NORC Ambassadors Program

Sustaining Workbook

NORC Innovation Centre at UHN

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Introduction to the Workbooks

About the Ambassadors Program Workbooks

Many older adults want to live in communities where neighbours support one another as they age. At the NORC Innovation Centre (NIC), we support local, neighbour-led aging in place groups that help people stay connected, share resources, and support one another in simple but meaningful ways.

Aging in place groups can look different from one community to another. Some focus on neighbourly help with everyday tasks like taking out the garbage, while others focus on social connection, sharing information about health services, or activities that promote health and wellbeing.

This series of workbooks is designed to help community members start and sustain their own aging in place groups. It walks through the key steps and resources developed for the NORC Ambassadors Program at UHN in a clear, practical way.

The NORC Ambassadors Program supports community members who want to take a leadership role in shaping age-inclusive communities. Working with the NORC Innovation Centre, neighbours, and local community service providers, Ambassadors co-create activities and resources that help residents live well and age in their own homes.

The workbooks are organized around four seasons of the program:

- **CONNECTING**
- **STARTING**
- **DOING**
- **SUSTAINING**

All of the content in these workbooks was co-created and refined with residents who have worked with us to implement the NORC Ambassadors Program in their own communities.

Who are these workbooks for?

Anyone interested in:

- Starting an aging in place initiative; or
- Learning how to grow and sustain the one you have.

What's a NORC?

A **Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC)** refers to a building, , or neighbourhood, or larger geographic area that has naturally become home to a significant number of older adults. For example, a NORC could be a multi-unit building, such as a condominium, housing co-op, or apartment building. It could also be an urban neighbourhood of single family homes or a rural town with a high density of older adults (e.g., Blind River, Ontario).

Unlike retirement homes or long-term care facilities, NORCs are not intentionally designed for older adults. Instead, they are intergenerational communities where many older adults live independently. The term "NORC" was introduced in the early 1980s as a way to describe the growing number of these communities.

This natural concentration of older adults presents a valuable opportunity to create NORC programs that provide services and support directly within these communities. Whether you consider your community a NORC or not, any building, neighbourhood, or town can help people to age in place where they already live and where they want to stay.

How to Use These Workbooks

Given that each of your communities are completely unique, you may choose to use the information in each workbook in a way that best suits your needs.

The program is organized by: CONNECTING, STARTING, DOING, and SUSTAINING. For each, there are different topics to consider, as well as helpful tools and templates. The workbooks will provide context for each topic, enabling you to determine how and when it might be relevant as a step in your initiative. With each topic, you will also be directed to the pertinent tools that detail how to put that topic into action in your communities.

These topics and tools are modular in design. This means you may start where you want, and use only what you need when you need it.

Key features in every workbook

For ease of use, each workbook will feature:

- **For Established Ambassadors icon:** highlights sections of information that might be relevant to more established aging in place groups (i.e., those that have been active for a year or more).
- **Reflection questions:** to help set the intention of the season in a way that reflects our shared program values and directs you to the appropriate workbook for where you are currently at.
- **Stories:** real-world examples from the older adult leaders in our communities to contextualize the activities of the season.
- **"Get the Tools" Toolbox:** easy-to-find templates and tools to help you put your aging in place plans into action.
- **Bright Spots:** a moment to reflect as a group and recognize a positive new learning or moment growth.

Join us at NORC Talks

Together with these workbooks, the NORC Innovation Centre's monthly NORC Talks provides additional support for starting and maintaining an aging in place initiative. NORC Talks is a monthly meeting series to not only learn the steps of our Ambassadors Program, and build an aging in place initiative, but also to share learnings with those who have done it before, and take away tools to do it yourself. Monthly NORC Talks focuses on a topic, following the flow of the program's seasons, but you can always refer to the workbooks to access the full set of tools and stories for each season.

About the NORC Innovation Centre

The NORC Innovation Centre (NIC), based at University Health Network (UHN) in Toronto, Canada, supports communities to adopt and grow NORC Programs. We work alongside older adults, building partners, and health and social care organizations to strengthen local efforts to support aging in place.

Our approach is co-designed with residents and community partners. It focuses on reducing social isolation, strengthening peer support, improving access to health and wellness activities, and building a strong sense of community.

Our work is guided by relational care principles. We believe strong communities grow when trust and relationships come first. This means:

We build connections with community to co-create solutions

We are curious, empathetic, and humble

We are all teachers and learners, each with knowledge and experience to give and receive

These principles provide a strong foundation for healthy aging in place and are reflected throughout the workbooks.

Acknowledgments

The team at the NORC Innovation Centre gratefully acknowledges the sustaining contributions of the many residents and community members who helped grow the NORC Ambassadors Program and NORC Talks. Your continued participation, feedback, and support have shaped the content of these workbooks, as well as the momentum of an aging in place movement.

Land Acknowledgment

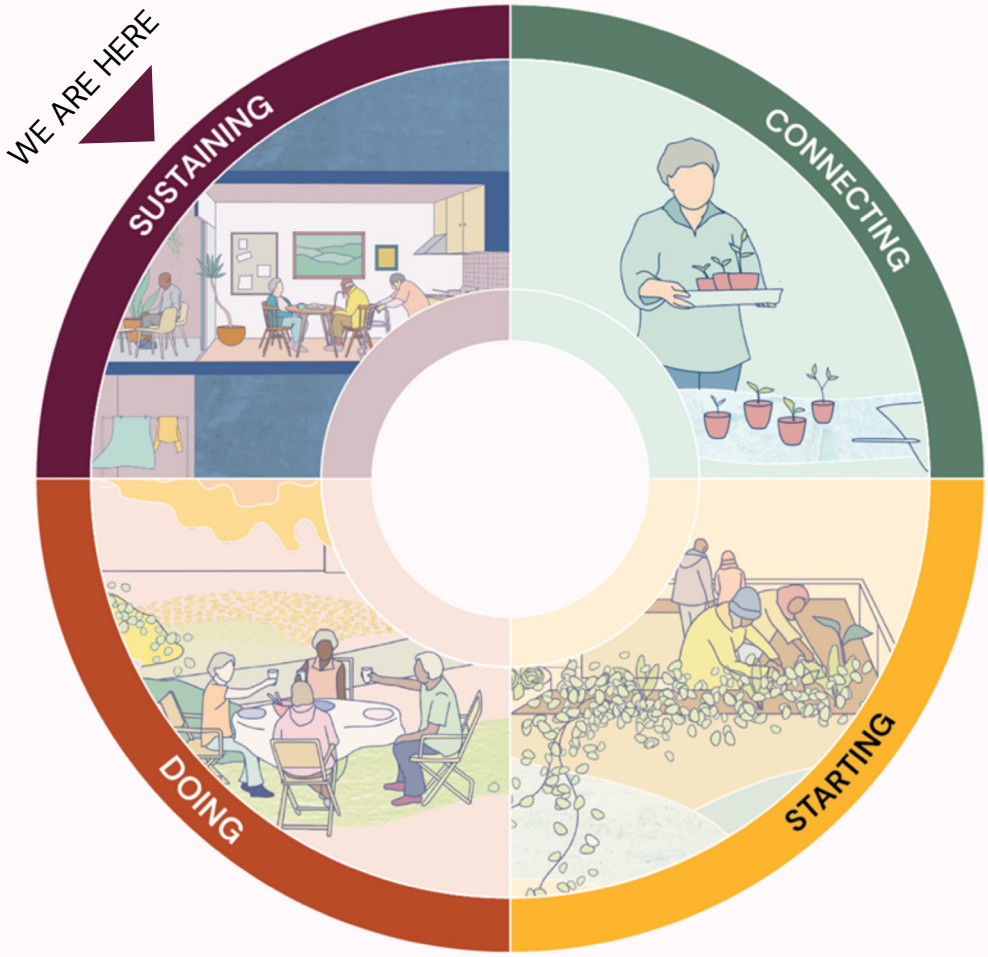
The NORC Innovation Centre is located in Tkaronto, a Mohawk word meaning “where the trees stand in the water,” on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Wendat, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

This land is covered by Treaty 13, and it is also part of the area governed by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant — an agreement to share and care for the land and waters of this region.

The area we now call downtown Toronto has long been a site of Indigenous gathering, diplomacy, and migration. Long before the streetcars and subway lines, these were footpaths and trade routes. The land beneath this city is layered with the histories of communities who have lived in balance with it for thousands of years.

As we occupy space in this dense urban environment, we remind ourselves that the land is still Indigenous land, and its caretakers are still here. And we’re grateful to be doing this work with communities near and far that is rooted in relationship building and mutual care.

Welcome to your Sustaining Workbook



You're in the Sustaining Season of your aging in place initiatives if:

- You're reflecting on the sustainability of your efforts to ensure your work lasts for the long term;
- You're actively planning ahead for your aging in place initiative;
- You're preparing for growth and change within your community.

About Sustaining

The Sustaining season is a time to reflect on the work to date and get ready for what is ahead. Your community may be steadily humming with activity or with plans for activity, as you engage more neighbours. You are seeing the roots of your aging in place initiative growing. As one Ambassador said, “Our group plants the seeds and we watch our neighbours help grow them.” With all this energy and momentum, sustaining becomes a chance to reflect on what’s been accomplished, revisit your goals, and prepare for changes. This process can strengthen bonds and ensure you’re ready for the next steps that will carry your community initiative over the long term.

Let’s get started with a story and a review of the tools for how we Sustain!

Reflect & Discuss

- Are there times where you’ve been in a quiet, reflective, planning-focused phase of your own life?
- How challenging or enriching do you find these times?
- What have they taught you?

Stories of the Season

At a recent aging in place group meeting, time was set aside for something simple but really meaningful—a group check-in. Many individuals in the group had concerns around capacity, overall health, and sustainability, but weren't bringing them up with the larger group. Many felt hesitant to share because they didn't want to bring anyone down or add to anyone's already full plate. During their group check-in, everyone named one goal they'd like to set or something new they want to try—and one thing they want to let go of, get help with, or change.

What happened next was a really powerful shift. As the group members started sharing, others chimed in with support, encouragement, and validation. People realized they weren't alone in what they were feeling. This demonstrated that creating a space where people can share their true experiences and feelings can make a huge difference. There was so much care in the room, and it allowed everyone to open up in a way they hadn't before, actively supporting one another, and creating an intentional space to share with each other how valuable they believe others are in the group and why.

Interestingly, this wasn't approached as an agenda talking point on succession planning or sustainability—just a genuine check-in. Through that simpler approach, a space was created for honest conversation, connection, support, and clear next steps. The group really showed up for one another, and it brought a new level of openness that will help them continue to grow—not just as individuals, but as a collective. They clarified what they needed to do next to sustain, and in a way that felt genuine and inclusive.

Sustaining Toolbox

Explore the steps and resources for Sustaining below. We invite you to select which ones are relevant to you, your community and your goals.

In the Toolbox, you can find resources for:

01

Honouring Volunteer Participation

- Shine a Light
- Offer a Gesture of Gratitude
- Host Appreciation Events

02

Preparing for Change & Managing Tensions

- Make a Succession Plan
- Manage Differences and Tensions

03

Building Neighbourly Help Systems

04

Advocating for System Change

05

Listening to Your Community

- How to Set Up Your Check-Ins
- Check-In with Building Management

Toolbox

1: Honouring Volunteer Participation

How do we as an aging in place community show up for those who show up with the gift of their time and energy? While we know that volunteering itself can be rewarding (enhancing cognitive function, social connection, and sense of purpose), gestures of appreciation for volunteers show that their community values them. Volunteer recognition can create a more positive volunteer experience, strengthen their sense of purpose, and ensure their continued participation. Honouring volunteer contributions is also a way for community members to learn about the positive impacts being made, inviting others to get involved. This can result in a stronger sense of belonging, inclusion, and shared purpose.

While it need not take much, here are some ways you can honour the time, invaluable skills, and dedication of your volunteers:

Shine a Light

If there are members who consistently volunteer and contribute to various activities or events, make sure you honour their contributions. Some ideas include highlighting a special volunteer in the newsletter, hosting a volunteer party, or handing out special "Volunteer of the Month" certificates with a small gift card.

Offer a Gesture of Gratitude

Based on your budget and capacity, you may be able to offer gestures of gratitude or small tokens of appreciation to encourage participation. This could be as simple as giving out small gifts [e.g., a coffee mug, a gift card with handwritten note], or simply making a point of acknowledging and thanking volunteers by name at events.

Get the Tools

Template

- Volunteer of the Month Certificate

Host Appreciation Events

Depending on budget and capacity, it can also be effective to gather and celebrate the passion and commitment of all volunteers by organizing a social event or party. A building or community-wide event of this type can also be an opportunity for volunteer and community feedback (see the Check-In section at the end of this workbook).

As mentioned, sometimes volunteer appreciation can be a very small, but meaningful gesture. One vibrant community comprising two large high-rise buildings had a very active aging in place initiative. Between the two buildings, there are over 22 volunteers who always help out during the events or special programming that they have. The volunteers help with things like creating posters for the events, decorating the social room, preparing snacks and beverages, and overseeing event registration. One volunteer became the official photographer of community life, capturing the many different cultural events and holidays the community celebrates. Her photos are printed and displayed in the building's common spaces and have become a source of pride for the community. The community celebrated her special contribution and the contributions of all the volunteers at an annual volunteer appreciation luncheon organized by the aging in place group.

Toolbox

2: Preparing for Change & Managing Tensions

While consistent community involvement is one sign that your aging in place initiative will be around over the long term, being able to adapt to changes is just as important. It is not always possible to predict what changes you might encounter in growing your aging in place initiative. A few common ones that have challenged other aging in place groups include the departure of key people and interpersonal differences that shift community "culture". In this section, we will review some adaptive actions (and resources) that address expected and unexpected changes in ways that are empowering for community members.

Get the Tools

- Welcoming New Members

Make a Succession Plan

Established Ambassadors

Whether you are a newly formed or well-established aging in place group, it is never too early or late to think about where you are in your aging in place initiative, where you want to go, and what you can do to ensure you get there. Because your aging in place work is driven by the energy, skills, and knowledge of volunteers, you will want to prepare for the possibility of people stepping away from their roles. Resident leaders and volunteers may step away for varying lengths of time and for many reasons, e.g., caring for a sick family member, friend, or their own health issues; moving to a new residence; desiring to devote time to other interests; feeling over-extended. Whatever the reason, you will want to ensure you are able to fill the gap effectively by setting up a process or environment early on for sustaining your aging in place work.

If you have created an environment where people are actively taking leadership on new activities, or if you continuously expanded the core group to include additional members, then succession planning might not be a hard task. However, if participation levels are not ideal and activities are organized and led by only a few (and often the same few) people, then it might be worth undertaking a refresh for your group with a focus on driving up engagement.

The Succession Planning Tip Sheet (see the Get the Tools box) provides some tips for protecting the longevity of your aging in place initiative, such as:

- Involving new and younger people;
- Onboarding new interested participants in an intentional way, with training (see Connecting Workbook for Welcoming New Members to an Established Aging in Place Group resource);
- Inviting volunteers with diverse skills and interests to get involved;
- Maintaining relationships with key building management members.

Established Ambassadors

Here is an example of how one Chair of an aging in place (or Ambassador) group adapted to changes and grew community involvement. The Chair of this Ambassador group shared her experiences with how they set up processes for increasing volunteers, growing Ambassador group membership, preparing for activities, and hearing ideas for new activities.

The Chair highlighted that volunteers are on-boarded slowly, with minimal commitment, helping out with events. This way, the Ambassadors take time to learn about their volunteers' interests and skills. The Ambassador group supports volunteers by providing an outline of the tasks for running their events. If the Ambassador group is looking to add new members to their group, they invite volunteers to sit in on one of their meetings. They provide an outline of what the commitment of joining their committee entails and invite the volunteer to try out a role.

Being open to new ideas for programs and events is also key for sustaining their aging in place initiative. The Ambassadors listen and discuss any new ideas brought forward by residents. If the idea isn't possible, they explain why. If it is feasible, they help the residents to initiate it. As the Chair says, "Make it light-hearted and fun. This is important because you're asking someone to enter into something. We make mistakes, but we laugh about it."

One significant change for their aging in place initiative is the Chair's decision to step back from the role she held for several years. Fortunately, having a robust Ambassador group and volunteer network made it easier to see which residents might want to take on the role. Interested residents could try out aspects of chairing/leading to gain experience.
With a new resident filling the role, the former Chair created a new position for herself that speaks more to her current passions - advocacy for aging in place, finding grants, and procuring donations from local businesses. What helped her overcome worries about stepping back as Chair was simply to pass on responsibilities and trust in others to run events.
She attributes the successes of the aging in place initiative to learning the importance of:

- Discovering ways of being more open to ideas and working with others; seeking out ways to share the load, to negotiate, and to have conversations about collaboration;
- Helping people who are hesitant to get involved to find out for themselves what the initiative is all about.

Manage Differences and Tensions

When working with others, there is bound to be a time where personal differences or viewpoints result in conflict. Maybe your group is struggling to resolve different ideas on when to host a social event, like a pot-luck. Or maybe the difference is a little more complex, such as differing views on how your group meetings should be run based on individual personalities and communication styles - e.g., efficient meetings focussed on agenda items or more casual or expansive meetings with time for social interaction. When these conflicts are not acknowledged or addressed, resentment can build, resulting in a lack of motivation for organizers and participants alike and possible burnout. We explored how differences can be managed within your aging in place group in the Values and Differences worksheet of our Connecting Season workbook.

Get the Tools

- Managing Differences

Now, let us consider the case of navigating differences across the wider building or community culture.

Established Ambassadors

Whether you are a new or more established aging in place group, introducing new ideas into your community can invite mixed and sometimes challenging feedback. For example, you might encounter a kind of “status quo” mindset, where individuals or communities are less receptive to new ideas because they are entrenched in the way things have always been done. Or perhaps they can't consider new ideas because they have tried something similar in the past and it failed. Maybe they express concern or worry that an aging in place focus will give an impression that your community is a “seniors” building.

Whatever the case may be, this kind of feedback can seem like a lack of openness to new ideas. It is normal to feel discouraged when encountering resistance in your community towards your initiative. However, we have learned that there is value in taking small steps and being patient as you work through these different perceptions and reactions.

For example, one aging in place group was able to run activities and programs in their building with the full support of their property manager. However, when there was a change in property manager, they were met with reduced support for some of their activities. While this could have been very discouraging and paralyzing for them, they continued to do what they could with what was available to them. This approach was a constructive way to demonstrate the value of their aging in place group in the community to the new manager and successfully build his trust and support of their initiative.
For some practical tips on navigating differences at the

community level, see the Managing Differences Tipsheet in the Get the Tools box. [In the case of changes in building governance, you may also want to revisit the Tips for Collaborating with Building Governance in the Connecting Workbook].

Toolbox

3: Building Neighbourly Help Systems

As social connections grow stronger, residents of all ages may come to view everyday neighbourly support as a vital part of community life. Having someone to call on for a small favour or in an emergency helps create a culture of care and mutual support, where people look out for one another.

Some areas where neighbours who look out for each other can take action and strengthen mutual assistance include:

- Goods and equipment - sharing unwanted or underused household items and supplies (e.g., books, left over yarn, an old cane);
- Services - e.g., offering your time to take out a neighbour's garbage, pick up something at the grocery store, or check in on more isolated residents;
- Skills - sharing useful skills or knowledge, e.g., help with certain computer programs like email or video calls;
- Emergency preparedness - sharing safety information in the event of blackouts or extreme weather events.

Communities have shared that setting up mutual assistance among neighbours can be challenging. Some people may feel uncomfortable asking for or accepting help, while others may not know their neighbours well enough yet to build the trust needed for a neighbour-to-neighbour support network. The resources in this section (see the Get the Tools box) can support your efforts, outlining practical steps and ideas to help you establish those initial connections, identify goals, and plan for action.

As an example, one aging in place group in a high-rise condo has organized an informal help network to connect neighbours who require periodic help with small day-to-day things, with volunteers who live on the same floor. These volunteers can help to make a phone call, get the lid off the prescription

Get the Tools

- Neighbour to Neighbour: The Connectors' Toolkit (via Building Resilient Neighbourhoods)
- Simple Actions List for Neighbours Helping Neighbours (via Building Resilient Neighbourhoods)
- Inspiration Cards for Neighbours Helping Neighbours
- Tips for Being Neighbourly

container, or help to read small print. Also, in instances when there is a neighbour who may be isolated or who is recovering from a health setback, these volunteers can reach out to offer additional assistance. Over time, these volunteers began building connections with neighbours of all ages. As people became more comfortable asking for and receiving help, the network grew and expanded its reach.

Toolbox

4: Advocating for System Change

Many community leaders tell us they are looking for change and see advocacy as a key part of sustaining their groups. Raising awareness about the needs of older adults and the importance of aging in place helps ensure these issues stay visible and are taken seriously.

Advocacy can be any action you take that supports or champions a cause on behalf of others. If, in your aging in place initiative, you've ever challenged unresponsive management, clarified roles within a resident-led program, organized donations or activities, or explained the value of aging in place work to a Board of Directors, you have already been practicing advocacy. These are just a few examples of the kind of advocacy your group can take within your own community.

Sometimes, as you learn about your community's needs, you may also uncover system-level gaps that need to be addressed. These can be things like inaccessible sidewalks, lack of nearby cooling centres in a heatwave, or bus stops that are too far for some neighbours to reach. While your group cannot fix these issues directly, they are opportunities to use your role as community leaders to advocate for change. Actions might include letter writing campaigns, connecting with community partner organizations or other advocacy groups, or inviting local municipal government representatives to see the impact of aging in place initiatives firsthand. [See our Connecting with Your Elected Officials about NORCs resource in the Get the Tools box.]

For example, one Toronto-based aging in place group was concerned about the rehabilitation of some sections of sidewalk outside of their building. This important stretch of sidewalk was on the way to a public transit stop, but was bumpy and very difficult to navigate for anyone using a walking aid, like a walker or cane. The group decided to engage the

Get the Tools

- Connecting with Local Officials About NORCs

Mayor's office to ask for the status of when the sidewalk would be fixed. The group persisted in continuing to reach out every few months, as each time they would get some general information rather than a detailed update about the repair. They decided to reach out to the local city councillor and were able to get assistance from this office to determine who was accountable for the fix and get a detailed repair plan. Their persistence, combined with local advocacy support, led to a clear commitment and timeline for fixing the problem.

Toolbox

5: Listening to Your Community

Regular check-ins are a key part of sustaining your aging in place initiative. They provide opportunities to recognize accomplishments and align on the goals, expectations, and limits for both your aging in place group and for the broader community of neighbours.

One way to check in with members of your aging place group is by adding the brief, but regular practice of highlighting bright spots to your meeting agendas. You will have noticed at the end of each workbook, we reserve space for identifying "Bright Spots" - those moments for acknowledging and celebrating new learning and moments of growth for your aging in place group. Celebrating what your group has created and what challenges you have overcome are a meaningful part of this aging in place work. Taking time to acknowledge the bright spots is a way to make space for what you think is small, but can have a big, lasting impact. It can foster a sense of accomplishment, boost morale, and encourage continued involvement for champions of aging in place in your community.

For the wider community, regular check-ins can also be valuable in the same ways, yet they are often overlooked. Check-ins are a way for you to learn how people feel about the initiative, what you are offering, and whether the needs and wants of the community are truly being met. The purpose is not to invite criticism, but to create a safe space where people can share what is working well and what they would like to see next. Taking time to express gratitude and mark milestones is vital for inspiring communities. By acknowledging achievements, communities can inspire confidence, strengthen social connections, and solidify their commitment to future involvement.

Get the Tools

- Planning Your Community Check-In
- Program Feedback Sheet

How to Set Up Your Check-Ins

Determine the channel of communication you would like to use as your preferred way for conducting the check-in. This could be hosting a monthly open meeting, sending out an email survey, using the suggestion box, or conducting informal coffee chats. Make sure regular check-ins are scheduled into the calendar for consistency.

Consider the questions you may want to ask during your check-in to spark feedback, such as:

- What do we want to start doing?
- What do we want to stop doing?
- What do we want to continue doing?

Once you have collected input from your community, consider hosting an open forum to discuss new ideas, suggestions for improvement and plans ahead.

There are a number of tools in our Get the Tools section to support setting up these various practices for ongoing listening and learning about aging in place in your community. In addition to these, you may want to revisit the Hosting a Public Meeting resource from the Starting season.

Check-In with Building Management

As part of your community check-ins, it is important to continue to foster connection with building management. This can look like an annual or semi-annual meeting with Property Managers, Boards of Directors, and other building staff to update on progress and any emergent aging in place issues. Some established Ambassador groups make a point of inviting building management to join one of their regular aging in place group meetings. Finding small ways to maintain open communication with building management is both a much-appreciated courtesy and an opportunity for securing their ongoing support. For a refresher on communicating with building management, see the tip sheet from our Connecting Season here.

Bright Spots

We invite you to reflect with your group:

What is something that you have learned by spending time in this season?

What has felt positive or motivating for you?

Sustaining Checklist

By the end of this Sustaining Season, you will have gained ideas for:

- Honouring volunteer participation;
- Succession planning and managing differences and tensions;
- Organizing neighbourly help;
- Advocating for systems change;
- Celebrating and checking in with your community

Planting the Seeds of Next Steps

As you peruse the guide, we invite you to consider the following prompts:

- Which Sustaining tool might best support you now, at this point in your work?

A Closing Reminder

We are not expecting you to use each of the listed tools, but invite you to explore and select which ones are relevant to you, your community and your goals. You might choose to travel across these categories or return to them at different points in your work.

You might be engaged in Sustaining activities for many weeks, or even months, while you are forming a group or you may be revisiting this season after undergoing changes in your group. This is completely normal and encouraged! We always welcome any feedback on how the toolbox or the tools can be used.

Each monthly NORC Talk will focus on one topic in this list, but you can always refer to this workbook to access the full set of tools and stories for Sustaining.