

OUR STORY BEGINS IN 1954



1954 - 1957

In 1954, the City of Winnipeg was awakened to the needs of its most senior citizens. New developments in medicine had begun extending people's life spans and increased the number of people living into their sixties and up – including a large ratio who came through the depression years when making or saving money was difficult.

The Welfare Council of Greater Winnipeg undertook a major study of this new, older population. Prompted in part by the fact that Winnipeg's aged population had almost doubled since 1941, the study was financed by The Winnipeg Foundation and was the first survey of its kind in any Canadian city. It was called Age and Opportunity, and became the Agency's namesake.

This survey found that two thirds of all older adults in the region were living on incomes considered marginal or less. Interviewers reported on poverty, loneliness, and poor health in Winnipeg's older adult population.

“Some people spoke of being unable to afford glasses and hearing aids,” wrote one interviewer, “and that this cut them off from the world and likely produced the loneliness which was often noted.”

These issues were very publicly underscored by an investigative series entitled “Life on Forty” for the The Winnipeg Tribune. As a basis for the series, a reporter became a voluntary pensioner – living on \$40 for one month in winter of 1955. The report described in detail the lifestyle of many pensioners trying to get by on this very small monthly income, including a dreary rooming house, which held so many Winnipeg older adults.

The reporter-cum-pensioner spent most of his time in his room, lit only by one window and a single suspended electric light bulb. Eventually he ran out of money, and had to beg on the streets. This reporter's account of what it was like to live as a senior citizen drew increased attention to the issues faced by Winnipeg's older adults and accentuated the need for this 'Age and Opportunity' report.

The report was published in 1956, and on May 8, 1957 the first Age and Opportunity Bureau opened at 368 Colony Street.

The "Age and Opportunity" report made a number of momentous recommendations, including the development of a greater Winnipeg Age Centre – a place which was to become a hub for all older adults to access information and referrals, counselling services, and education and recreation programs. The bureau's activities in these first years were quite reflective of the concerns raised by the Welfare Council's study, giving the organization a mandate to research and advocate for older adults, as well as provide direct services such as the Friendly Visiting Program.

The Age and Opportunity Bureau became convinced early on there was a very urgent need for some type of day centre for seniors living in downtown Winnipeg. "Many have withdrawn from society," the President's Report in 1959 noted, "while many others spend much of their time sitting in the out-patients department of the general hospital, in the city welfare department and in our department stores, just to see people."

By 1960, the Age and Opportunity Bureau had proved its value. The opening of the first Winnipeg Senior Citizen's Day Centre was held on October 24, 1960 at 590 Notre Dame Avenue. Although the bureau was instrumental in its creation, this first centre was independent and run by the seniors themselves – a precedent

that has influenced the development of Age & Opportunity programs and services to date.

The bureau continued to expand its repertoire of services, and in the summer of 1961, offered its first touring program. Over 1,000 older adults enjoyed trips to Portage la Prairie, Morden, Falcon Lake, Grand and Winnipeg Beaches, Selkirk Park and Kenora. By 1965, Age and Opportunity was poised to open its second day centre at 472 Selkirk Avenue in North Winnipeg. The Selkirk Centre was the result of several years of study and preparation.

While this first decade for Age and Opportunity came in with a bang, it ended with some rather taxing news. In 1966, The City of Winnipeg terminated its arrangement of providing staff to the two senior centres and instead provided municipal block funding. With less money and the added tasks of administration, hiring, and budgeting for all services, this was indeed a big challenge to the bureau's pioneers.

1957 - 1966

1967 - 1976

Despite the challenges faced in 1966 when the city terminated its arrangement with the Age and Opportunity Bureau, its role in service delivery grew dramatically as it entered its second decade. Eight new centre locations were realized in this period of dramatic growth, and these centres were moved and reestablished numerous times as the bureau struggled to find the most fitting sites, which would be most of service to the largest number of people.

Shirley Busby, the director of the housing development on Stradbroke – one popular and long-standing Age and Opportunity location – remembers the excitement and growth of this time. “It was a very busy centre when I came. I don’t think a day went by where it wasn’t hustling and bustling. It was a real social gathering place,” she recalls. “I’ll bet you there was always 50 or more people in the centre.”

The Senior Centres weren’t the only thing expanding: in 1967, the bureau hired its first

Friendly Visiting Coordinator. Matching volunteers with lonely seniors, this flagship program had been a long standing service offered by the Agency, and was experiencing unprecedented growth in the late 1960s. Negotiation began between the Department of Health and Social Development and the bureau, and by 1975 an agreement was reached, allowing the Agency to extend the Friendly Visiting Program.

It was also during this heady time that the Age and Opportunity Bureau established its role as the link between Winnipeg’s senior organizations, and became highly regarded in the community. Age and Opportunity took this time to build a network of concerned citizens, and because of these efforts, other wonderful organizations – such as Creative Retirement Manitoba and the Manitoba Society of Seniors – were able to hit the ground running. The bureau demonstrated its knack for creating alliances in 1967, when it hosted a conference that brought together seniors representing clubs, churches and the public to share their problems and learn about all available community resources. The next year, the Senior Citizens Coordinating Council was established, and was intended as a vehicle through which older persons could take an active part in developing their own special programs, express their opinions and solve their own problems.

“These were the Agency’s golden years,” remembers Dianne Frost, who started out as a Friendly Visiting Volunteer in 1980. “It was a really good team – lots of camaraderie, lots of support, fabulous leadership.”

While the late 60s and early 70s marked the most fruitful growth period for senior centres, the focus shifted inward in the 80s, and the Agency was thoughtfully evaluated and realigned. Participation in the formation of a national organization of senior centres led the bureau to conclude that volunteers and members should be even more involved in the operation of the Agency; in 1978 the first ever Volunteer Coordinator was hired to provide support for the combined 400 senior centre volunteers.

All not-for-profit organizations struggle to maintain and increase levels of funding, and Age and Opportunity was no exception. Faced with the closure of the Ellen and Elgin Senior Centre in 1980, the focus was shifted to improve the financial stability of the Agency. However, it is these small crises that often provoke the most creative solutions: in 1982, the bureau established a subsidiary company, Age and Opportunity Enterprises, Ltd., as a travel service agency and, more importantly, a fundraising opportunity. The board also made the important decision to expand and strengthen the nutrition and meal programs

at the centres – a decision which paid off in spades. By 1983, service usage increased in all areas, and the number of people participating in congregate meals skyrocketed by 40%; over 24,000 meals were served in that year alone.

By the mid-1980s, the Agency began to broaden its focus. Noticing the diversity in the community, staff started to work toward meeting their needs. Older southeast Asian refugees represented approximately half of the 525 members of the West End Centre, and at the same time, staff at the Smith Street Senior Centre began work with a group of older adults from Winnipeg’s Punjabi community.

“We provided daily life skills,” remembers Abdul Salim, who was one of the Social Workers involved with the project. “The values were different in Canadian society [than in India]. We were trying to bridge the gap; the newcomers had all kinds of questions and curiosities, which they could not get answered from anywhere but Age and Opportunity – there was no stigma attached to the Agency’s services, as there would be with welfare services. They felt safe and weren’t judged for asking simple questions, like how to dress for a Canadian winter.”

The fourth decade started off with a bang: at Age & Opportunity's 30th anniversary celebrations, the Agency received the Mayor's Volunteer Service Award on behalf of its 600 dedicated volunteers, honouring their extraordinary collective efforts and giving of their time, talent and energy to improve the well-being of their fellow citizens. Their perseverance and devotion was obvious when, earlier that year, a devastating fire swept through the Smith Street Senior Centre. The efforts of volunteers, community partners, members and staff allowed Age & Opportunity's programs to continue in a variety of community locations in the midst of clean-up and rebuilding efforts.

Age & Opportunity also began to more studiously court public opinion in the 90s – training volunteers to give public lectures on the issues facing their community, and openly releasing educational videos for seniors and community professionals. The series of videos targeted some very relevant issues from pre-retirement planning, to multi-disciplinary approaches for dealing with elder abuse. In fact, elder abuse emerged as a prominent issue for Age & Opportunity, Inc. – and for the community – in the late 1980s and early 90s. Agency staff were interested in researching this troubling phenomenon, and as such, conducted a literature review, along with a series of inter-Agency meetings to discuss the issue. This led

to a model for an elder abuse resource centre, which was officially developed in 1990. The unfolding of this resource centre no doubt encouraged the Agency to produce a research report in 1992: "The Needs Assessment of Ethnic Newcomer Seniors in Winnipeg."

Just three years later, in 1996, the now-flourishing Elder Abuse Resource Centre partnered with a number of other Winnipeg organizations to train service providers working with domestic abuse; special attention was paid to Winnipeg's immigrant communities to ensure that there was community awareness about available resources. The United Way enabled Agency staff to launch a large multi-cultural project in 1996, reaching out to new seniors in the East Indian and Vietnamese communities – offering English training and Social Workers to describe the nuances of life in Canada.

Moving to a new country is a very challenging life experience. A man in one support group had quite the surprise the first time he tried to make tea when he arrived in Canada: "When the kettle started boiling, he put the tea bags into the kettle directly, poking his fingers in to push them down," chuckled Salim.

"We really can take simple life skills for granted."

It is fitting that in the year 2000 – the international year of the volunteer – Age & Opportunity volunteers contributed 20,780 hours to improve the quality of life for seniors in the community, akin to nearly \$130,000 worth of paid labour. Aside from the tremendous continuing volunteerism, this decade in Age & Opportunity's history focused on strengthening the Agency in several other key areas, including programming, communications, outreach and fiscal stability.

By way of programming, much time and attention was given to the Agency's language programs; the English as a Second Language (ESL) program grew in 1998 to serve over 300 newcomer seniors. A new volunteer program was initiated based on this influx of members called Language Partners, pairing English speaking senior volunteers with immigrant seniors in ESL programs to help participants learn the language and transition to Canadian life. By 2000, clients came from 21 different language backgrounds, and special support services were offered including childcare for grandparents, and transportation provided by volunteer drivers.

Community outreach was another ongoing priority for the Agency. With active living outreach in the St. Boniface and St. Vital communities, and a continually expanding SafetyAid

program, the Agency was focused on using community systems and supports.

“Instead of always bringing people into our buildings,” said Theresa Jachnycky, former CEO, “we wanted to bring the programs to the people.”

There was an essential link between effective communications and continued relevance for all social service agencies. To this end, Age & Opportunity revamped its web site, launched the A & O In Touch newsletter for members, and introduced the Focal Point newsletter for the community.

Another major accomplishment was the development of the Agency-wide Program and Services Guide. Previously, every single senior centre produced its own calendar, but the new guide gave members a cross-sectional view of what was happening all over the city.

The most creative communications project of the decade was the CJOB Seniors Radio Show. Hosted by now-CEO Amanda Macrae, 22 talk shows were produced that dealt with issues of interest to Winnipeg's older adults from the aging drivers, to vitamin, food and drug interactions.

2008 - 2017

The Agency's most recent decade marked innovative new initiatives and projects that enabled the Agency to position itself as a trailblazer in the delivery of specialized programs and services for older adults.

Many of these programs and services are the first of their kind in Canada.

The Agency is approached on a regular basis to provide training regarding program delivery on both a national and international level!

2008

- The Agency's mandate was expanded to include the Province of Manitoba.
- The Agency expanded the Safe Suite program to offer three locations across the city.
- The first Annual Housing & Active Lifestyles Expo was launched, and it celebrated its 10th anniversary on May 17, 2017.
- The Be a Santa to a Senior Program was launched in partnership with Home Instead Senior Care. In December 2016, the program delivered gifts to over 1,300 isolated older adults living in Winnipeg.



2008 - 2017

2009- 2012

- In 2009, Age & Opportunity invested in research and consultation to develop a brand focused on specialized services for older adults. Three years later, this exercise resulted in the Agency's new identity, **A & O: Support Services for Older Adults Inc.**
- Alongside the introduction of a new name and look came the fond farewell to the long established community-based centres. This gradual phasing out gave A & O a fresh perspective and renewed focus on the Agency's foundational pillars: safety and security; social engagement; and counselling.
- The Agency transformed its traditional service delivery model and positioned itself as a specialized service provider, responding to the needs of older Manitobans.

- The Senior Centre Without Walls program was launched, which is the first program of its kind in Canada. The program has over 6,000 callers who participate in programming on an annual basis.
- In partnership with Klinik Community Health Centre, A & O launched the 24-hour Seniors Abuse Support Line.
- The Agency delivered Canada's first ever Hoarding Disorder conference.

2016

- Michelle Ranville, Manager Community Services, received the YM-YWCA Women of Distinction Award in her category for Health, Wellness and Fitness.
- Due to popular demand, the Agency delivered a second workshop on Hoarding Disorder led by Dr. Michael Tompkins.

2008 - 2017

In 2016, Statistics Canada reported there are now more Canadians over the age of 65 than children and youth 14 and under. This data places a necessary emphasis on the growing needs of our aging population. As our population steadily ages, these needs simply cannot be ignored.

As A & O celebrates its 60th year, the Agency looks hopefully towards a future focused on proactive efforts to ensure healthy, happy, successful aging.

“There are many chapters that we live as older adults,” says Macrae. “Through the delivery of innovative programs and services we’re providing Manitobans with the tools and supports they need to age successfully.”



CELEBRATING 60 YEARS

AOSUPPORTSERVICES.CA

A photograph of two elderly women sitting at a table, smiling. The woman on the left has short, curly white hair and is wearing glasses and a light-colored jacket. The woman on the right has short, wavy grey hair and is wearing a red and blue patterned top. They appear to be at a social event, possibly a community gathering or a meal. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and tables.

EMPOWERING OLDER MANITOBANS