



The Neighbours Project:

Downtown East Co-Design Workshop

October 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Land acknowledgement	2
About the Neighbours Project	3
About this story	4
WHAT WE LEARNED AND CREATED	6
Key themes	7
What partners are hearing from seniors in Downtown East	8
Assets in Downtown East	9
WHERE TO NEXT	10
Core elements to the Neighbours model in Downtown East	11
Asset and journey mapping	11

INTRODUCTION

Land acknowledgement

As Health Commons, we acknowledge the traditional, ancestral, and sacred territories and lands we call home across what is now known as Canada. Health Commons is located in Tkaronto, now known as Toronto, which is on the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, Anishinaabe, Chippewa, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples. Tkaronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands, and is Dish With One Spoon Treaty Territory.

We recognize that for many First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples, relationship with the land is profoundly important to their sense of self and place. We are grateful for teachings that have been shared with us about how the land and waters heal and nurture by gifting the languages, stories, songs, ceremonies, and protocols that guide and sustain many First Nation, Inuit, and Métis communities and Nations.

We carry tremendous privilege in being guests on these lands, and are serious about our responsibility to understand, reflect on, and then take meaningful action to improve our relationships to these lands and to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples who are the original stewards of these lands and who continue to host us here. We are committed to doing whatever we can and are invited to do alongside communities to create space for healing, reparation, and wellbeing for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples and the lands, skies, and waters that surround and nourish us.

About the Neighbours Project



The Neighbours Project was created to improve social connection, access to community services, and healthy living for seniors (55+) in two ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of Toronto: North York and Downtown East. Both areas have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to health inequities, and as a result, many seniors are at higher risk of social isolation and loneliness.

North York has a higher proportion of older adults living alone compared to the rest of Toronto, where 39% of people aged 65 to 84 live independently and 55% of people 85+ live independently. Englemount-Lawrence, the focus of this initiative over the past year, is a neighbourhood that is home to over 115,832 people, more than 44% of whom are immigrants and newcomers. Tagalog, Spanish, and Russian are the most widely spoken languages after English.

In **Downtown East**, seniors make up 18% of the population. For people aged 65 to 84 years, 47% live independently and 50% of people aged 85+ live independently. French, Tagalog, and Cantonese are the most spoken languages after English. Downtown East is characterized by particularly high income disparity, with plenty of high-income earners, even more low-income earners, and little in between.

This project prioritizes the important relationship between social connection and seniors' wellness. Focusing on social connection, nutrition, and active living, we partner with local organizations in:

- 1 Amplifying**
existing services, programs, and resources in the neighbourhood that are seniors-specific
- 2 Facilitating**
learning, coordination, and partnership across organizations and sectors to improve service capacity and engagement in the neighbourhood
- 3 Collaborating**
with trusted community partners to co-design and implement innovative, hyperlocal solutions that fill community-defined gaps

About this story

We wrapped up our time in North York in summer 2023 ([read about it here!](#)), and we are now cultivating partnerships and co-designing the model in Downtown East. Our intention is to make sure we move into this space in a good way that honours the great and important work already happening in this neighbourhood and that is rooted in the vision of seniors who live here. While we are beginning our time in Downtown East with learnings, stories, and friendships from our time in North York, we are not making any assumptions that what we did in North York will translate into this new context.

Following a series of individual conversations with organizations and community members from the neighbourhood, we hosted a co-design workshop on October 30, 2023, which gathered community partners and members in Downtown East. We had 10 attendees, including representatives from community organizations and community members who are actively involved as volunteers in their neighbourhoods.



We know that community knowledge is key to understanding who we are serving and how to meet their needs. The lived experience of community members and the triumphs and challenges service providers experience on the ground are important for us to understand as we shift to this next iteration of Neighbours.

We knew it was important to facilitate a space where meaningful conversations could take place and people could form connections in a way that felt organic. Our intentions for the day included:

- **Relationship building:** A space for community partners and seniors to meet and connect with each other and to learn about what is being offered within the neighbourhood, what gaps exist, and how to fill them in a way that focuses on organizational strengths, challenges, and hopes.
- **Asset mapping:** A space for us to collectively illustrate a comprehensive picture of existing seniors health and wellness programs, services, resources, and groups in Downtown East, including key gaps.
- **Co-design the Neighbours Project model:** Pinpointing 3-5 key offerings and experiences the Neighbours Project can contribute to Downtown East as a way to coordinate, amplify, or expand upon the work partners are doing.

The purpose of this story is to share back what we learned and created together, and where we go from here.



WHAT WE LEARNED AND CREATED

Key themes

During an exercise to surface strengths and challenges that each organization is experiencing in meeting the needs of seniors, the following themes emerged:

What is working well in Downtown East:

- **Strong networks:** Each organization reaches several different communities in Downtown East through their existing outreach strategies, whether through in-person bulletins, email newsletters, or word of mouth.
- **Engagement:** Existing clients and community members who initially engage with organizations' services and programs tend to stay connected and get involved in other offerings.
- **Integrated service offerings:** Across organizations, coordinated internal supports and external referrals strive to provide wrap around care for seniors in Downtown East and beyond, bridging clinical, social, and community services to create a consistent experience.

What barriers people are navigating in Downtown East:

- **Language and accessibility:** Many languages are spoken in Downtown East, and this has introduced accessibility challenges in offering relevant programming for seniors, especially for newcomers who are participating in programs for the first time. Translation services are expensive and it is not always possible to have volunteers available to translate.
- **Staff capacity and resource constraints:** There have been a number of staff and priority changes within organizations since COVID-19. Where there is a high need for some program offerings there may not be enough staff to operate or scale existing initiatives, let alone test out new ones. There is also a shortage of accessible community spaces to host events.
- **Reaching the most isolated seniors:** It is a challenge to safely bring information, resources, and programming to seniors who live alone and may not leave their residence often due to mobility or health challenges.

What partners are hearing from seniors in Downtown East

Bring activities to buildings: Seniors are interested in having activities brought into their residence buildings to ensure services are accessible, whether it is social and active living programming, library offerings, or clinical services. It is important to remember that location and accessibility impact which activities can take place in residence buildings. For example, is there wifi? Is there a communal space or recreation room? What technical equipment is available? Are the washrooms accessible?

Timing and cost of programming is important: Seniors are looking for morning activities to jump start their day and for affordable (low cost or free) activities.

Think about accessibility: It is important to have technical equipment and materials that support inclusion, for example having microphones available for those who are hard of hearing, large print documents for visual accessibility, programming and resources in several languages, and navigation supports so seniors know what supports and offerings exist and how to access them.

TIP

Integrating and combining services and programs across organizations improves accessibility and quality of offerings for seniors.

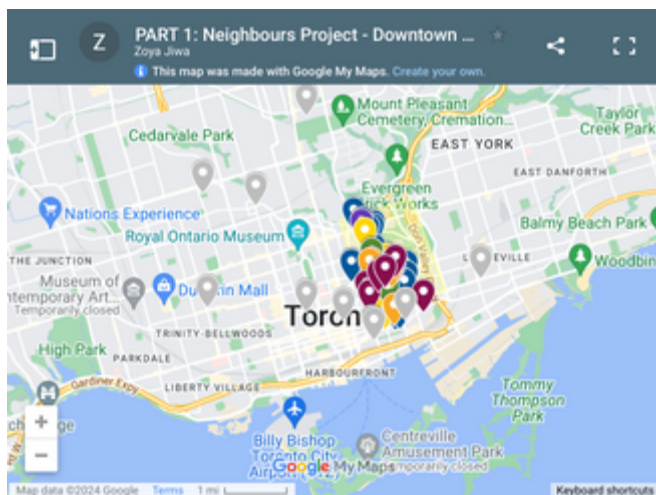
Start and end with dignity: Seniors want and need access to learning opportunities and experiences that are intellectually stimulating and that allow them to share and lean on their strengths and skills.



Assets in Downtown East

As part of our co-design workshop, we worked on an asset map that shows all of the services, supports, resources, etc. that are available to seniors in Downtown East. Our intention with this was to create a resource to help seniors know what is available and how to access them, while also providing something for organizations to use to refer seniors to the offerings they need.

Here is the asset map so far - click the links below to open a version that you can explore in more detail. We will share a combined map in the near future!



[Asset Map Part 1](#)



[Asset Map Part 2](#)

WHERE TO NEXT

Core elements to the Neighbours Project model in Downtown East

In discussing and brainstorming what the Neighbours Project model should look like in Downtown East, three key priorities surfaced:

- **Strengthen the ecosystem of services and supports:** Building relationships and bridges between organizations who offer similar, overlapping, or interconnected services, to create a more seamless ecosystem of services and supports for seniors.
- **Fill gaps through innovation and relationship:** Fill gaps within the ecosystem using innovative solutions that bring services to people, that connect people to services, or that connect services to each other so we can create a more seamless foundation of activities, supports, and services for seniors.
- **Empower seniors:** Actively and meaningfully involve and learn from seniors who are already engaged in the neighbourhood, as critical experts in what the Neighbours model should look like.

As part of this, we will establish a collaboration table with partners and seniors and plan activities like health fairs, enhanced promotion and outreach strategies, translation strategies, peer learning opportunities, asset mapping, journey mapping, piloting new projects that can test out, improve, or expand upon programs (e.g. workshops) and other critical activities.

Asset and journey mapping

We continue to engage seniors and community partners to evolve our asset map to make sure it is a fulsome representation of what is offered in Downtown East. Alongside this, we are creating various journey maps to better understand how seniors navigate core assets, including what they are thinking and feeling at each step and how we can address gaps and barriers they experience along the way.



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