

- Language of Services
- Isolation and Depression and the associated stigma
- Transportation
- Lack of Knowledge of Available Services
- Lack of Trust in Service Providers
- Reliance on adult children for help and at times feeling “shame” when they ask for help from their children
- Italian Women Seniors lack a convenient and permanent place to meet
- Church no longer seen as providing social services

Issues Identified by Caregivers:

- Family members and seniors not aware of available services
- Language and transportation are major obstacles and especially for women
- Family and caregivers sometimes have no ability to take a break from providing care – lack of respite facilities
- Experience among caregivers has been different – some positive, but most services are found to be lacking, ineffective or expensive
- Caregivers are sometimes elderly parents caring for adult children who still require assistance (e.g., “adult children with disabilities”)
- Depression and isolation resulting especially from loss of family and/or friends
- Present services are not fulfilling needs of frail Italian seniors

Issues Identified by Italian Associations:

- Associations are focussed on organizing cultural-social events, not providing social services
- Associations are doing their best and most are doing something to help
- Demand for home visits is increasing but capacity is limited
- Families are responsible for care but it is recognized that this is increasingly challenging
- Associations recognize that needs are many and varied including: lessening of isolation and depression; providing places to feel comfortable; awareness of services and services in Italian; and, transportation.

Issues Identified by Service Providers:

- Service Providers asked “Is there a leading agency dealing with the needs of Italian Seniors?”
- Recognize that activities offered are mainly for high functioning seniors rather than for frail seniors
- Noted that Italians have many organizations within their community but mental health and transportation are key gaps

- Noted that some Italian seniors are reluctant to partake in or continue in geriatric day programs perhaps due to factors such as language and cultural barriers (e.g., food, music, crafts, games). Service providers would be interested in working with the Italian community in order to improve their services and thus retain more seniors in their programs.
- Noted that Italian seniors have no after care or day programs offered specifically to them
- Noted that families want to keep mental health issues confidential because of stigma
- Cultural interpreters are sometimes used by some providers due to confidentiality and involvement with family
- CCAC has few Italian speaking personal support workers
- Italian seniors face similar issues as other immigrant seniors but they do not seem to access services as others do
- Italian seniors seem to be reluctant in mixing with seniors of other cultural backgrounds.

Summary of Key Issues Faced by Italian Seniors:

- **Isolation and Depression**
- **Transportation** that enables autonomy
- **Language** Barriers
- **Awareness** of Available health and social services
- **Stigma** arising from mental health issues
- **Pressures faced by family** in providing care
- **Appropriate sociocultural programs** for frail seniors

Solutions Suggested by Focus Group Participants:

From the interactive discussions held in the Focus Group Sessions, several suggestions were made by participants regarding possible solutions to some of the more pressing challenges and barriers faced by Italian Seniors in Ottawa.

Common themes emerged on suggested solutions. These are itemized below but it should be noted that they are not by order of priority.

- Respite care in nursing homes should be available to reduce the stress and burden experienced by family members in caring for their seniors
- Friendly telephone calling and home visits should be available to help reduce the prevalent feelings of isolation and depression
- Critical services should be available in the Italian language given the language barriers that appear so common for Italian Seniors
- Transportation services should be available to allow seniors greater ability to leave their homes for social, health or recreational purposes
- Resource persons should be available to facilitate communications for seniors who face language barriers as well as to provide advice and information on existing services and programs and on how to access those services
- More connections should be available with existing service providers by working collaboratively to help service providers improve their services for Italian Seniors
- Meeting locations and activities should be available for Italian Women Seniors
- Periodic Information sessions, educational programs and opportunities for sharing information on existing services should be made available

Community Scan of Service Providers in Ottawa and Information Booklet:

Community Scan:

During the Spring and Summer of 2010, extensive research was undertaken of websites, government sources, directories, census data and in-person interviews. Institutions, Associations and Service Provider Professionals were contacted in writing and/or by telephone to determine their capacity and interest to serve Italians in Ottawa who have language difficulties.

The community scan was used to accomplish several objectives. Specifically, to:

- Increase understanding of the health and social services sector;
- Determine and better understand the demographic make-up of our community;
- Contribute to questions to be explored interactively in the focus groups; and,
- To provide the substantive content for a booklet in Italian that lists health and social services for use by Seniors, Family Members/Caregivers and Service Providers in accessing Italian language friendly services.

Information Booklet:

At this time, an Information Booklet is being finalized for publication and distribution in early 2011. The booklet will provide as comprehensive as possible a compendium of services available in Italian to Italian Seniors in Ottawa.

The Booklet, to be published in Italian, will contain information of the following type:

- INFOline for seniors
- Telehealth Ontario telephone numbers and services
- Listing of available services
- How to find a Doctor in Ontario
- Hospitals and Services
- Doctors, Dentists and Optometrists in Ottawa that Speak Italian
- Mental Health Care and Psychologist Services that are available in Italian
- Pharmacies to serve customers in Italian
- Important Dietary Information

At this time, the intent is to distribute this booklet as broadly as possible and using several means to reach as many members of the Italian community as possible.

Conclusion:

By way of conclusion, given the context of the work performed by the Social Services Committee and the findings and implications which emerge, ending this document with a statement by the theologian and philosopher Abraham Heschel would appear to be relevant and appropriate. The statement cogently makes the point on why it is so important for us, as a community, to come together to help our Seniors as best as we possibly can in overcoming the challenges they face.

“A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture.”

In our view, the gold mines of our culture are indeed our Seniors. It is therefore incumbent on us to help them the way any one of us would want to be helped if and when, in our golden years in the future, we face challenges and obstacles which our community could help address.