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# Rural Aging during COVID-19: A Case Study of Older Voluntarism

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**Résumé**

Lors de crises à grande échelle comme celle de la pandémie de la COVID-19, la précarité des personnes et des bénévoles plus âgés peut être exacerbée, particulièrement dans les régions rurales et les petites villes moins desservies. Pour comprendre comment la pandémie a affecté le « bénévolat des personnes âgées », cet article présente une étude de cas portant sur trois programmes de bénévolat dans les régions rurales de l'Ontario (Canada). Des entretiens avec 34 bénévoles et administrateurs ont révélé des expériences à la fois difficiles et porteuses pour les bénévoles et les programmes pendant la première vague de la COVID-19. Ainsi, les résultats démontrent la vulnérabilité et la résilience des bénévoles plus âgés, mais aussi l'adaptabilité et l'incertitude des programmes qui reposent sur le bénévolat de cette population, alors que la communauté et ses résidents âgés font face aux perturbations liées à la pandémie. L'article propose un cadre pour la compréhension de l'impact de la pandémie sur le bénévolat chez les personnes âgées en relation avec les dimensions personnelles, programmatiques et communautaires du vieillissement rural durable. En outre, il explore les pistes pour que les bénévoles plus âgés, les organisations qui dépendent d'eux et les communautés qui connaissent un vieillissement de la population puissent poursuivre leurs activités après la pandémie.

**Abstract**

During large-scale crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the precarity of older people and older volunteers can become exacerbated, especially in under-serviced rural regions and small towns. To understand how the pandemic has affected "older voluntarism", this article presents a case study of three volunteer-based programs in rural Ontario, Canada. Interviews with 34 volunteers and administrators reveal both challenging and growth-oriented experiences of volunteers and the programs during the first wave of COVID-19. The findings demonstrate the vulnerability and resiliency of older volunteers and the adaptability and uncertainty of programs that rely on older voluntarism, as the community and its older residents navigate pandemic-related changes. The article advances a framework for understanding the pandemic's impacts on older voluntarism in relation to personal, program, and community dimensions of sustainable rural aging. Further, it explores ways that older volunteers, organizations that depend on them, and communities experiencing population aging can persevere post-pandemic.

## Introduction

Aging rural communities internationally are persistently challenged to support their older residents most often through an increased reliance on volunteers and volunteer-based programs (Davies, Lockstone-Binney, & Holmes, 2018; Walsh & O'Shea, 2008; Winterton & Warburton, 2021). Indeed, rural aging scholarship over the past two decades has highlighted the pivotal role of volunteers and volunteer-based programs (or "voluntarism") in mitigating the implications associated with population aging (Kaye, 2021; Keating, 2008; Naskali, Harbison, & Begum, 2019; Scharf, Walsh, & O'Shea, 2016; Skinner, Winterton, & Walsh, 2021). A critical component of this work has been demonstrating and delineating how voluntarism is essential to the fabric of rural communities and the lives of rural residents (Lovell, 2009). Not only does voluntarism support older residents aging in place, but it can also act as a catalyst for positive community development, as the interactions with individuals and communities alike help to sustain services within aging rural environments (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Menec & Novek, 2021; Russell, Skinner, & Colibaba, 2021). Nowhere is the need to understand voluntarism more pressing than in under-serviced small towns and rural communities, where the demographic reality of aging rural populations in countries across Europe, North America, and elsewhere means that most rural volunteers are older residents themselves (Davies et al., 2018; Keating, Swindle, & Fletcher, 2011; Walsh & O'Shea, 2008; Winterton & Warburton, 2014).

Research on voluntarism in aging rural communities has highlighted both how older people's experiences and aging communities' dynamics are mediated through voluntarism as a means of integration and marginalization (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Skinner, Joseph, Hanlon, Halseth, & Ryser, 2016). Volunteers supporting older residents are often older themselves and are at risk of burnout, given the downloading of responsibility onto volunteer-based programs (i.e., programs and services that heavily rely on volunteers in their day-to-day operations). However, during times of global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the precarity of voluntarism in rural communities becomes particularly exacerbated (Colibaba, Skinner, & McCrillis, 2021). Recent studies have called for greater attention to the phenomenon of "older voluntarism" (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019), in which individual, older volunteers' activities and voluntary organizations (composed of an older volunteer base) provide essential services and supports to aging rural communities. The prevalence of this phenomenon leads to uncertainty regarding rural service sustainability and concerns for the precarity of older volunteers themselves (Colibaba et al., 2021). Addressing such uncertainty requires consideration of the broader sustainability challenges facing aging rural communities (Markey, 2012) and older voluntarism as a whole, in which the personal (individual volunteers), program (volunteer-based organizations), and community (aging rural places) dimensions of sustainable rural aging (Colibaba, Russell, & Skinner, 2021) can become intertwined and increasingly precarious.

The precarity of older volunteers and aging rural communities and the sustainability of rural services and programs becomes intensified during global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and, therefore, the need to understand older voluntarism becomes even more acute. Media reports and preliminary studies show that social distancing measures, for example, are creating new and often insurmountable challenges in supporting older people and are also providing significant challenges for volunteers themselves (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Gleckman, 2021; Henning-Smith, 2020; Hill, 2020; Ireland, 2020; Muscedere, 2020). During a time of adherence to physical distancing measures in Canada and other countries, it has become critical to understand how older volunteers, volunteer-based programs, and rural communities alike continue to support their aging populations (Meisner et al., 2020). For example, in the Canadian context, Colibaba et al. (2021) examined older voluntarism during the current global pandemic, shedding light on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older voluntarism and in turn on rural aging. In addition, as Herron et al. (2021) demonstrated, studying the experiences of older adults, older volunteers, and aging rural communities have already begun to support contemporary rural aging studies in uncovering the current and future implications for aging in a post-pandemic society.

To address the emergent questions about the implications of the global COVID-19 pandemic for rural aging and older voluntarism, this article reports on a case study undertaken during the first wave of the pandemic in Ontario, Canada. Expanding on existing research in aging rural communities (Colibaba et al., 2021), the present study sought to understand how the pandemic impacted the rural voluntary experience in the early portion of the pandemic. To do so, it drew on a case study that elicited the perspectives of volunteers and administrators of three volunteer-based programs (housing, fire services, and libraries) that support older residents, typical of similar initiatives in rural and small town Canada. The case study provides exploratory insights into the vulnerability and resiliency of rural older volunteers and the adaptability and uncertainty of volunteer-based rural programs during the pandemic. First, the research is situated within the growing body of rural aging, older voluntarism, and COVID-19 scholarship, with a particular emphasis on the Canadian situation. The article concludes by discussing how the findings support an understanding of the precarity of rural aging and the sustainability of older voluntarism in a post-pandemic society.

## Rural Aging, Voluntarism and the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

As in most regions of the world, Canadian population aging occurs predominantly in rural communities that are disproportionately older than their urban counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2017). For the past two decades, rural aging scholars have made persistent calls for greater attention to the complexities of aging in rural communities (Doheny & Milbourne, 2017; Keating, 2008; Milbourne, 2012; Scharf et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2021). Examining the rural aging demographic prompts critical questions about both the suitability and the sustainability of aging in place in rural communities (Keating, 2008). These questions speak to a situation poignantly referred to by Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher (2005, p.137), more than a decade ago, as the "double jeopardy of a vulnerable person in a vulnerable community." Here, older residents' experiences connect to the trajectories of the rural communities in which they age. This double jeopardy has placed increasing responsibility on rural service care providers, volunteers, and both formal and informal caregivers who support aging rural residents (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Skinner, 2014).

In the rural context, voluntarism mediates the implications of population aging for older people's well-being and self-identity, typically through increased social participation (Gieling & Haartsen, 2017; Winterton & Warburton, 2021; Yarker, Heley, & Jones, 2020). Strengthening community vitality and expanding, maintaining, and sustaining rural services, supports, and social capital may increase older voluntarism (Black, Dobbs, & Young, 2015; Lovell, 2009; Sullivan, Ryser, & Halseth, 2014), helping to facilitate aging in place and community development (Davis, Crothers, Grant, Young, & Smith, 2012; Skinner & Hanlon, 2016; Winterton & Warburton, 2014). In turn, older volunteers' positively influencing the sustainability of rural services (for example, health, recreation, housing services) (Skinner & McCrillis, 2019) may lessen the likelihood that older residents become stuck in place, typically for reasons of economic, social, and/or racial disparity, unable to relocate from homes that may no longer be safe, accessible, or appropriate (Torres-Gil & Hofland, 2012).

However, the downloading of responsibility for rural service provision onto the voluntary sector complicates the reality that the rural volunteer pool is itself aging (Warburton, 2015). Increasingly prevalent in rural areas, older voluntarism challenges older residents, organizations and communities alike, creating age-related barriers to participation, absenteeism, and burnout (Davies et al., 2018; Wiersma & Koster, 2013). This process raises critical questions about the uncertain capacity and resilience of aging rural volunteers, the volunteer-based programs they support and, more generally, the rural communities in which they live (Colibaba et al., 2021; Yarker et al., 2020).

Further, there is a growing body of scholarship focused on understanding the sustainability of aging rural communities (Davis et al., 2012; Heley & Jones, 2013; Markey, 2012; McCullough & Bouldin, 2021). Of particular interest is recent research into the

specific question of the sustainability of older voluntarism in aging rural communities that has introduced a framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities surrounding the sustainability of older people supporting aging places. As a means of framing the multiple and reciprocal dimensions of sustainable rural aging, Colibaba et al. (2021) call for a nuanced focus on the personal (individual volunteers), program (volunteer-based organizations), and community (aging rural places) elements of older voluntarism. Emergent questions for research, policy, and practice demonstrate the need to explore the applicability of this multidimensional framework in various geographical locales as well as during times of social change (e.g., a global pandemic). This framework provides a lens through which to consider new empirical findings concerning the sustainability of older voluntarism during and post-pandemic.

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, older people face both heightened vulnerabilities to the virus, and ageism-related stigma (Meisner et al., 2020). Local, national, and international media are raising awareness about the need for isolated older adults to maintain social connections during the pandemic (e.g., Gleckman, 2021; Hill, 2020; Ireland, 2020; Muscedere, 2020). Further, aging scholarship is beginning to understand the impacts of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on the older adult population and their communities (Herron et al., 2021). Although this contemporary literature points to the importance of understanding the impacts of the pandemic on older adults, particularly those in long-term care settings (Behrens & Naylor, 2020; Béland & Marier, 2020; McArthur et al., 2021) and assisted living communities (Dobbs, Petersen, & Hyer, 2020), the need to understand how the pandemic is impacting under-serviced small towns and rural communities is critical, given unique socio-demographic risks. Specifically, rural settings typically have fewer financial resources and limited health care capacity and access to technology. Further, older rural adults may be more susceptible to the challenging personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as an increased risk of isolation (Henning-Smith, 2020).

Social distancing and self-isolation public health measures have created barriers to older people's participation and inclusion in voluntary activities (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Henning-Smith, 2020; Miller, 2020; Monahan, Macdonald, Lytle, Apriceno, & Levy, 2020; Tyrell & Williams, 2020). Rural older adults are at higher risk of social and physical isolation than their urban counterparts because of more dispersed rural settlement patterns, outmigration of younger cohorts (e.g., family members living further afield) and the higher likelihood of living alone (Kaye, 2017). To support these challenges, rural volunteer-based programs offer both support for isolated rural residents as well as opportunities for participation and social networking through volunteering (Warburton, 2015; Warburton & Winterton, 2017). However, very little is known about how the recent physical/social distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic are impacting older rural voluntarism. Taken together, this literature highlights the precarity of older voluntarism and what it means for rural residents, programs, and communities (Colibaba et al., 2021).

To address the important gaps in understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting older rural adults and the perceptions of older adults living through the pandemic (Colibaba et al., 2021; Herron et al., 2021; Meisner et al., 2020; Morrow-Howell, Galucia, & Swinford, 2020), we undertook a "first wave" case study of three volunteer-based programs serving and/or involving older adults in one of Canada's most rapidly aging rural regions. In doing so, the research seeks to contribute to the gap in knowledge about the experiences of volunteers and program administrators as they navigate living and volunteering in aging rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Research Design and Methods

### Case Study of Rural Volunteer-Based Programs

With funding from Trent University's Office of Research and Innovation, and with community interest garnered in supporting and learning from this study, the authors conducted a case study of three rural Ontario volunteer-based programs between June and September 2020. At that time, the Province of Ontario was in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 17, 2020, the Ontario government declared a state of emergency, followed by the restriction of all non-essential travel across the Canada–United States border, the closure of all non-essential businesses and outdoor amenities, mandatory face coverings in public spaces, and restrictions on social gatherings. On May 14, 2020, parts of Ontario entered stage one of its reopening plans, with some businesses starting to open under controlled guidelines, continuing into stages two and three in July 2020. However, because of high numbers of COVID-19 cases in parts of the province, on September 28, 2020, the Ontario government declared it was officially in the second wave of the pandemic. With COVID-19 cases rising with the introduction of variants of concern, on March 15, 2021, Ontario entered the third wave of the pandemic (Government of Ontario, 2021). It was during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that we explored the experiences of volunteers and the ways the first wave impacted older voluntarism in Selwyn Township, Ontario.

The case study was conducted in partnership with three volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township (population 17,060), located on the traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig Anishnaabeg and adjacent to Curve Lake First Nation. Selwyn is one of eight townships in Peterborough County (population 138,239) and lies within the public health jurisdiction of Peterborough Public Health, which is approximately 100 km northeast of Canada's largest city (Toronto). Selwyn Township is comprised of three rural wards that represent typical North American rural typologies: Bridgenorth (rural-recreational, or "cottage country"), Ennismore (agricultural, or "farming"), and Lakefield (small town, or "service centre") (Adams & Taylor, 2009).

The volunteer programs of focus in the case study include the Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, Selwyn Fire Department, and Selwyn Public Library. These programs represent typical volunteer-based initiatives in rural and small town Canada (Ryser & Halseth, 2014) that involve older volunteers who support local older adults (Skinner, 2014). The co-authors had previously existing relationships with the three volunteer programs, facilitating efficient research uptake to meet the calls to build new knowledge about the implications of the COVID-19 global pandemic (Meisner et al., 2020) and the expansion of pre-existing research partnerships to adopt a pandemic-focused lens.

The Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield is a volunteer-run organization mandated to provide affordable co-housing accommodation and companionship for older residents of Lakefield (Abbeyfield Lakefield, 2020). Composed of eight older volunteer board members, their collective goal is to implement a co-housing initiative in the village of Lakefield (for more on Abbeyfield, see International Federation on Ageing, 2021; Kovach, 2021; Rutherford et al., 2018). The organization's volunteers perform activities

such as community fund raising, lobbying, grant writing, and facilitating collaborations with the municipality and with other community partners. Because of the pandemic's physical/social distancing measures, at the time of this research, Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield's volunteer board of directors began to meet monthly through online platforms (e.g., Zoom), and held distanced outdoor meetings; however, in-person restrictions limited their capacity to perform many regular volunteer activities.

The Selwyn Fire Department is a volunteer-based rural fire department that provides emergency services to Selwyn Township. The department consists of five halls within the major township settlements (Bridgenorth, Curve Lake, Ennismore, Lakefield, and Young's Point) and provides fire and emergency medical services, ice and water rescue, search and rescue, and fire prevention and education. The Selwyn Fire Department consists of three full-time township employees (fire chief, fire prevention officer, and administrative assistant) and 92 volunteers across the five halls, many of which are over the age of 65 (Colibaba et al., 2021). During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the department continued to respond to all dispatched emergency calls; however, they increased the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and amended policies to ensure volunteer safety.

The Selwyn Public Library is a volunteer-based rural public library that serves Selwyn Township, with one branch in each of the three wards (Bridgenorth, Ennismore, and Lakefield). It operates based on the work of six full-time township employees and 174 volunteers, almost all of whom are over the age of 65. Volunteers are critical to the operations of the library, performing duties such as staffing the circulation desk, cataloguing, and handling memberships and reservations (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019; Colibaba, Skinner, & Furgal, 2019). At the time of data collection, the Selwyn Public Library's public-facing services ceased until it established curbside pick-up and virtual programming. Without in-person public engagement, the library was limiting the use of volunteers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, paid library staff continued their curbside and virtual operations.

## Participants

With ethics approval from Trent University's Research Ethics Board, the study completed data collection between June and September 2020, during Ontario's first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. To develop the pandemic-focused research scope, we conducted follow-up interviews with participants from our completed studies with the Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield (2017–2018) (Rutherford et al., 2018), the Selwyn Fire Department (2019–2020) (Colibaba et al., 2021), and the Selwyn Public Library (2016–2018) (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019; Colibaba et al., 2019). Using pre-established contact information, we virtually recruited participants, either by telephone or by e-mail. Drawing upon continued rapport and collaborative relationships with each of the three organizations, a researcher contacted all participants from the three previous studies to invite them to participate in an interview. Although the research focuses on aging in rural communities, we contacted all prospective participants, regardless of age, to elicit the perspectives of all volunteers. We recruited just over half ($n = 34$) of the 64 participants from the three previous studies (Abbeyfield, $n = 5$ of 8 original participants; Selwyn Fire Department, $n = 16$ of 24 original participants; Selwyn Public Library, $n = 13$ of 32 original participants). Participants of the study were an average age of 65 years; 62 per cent ($n = 21$) were

male and 38 per cent were female ($n = 13$). Many participants had volunteered with their respective organizations for quite some time, consistent with demographic trends of older rural Canadian volunteers (Cook & Speevak Sladowski, 2013). Three of these participants were administrators (one from each program) and 31 served in strictly volunteer roles.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Because of the public health mandated physical/social distancing measures in place in Ontario at the time of data collection, we conducted interviews either by telephone or by using an online platform (Zoom). Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and covered topics including participants' volunteer experiences during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges facing their volunteer-based program as it navigated the pandemic's sudden and necessary operating changes, and how the pandemic affected their community at large.

With participants' informed consent, we recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Following an iterative collaborative qualitative analysis (ICQA) process established by Russell, Skinner, and Fowler (2019), we reviewed a sample of interview transcripts and collectively developed, tested, and revised a code list. Using deductive reasoning to develop both predetermined and emergent themes, the finalized code manual included five codes (specifically: evolution, community connections, positivity, sustainability of volunteering, and vulnerability). We then coded the transcripts according to the code manual. The first coder assigned code(s) to raw sections of the text, after which the second coder reviewed those pre-coded transcripts, cross-checking and refining any inconsistencies. We then created code summary documents, which included agglomerated text from that code, and detailed writing about emergent key findings (specifically: vulnerability and resiliency for volunteers, and adaptability and uncertainty for programs). Holistically analyzed for emergent, summative, and largely representative key themes (with any exceptions identified), these documents formed the evidence from which the study findings, detailed in the following section, developed. Because of the exploratory nature of the research, the analysis found many unexpected themes, especially the ones relating to how well the older volunteers were coping with the pandemic, given the media's portrayal of seniors. To showcase the resilience of many older adults during the first wave of the pandemic and to shine a light on the experience of rural older adults, we specifically honoured those themes. Implementing a multi-collaborator coding process strengthened the reliability of the findings, with only cross-cutting themes from the final analytic stage being included in the present findings. To maximize the likelihood of anonymity, the analysis of findings identifies participants by their randomly assigned participant numbers and their gender and age cohort demographics; however, with the explicit permission of participants, this article uses community and program names.

## Findings

A series of key themes emerged from the analysis in relation to older volunteers and volunteer-based programs. Findings demonstrated interconnected themes of the vulnerability and resiliency of individual volunteers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the adaptability and sense of uncertainty

within programs as they attempted to sustain their services in the face of provincially mandated pandemic restrictions.

### Vulnerability and Resiliency of Older Volunteers

Individual volunteers from the Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield (Abbeyfield House), the Selwyn Fire Department, and the Selwyn Public Library described a sense of vulnerability associated with their older age during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-existing medical conditions and compromised immune systems enhance the risk, for many, of contracting and experiencing serious complications from the COVID-19 virus. These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by engaging in volunteer activities (e.g., being near other volunteers, gathering for meetings, interacting with the community). For Abbeyfield House volunteers, whose steering committee members are older, they feared that gathering as a group for their monthly meetings would put their members in precarious or compromised situations, as noted by an older volunteer: "Any volunteer organization has to meet the needs of the volunteers and I don't think there is any way we can meet that particular need, simply because it would not be safe for us seniors to get together" (P3, Abbeyfield House, female, early 70s). For fire department volunteers, a vulnerability was felt in their continual in-person interaction with the community when responding to medical calls, putting themselves at risk and creating vulnerability within their families. In reference to the additional risk, a volunteer stated:

> We had to think about doing our job in many different ways and also probably thinking about being that firefighter and coming home. That's something you never put in the forefront. Now, the possibility of bringing something physically home, as opposed to something mental or emotional, is there. (P12, fire department, male, mid 50s)

Social isolation was a vulnerability felt by volunteers during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inability to gather in larger groups cut many off socially from fellow volunteers and their community, as discussed by a library volunteer who was not actively volunteering at the time of the research:

> I miss it terribly. [Volunteering] is very high on the list of things that I miss. I miss the involvement with the greater community and my way of contributing to the greater community. I really feel cut off from that. (P32, library, female, late 60s)

Unable to debrief together following emergency calls, fire department volunteers discussed feeling mentally isolated:

> In the department, we sort of self-regulate how we are doing emotionally by sitting around talking to each other and making sure the guy next to you is okay. Now we can't do that anymore. There are only two people in the truck so we have people in their personal vehicles going right home. They don't even get to see each other. That's a huge challenge for us. (P19, fire department, male, early 60s)

Despite these vulnerabilities, older volunteers displayed a sense of resiliency, as many continued to volunteer (Abbeyfield House and Selwyn Fire Department) or wished to resume volunteering (Selwyn Public Library). Regardless of the risk, a volunteer from the Selwyn Fire Department noted that the need to provide a community service motivated them to continue:

> Even though they keep reminding me how old I am…I guess it's just built right into me…If someone is in need, I want to be there. I go. I

know that we are protected to the last degree. I still love doing the volunteering because you just don't know. It could be your neighbour, relative, or family member. It could be anybody. When they need help, they need help. (P4, fire department, male, late 70s)

For firefighters, at the beginning of the pandemic in Ontario (March 2020), many began the process of self-identification, in which individual volunteers identified personal circumstances that enabled them to volunteer and to what degree, with many deciding to limit their volunteer capacity. However, many individuals often began to volunteer at full capacity later in 2020, between Ontario's first and second waves of the pandemic (June to September). Despite having a pre-existing medical condition, one older volunteer returned to full capacity (e.g., responding to medical calls) during the first wave:

> Originally, I had a little bit of fear about getting [COVID-19]. So that was a bit of a hurdle to overcome. I have got medical conditions and let's just say I shouldn't get the virus. So I was a bit hesitant [to volunteer] at first, but now, not so much. (P7, fire department, male, late 60s)

Volunteers were resourceful in maintaining community connections. Continuing to volunteer in a limited capacity allowed participants, such as one Abbeyfield House volunteer, to maintain social connections and to focus on things other than the pandemic:

> From an isolation and mental point of view, having the Abbeyfield group and communicating with them and working with them is beneficial. I think the benefit of being a part of a board or a volunteer organization, in times of COVID, I think it helps to normalize your day as opposed to focused on just the pandemic. (P13, Abbeyfield House, male, early 60s)

Maintaining connections through distanced outdoor visits or connecting virtually was key to maintaining social connectivity in participants' voluntary organizations. As discussed by another Abbeyfield House volunteer:

> It brought people closer together. Not face-to-face, but by the phone or Zoom. One of the things I do is an exercise class. The group started going to McDonalds after for a coffee but this came to a stop once the restaurants closed. When that happened, I got going with Zoom and I managed to get the rest of the class on it as well. We had a good laugh! That was one good thing and it replaced another good thing. (P1, Abbeyfield House, male, late 80s)

Finally, participants described the rural nature of communities as a source of people's social resiliency during the pandemic, especially for those individuals not actively volunteering, as noted by a library volunteer:

> It's nice to see networks formed with people phoning each other and taking care of each other that way. I think there's been a lot of community spirit with that and people's shopping for people that don't want to go to the grocery store. We did some shopping for some folks that were immunocompromised. So that has been happening and I think it's important in small communities because that is how they survive. (P27, library, female, early 70s)

The nature of rural communities as close-knit environments speaks to the resiliency not only of the older volunteers but also of the community at large. Here, this resiliency was the community helping to support its residents by ensuring it looked after its isolated older individuals, whether it be through social connections

on phone calls, or getting groceries for a neighbour. However, the resiliency was also that of the volunteers and volunteer programs continuing to support their community by offering their services throughout a pandemic.

## *Adaptability and Uncertainty of Volunteer-Based Programs*

Adaptability at the program level helped participants to continue to navigate the changes in volunteering brought on by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. For volunteers, some changes were minor (e.g., increased PPE such as masks) and some were major (e.g., temporary closure of in-person library services). However, volunteers described the importance of continually adapting and evolving with the changes to ensure that their organization would remain active in some capacity. Regarding the changes made at the Selwyn Fire Department, one participant observed:

> These things are changing quite literally on a day-to-day basis as the updates are coming from the health unit and the province. So reacting and adapting to the changes under the umbrella of keeping up to date was a challenge. (P12, fire department, male, mid 50s)

The adaptations and the process of keeping up with the changes made by local, provincial, and federal governments were described as being positive and, at times, a welcomed change that helped the organization move forward in its mandate and realize new organizational goals, as noted by an Abbeyfield House volunteer:

> We have achieved a lot in the six months and even with the Zoom challenges, I think we have done well. If we weren't pushed and we were not in this situation it would have taken us a year to get there. (P13, Abbeyfield House, male, early 60s)

Changing, altering and creating new policies and procedures to keep volunteers safe and healthy exemplified the theme of adaptability, although this varied across programs given diverse mandates. The library stopped all in-person services at its three branches, reopening for curbside pick-up of library material, run by paid staff only. The fire department enhanced PPE for emergency calls, and training moved online. Abbeyfield House switched from meeting in person to meeting on Zoom. Regarding the changes at the fire department, one volunteer observed:

> A complete rethinking and change in protocol and experience both on calls and at the hall as a group of firefighters in the community. The rules change, of course, for everybody. Many different areas suddenly become things that we had to think a lot about because we can't stop doing our job. (P12, fire department, male, mid 50s)

The use of technology was common among all three programs as a way to adapt to the changes brought on by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fire department conducted bi-weekly training via online platforms with all of their volunteers, the library implemented programming such as virtual book club and trivia nights, and Abbeyfield House switched from in-person to Zoom meetings. In reference to Abbeyfield House's switch to using Zoom, one older volunteer stated:

> I hear everyone Zooming these days – the council, the provincial government. So I thought if they can Zoom, we can Zoom. We have had three Zoom meetings so far. I've been pressing for a Zoom presentation to council and I finally got the group to agree to do that. (P1, Abbeyfield House, male, late 80s)

Abbeyfield House volunteers in particular described issues presented by the limited rural Internet connectivity that challenged a continuity of business from in-person to online:

> The technology aspect of it was not a big challenge. Other than our Wi-Fi out here at the lake which is not always the best. So that was a thing. If anything, it's not so much as the aspect of applying the technology but more so rural internet which has challenges. We are all rural and the internet is spotty out here. Especially with weather issues. (P13, Abbeyfield House, male, early 60s)

Older volunteers and the public were at times challenged by the rapid switch to online, as discussed by a library participant:

> In terms of challenges, it was all of our programming – trying to move as much of that online. I feel it went pretty well, but then again, technology challenges and an older community…so we try to help them as much as we can and serve our community. (P6, library, female, mid 30s)

Volunteering during COVID-19 represents the next phase of voluntary adaptation observed in Selwyn Township. According to many participants, volunteering would never be the same (e.g., there would be the establishment of a new normal). Personal safety, for many, was at the forefront of making decisions during and following the pandemic, especially the safety and vulnerability of the volunteer base. With reference to how to manage older volunteers post-pandemic, a participant from the library noted:

> We will bring back the volunteers when we feel it's safe to do so. We have thought of bringing back a few for behind-the-scenes work like putting back quarantined items on the shelf, helping out the curbside pickup and the holds that people place online…until everything is streamlined, we won't bring them back. Their health and safety is obviously a priority. (P6, library, female, mid 30s)

The attitude toward volunteering, for many, changed following the pandemic's onset. What was once an enjoyable experience, was now described as "not being fun anymore" (P22, fire department, male, mid 60s), as the COVID-19 pandemic forced volunteers to either stop volunteering completely or to do so in a modified way in which they were unable to engage with the elements they enjoyed most about volunteering (e.g., the social interaction with other volunteers). Speaking to the change in atmosphere with the fire department, a volunteer stated:

> It's just fun to be on the department in general. It definitely feels less fun since COVID. It really took away from the fun things we do and the social interactions we have. The fire department is a social club in a way but we can't do that now. (P9, fire department, male, mid 20s)

Volunteers working at limited capacity expressed mixed emotions about returning to their routine volunteer activities. Some missed their fellow volunteers and community connection and were excited about returning to full capacity, as noted by an older library volunteer, who was not actively volunteering:

> I am really looking forward to it. We will be wearing our masks so I will certainly feel quite safe there. So I am not worried about it at all. It will be sort of after the pandemic where we are safe not wearing masks and having the usual capacity. I am looking forward to that but that's not going to happen for a while. (P27, library, female, early 70s)

Others, especially those individuals who were not actively volunteering when data were collected, described feelings of anxiety and apprehension about volunteering during a pandemic, citing safety procedures and policies and the fear of contracting COVID-19 from fellow volunteers:

> I do miss it and I will be glad when it starts again. I don't know when that's going to be and when they start opening up the library. I might be a little bit nervous at first because I have been careful. (P5, library, female, early 80s)

Although the three volunteer-based programs adapted to the changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario, the unknown of what post-pandemic voluntarism will be in aging rural communities remained at the forefront for some older volunteers. However, these findings highlight the vulnerability and the resiliency of older volunteers and the adaptability and uncertainty of volunteer-based programming. Communities and programs alike continued to evolve, likely ensuring their sustainability during the ever-changing COVID-19 climate.

## Discussion

Through interviews with volunteers and administrators of three volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township, Ontario, this article explores the implications of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on "older voluntarism" in aging rural communities. Expanding on studies with the participants before the pandemic (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019; Colibaba et al., 2021; Colibaba et al., 2019; Rutherford et al., 2018), the COVID-19-focused research presented in this case study revealed that volunteers demonstrated vulnerability and resiliency during the pandemic, and that the programs showcased adaptability and uncertainty towards changes brought on by the pandemic to ensure rural service sustainability.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has created specific challenges for older populations (Reynolds, 2020), the resiliency demonstrated by the volunteers at Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, Selwyn Fire Department, and Selwyn Public Library shows that rural volunteers are debunking the narrative of vulnerability associated with older adults during the pandemic. As demonstrated in the case study, rural volunteers are challenging the notion of older adults' remaining isolated, lonely, and vulnerable throughout the pandemic (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2020; Lind, Bluck, & McAdams, 2021) by maintaining social connections through technology, distanced visits, or continuing to volunteer despite the risks, to counter feelings of social isolation, thereby ensuring that local community services are sustained. This resiliency speaks to the key themes in the literature on the nature of rural communities, often remaining resilient themselves during times of service restructuring by using voluntarism as a way of mediating the implications of population aging (Joseph & Skinner, 2012; Winterton & Warburton, 2021). Joseph and Skinner (2012) point to the transformative potential of voluntarism in aging rural communities, in which the local dynamics of voluntarism create positive community change (see also Skinner & Hanlon, 2016). The findings show that even during a time of global crisis, the resiliency and adaptability of individual volunteers and volunteer programs contribute to the dynamics of voluntarism, changing in order to continue to best support their aging populations. This sustainability of older voluntarism during the COVID-19 pandemic speaks to the nature of volunteering and the ways in which it aids in

supporting healthy aging in rural communities (Gieling & Haartsen, 2017; Winterton & Warburton, 2021; Yarker et al., 2020), in a time when older adults are facing the risk of heightened social isolation.

In terms of implications, although this article examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experiences of older volunteers and volunteer-based programs in Selwyn Township, Ontario, these findings may not represent the experiences of the township as a whole, nor of all of its residents, nor within other rural community locations across Canada or internationally. Importantly, however, the present findings illustrate the ways that a diverse set of volunteer initiatives catering to an aging rural population are able to maintain levels of personal, program, and community sustainability throughout a global crisis. As noted earlier, recent research is raising questions about how to better understand the sustainability of older voluntarism (Colibaba et al., 2021; Yarker et al., 2020), which is an important line of discussion in the case study findings. Here, to understand how it can be maintained in post-pandemic aging societies in Canada and internationally, this article turns to the sustainability framework by Colibaba et al. (2021). The framework illustrates the multidimensional personal, program, and community levels of older voluntarism. To elaborate, personal sustainability is the ability for individuals (older adults) to continue volunteering long-term, program sustainability is how the volunteer-based program can last into the long term, and community sustainability acts as one of the outcomes of older voluntarism, in which services and supports that may otherwise be lacking continue to be present within the community.

The personal sustainability of older volunteers in a post-pandemic society is determined by the ability of volunteer-based programs to continue to utilize volunteers in their operations and how they are able to manage volunteers' attitudes towards volunteering during and after the pandemic. Present findings demonstrate that having a supportive program that is willing to modify its policies and procedures in terms of health and safety strengthened volunteers' positive attitudes towards continuing to volunteer post-pandemic. Although the age of many of the volunteers could perhaps compromise their personal sustainability, changes at the program level such as the increased use of Zoom meetings and enhanced PPE, and in the case of the library, limiting the use of volunteers, made individuals feel that their program had their personal safety in mind, ensuring that they were protected from contracting COVID-19 from other volunteers and the public. These positive attitudes allowed volunteers to feel excited about and eager to continue (or start) volunteering during and after the pandemic, keeping them personally sustainable (wanting to volunteer), which ensured that their program more broadly remained active within the community.

Program sustainability, through which the volunteer-based program can endure post-pandemic, is integral not only for the individual volunteer but also for the broader community. The levels of adaptation during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that the findings have demonstrated potentially point to strong post-pandemic sustainability. As revealed in the findings, Abbeyfield House Society of Lakefield, the Selwyn Fire Department, and the Selwyn Public Library all modified their services in some regard, either through adjusting services and/or creating new policies. These adaptations seen within the three programs allowed many volunteers to overcome their uncertainty regarding the risk of volunteering during and after the pandemic, ensuring the sustainability of the program through a robust volunteer base.

Additionally, these modifications allowed the programs to adapt to the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic and allowed their operations to continue in some capacity, maintaining community services and often allowing volunteering to continue, albeit in a modified manner. For example, the three organizations all began to utilize technology more in their operations. Although it was described as challenging at times, the use of virtual platforms and placing a heavier reliance on technology in their organization allowed for the program to remain sustainable through the first wave of the pandemic, when they were able to continue to provide services (housing, emergency response, and library) to their community.

Maintaining community sustainability ensures that services and supports that would otherwise be lacking remain, allowing older residents to continue aging in place. Community sustainability is intrinsically tied to individual and program sustainability, through resilience and adaptability at both levels. These attitudes and actions portrayed by volunteers and programs alike, through their personal resiliency to remain volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic and through the programs' abilities to adapt to the changes brought on by the pandemic, help to ensure the sustainability of older voluntarism as a whole in their community, ensuring a place for older rural adults to volunteer and by extension provide services that help support those rural residents aging in place, such as housing, and emergency and library services. However, to ensure a more sustainable approach, the community and its residents must also adapt to the new policies implemented by the organizations (e.g., increased PPE for staff and volunteers), and ways of implementing services (e.g., curbside pickup of library materials). The reciprocal relationship observed in the case study among individuals, programs, and communities can ensure the sustainability of post-pandemic voluntarism in aging rural communities.

## Concluding Comments

To advance the state of knowledge about older voluntarism and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults and rural communities, this article explored the experiences of three volunteer-based programs in a rural Ontario township during Canada's first wave of the global pandemic. By understanding the experiences of volunteers and program administrators, the ways in which older voluntarism was able to persevere through a global pandemic has shed light on the sustainability of post-pandemic older voluntarism. Findings show that what is known about older voluntarism during a global crisis is that vulnerability and resiliency, and adaptability and uncertainty may work in tandem as a way to mediate the impacts of the pandemic. Older volunteers and volunteer programs overcome the risks and precarity of voluntarism during the pandemic to ensure that personal, program, and community sustainability remains resilient in a post-pandemic society.

By exploring a deeper understanding of older voluntarism in aging rural communities during a global pandemic, the research showcases the resiliency and adaptability of individuals, programs, and communities alike. As Henning-Smith (2020) described, older rural residents face unique risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the risks are not equally distributed among rural older adults (i.e., racialized and marginalized populations of older adults). Additionally, following Herron et al. (2021), there is a need for further gerontological research into the diverse

experiences of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada. Future research into the experiences and perspectives of marginalized older adults will help to identify the nuances of rural aging and more specifically older voluntarism and whether and how it is sustained in rural communities in Canada and internationally. Specifically, this includes how older voluntarism is conceptualized, actualized, and experienced in areas with varying health and safety protocols and different degrees of interaction with the pandemic. Of particular importance will be additional case studies of volunteer-based programs across the continuum of the voluntary sector (e.g., social services, health, and recreation) to provide a complementary yet diverse perspective to the ones explored in this article. Although the sustainability framework is useful for illustrating the ways for volunteers and volunteer-based programs to persevere post-pandemic, a full accounting for the application of this framework is not possible in a data set where the pandemic's physical distancing measures limit volunteering. Further exploration into a range of volunteer-based programs is critical for building an understanding of the diverse ways that individuals volunteer and the ways that volunteer-based programs are adapting to the changes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, research into the precarity and sustainability of older voluntarism in the successive waves of COVID-19 as well as post-pandemic will help to illuminate the longer-term implications of the global pandemic on rural older volunteers and volunteer-based programs, and the effects on the sustainability of services in aging rural communities, potentially providing a sense of hope for older voluntarism in the years to come.

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