

‘There’s No Place Like Home’: The Experience of Metis Aging in Place Summary Report—2012

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What is “Aging in Place”?

The term *aging in place* refers to the ability of an individual to remain in their home and community as they age. Being able to stay in your own home often results in better health over the long term and can reduce long-term health care costs for society. However, there are challenges for those aging in place, including reduced access to care and support services, unsafe living conditions, and living in isolation.

Why did we do this study?

This research began because Metis citizens felt it was important to better understand the experience of aging in place for the Metis population in Manitoba, and to become informed of any unmet needs existing for Metis seniors currently aging in place.

What did we want to find out?

The main questions we sought to answer by conducting this research were:

1. What formal and informal resources exist to support aging in place?
2. What other resources and supports are needed?
3. How can the community impact programs and services to assist aging in place?

Who participated in this study?

Metis citizens aged 60+ living in rural communities in the Northwest MMF Region were asked to share their experiences with aging in place. As well, informal caregivers of Metis seniors were asked to share their stories.

What did we find?

Metis seniors in the Northwest MMF Region thought that there really is “no place like home”. They said that staying in their rural communities was best for their health, well-being, and for their families and communities. Many Metis seniors said it was more affordable to live there, that they had good memories of living there, and that many of their friends and family were still close by. They said that there were a lot of things to do to stay busy, including volunteering, if they were able to.

“Well just being able to remain in your own home culture, it’s what you grew up with. It’s what your life is. It is quality of life”.

—Metis Senior



Although Metis seniors expressed the preference to stay in their home and community, they also spoke about several challenges they faced while aging in place. The main issues Metis seniors discussed as barriers to aging in place involved:

- distance to basic services and amenities;
- lack of an affordable and reliable form of transportation;
- lack of appropriate home care services;
- difficulty accessing community-based services and physician services;
- lack of locally available and affordable food, gas, and personal supplies;
- high costs associated with upgrading homes to increase safety and mobility;
- difficulty acquiring assistance with home and yard maintenance; and
- a shortage of social activities for seniors.

Many of the issues voiced by Metis seniors and their informal and formal caregivers were associated with rurality. For example, the distance to basic supplies like food, gas, health supplies, and physician or other health services was seen as a significant barrier to aging in place for rural seniors. Compounding this issue is the fact that some seniors do not own their own vehicle, cannot drive, cannot afford gas or vehicle insurance, cannot afford public transportation, or are unable to access transportation at all.

Additionally, road access into these rural communities also creates barriers. Travelling to other communities to access necessary supplies and services is challenging at times due to snow-covered or flooded roads—an issue that also can prevent emergency or itinerant health services to reach people in the community. This is particularly concerning during times of emergency or when someone has run out of essential medications.

Although home care services were considered a benefit to many seniors aging in place, Metis seniors also felt that home care workers should be allowed to assist them with a broader scope of things. They also expressed a desire to have local workers—not only because they would be more readily available, but also because they might understand the comprehensive needs of local Metis seniors better.

With respect to housing and personal safety, in many cases Metis seniors simply cannot afford to make the upgrades to their houses that would allow them to age safely in their own home (e.g., ramps, grab bars, special bathtubs, etc.). Participants also mentioned the need for help with general maintenance such as lawn cutting, snow shoveling, window washing, and cutting and hauling firewood. A shortage of young people in the community to help with these things was noted. Furthermore, personal safety and security from crimes such as arson, thefts, and vandalism was also an area of great concern to Metis seniors. It is believed that Metis seniors could help to ameliorate these issues by mentoring youth and teaching them to respect others.

“Stay young at heart and if your body doesn’t do it, then you just sit there and laugh about it”.

—Metis Senior

An important finding from the research was the recognition that Metis culture is alive and inherent in many rural communities, and that it is sustained by, and provides a strong support for, Metis seniors. Metis culture is intimately connected to the land base in which it is situated, and the two cannot be separated. This highlights the importance of aging in place for Metis seniors with respect to maintaining cultural continuity and community ties. However, Metis seniors worried that they would have few people to pass their traditions on to, since so many young people leave their communities. They felt it was important for them to mentor local youth and to teach them about respect and the Metis culture.

Metis seniors told us that governance—or, having a voice—was as important as access to health services and community resources. They expressed desire to have a voice in their community but also in having control over the course of their lives, and that it was sometimes difficult to do so.

We also spoke with caregivers (informal and formal) of Metis seniors, and many of the issues they identified paralleled the issues Metis seniors brought up. However, there was some difference in perspective between what formal caregivers believed and what Metis seniors stated with respect to accessing health programs and services.



For example, formal caregivers thought that all community members had access to health facilities on neighbouring reserve land, but Metis people do not have access to these federal facilities—instead they must access provincial health care programs and services which may mean travelling up to two hours to seek medical care.

We found that informal caregivers provided very important services that help seniors stay in their homes. These included driving seniors to medical appointments, making sure they got proper medications, helping with finances, and spending quality time with them. Although they felt their role was stressful at times, informal caregivers loved being able to help their family members and felt it was very important that they be able to stay in their homes as long as possible.

“The other advantage is for their own personal satisfaction. You know people want to be at home. There aren’t a lot of people who I come into contact with who don’t want to live in their homes any more. I can’t think of very many times when people really wanted to live in a different place...so I think people are happier staying in their home and if we can honour that by keeping them safe living in their home, financially it would be an advantage, and it would be an advantage to their spirit”.
—Metis Caregiver



Summary

Through discussions with Metis seniors in rural communities, and their formal and informal caregivers, many important issues were brought to light regarding Metis seniors' experiences with aging in place. The major supports and resources Metis seniors said they needed were:

- Improved access to community-based health programs and services;
- Enhanced home care services;
- Affordable and convenient transportation;
- Better access to affordable, nutritious food, gas, and personal care products;
- Assistance with general home maintenance; and
- Organized social activities directed at seniors.

Meeting these needs would help Metis seniors age in place, healthily and safely, in their home and in their community. Despite the barriers they currently face to age in place, Metis seniors seemed very happy living in their homes and participating in their communities—a testament to their resilience.

With improvements to the accessibility and affordability of services required to help Metis seniors age in place, they will be able to remain in their homes much longer, contributing an essential cultural and social leadership role in their community for years to come.

“I don’t mind getting old at all”.

—Metis Senior

Where do we go from here?

Our Regional Knowledge Networks, which include the Manitoba Metis Federation and Regional Health Authority members, are currently working together to adapt Manitoba Health programs and services to better meet the needs of Metis people. These Knowledge Networks will use the results of this study to determine priority areas for improving the health of Metis seniors in Manitoba.

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