Goal and Project Description

There are three societal challenges addressed in this proposal – an aging population, the unique experiences of older immigrants and the growing prevalence of loneliness and/or social isolation among older adults. The expected outcomes of the proposed research include new and improved program models, processes and technological solutions created through college-community partnerships. The Sheridan Centre for Elder Research and four invited partner organizations will form the nucleus of a new research collaborative that will provide overall direction to the research. The proposal is socially innovative, bringing together a mix of people, services and resources to collectively develop new ideas and solutions that respond to unmet needs of the target population while benefitting and strengthening the broader community.

Overall Goal and Specific Objectives
   The overall goal of the proposed research is to create community-informed strategies for more effectively reaching and serving immigrants age 65+ who may be experiencing or, are at risk of experiencing, loneliness and/or social isolation (in some places abbreviated to L/SI in this proposal). During the lifespan of the grant, the Sheridan research team, together with community partners in the Regions of Halton and Peel, will collaborate to:
1. Develop tools to more effectively identify immigrants 65+ at risk for experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation.
2. Create culturally sensitive strategies to increase support for immigrants 65+ who are living in the Regions of Halton and Peel.
3. Design, test and evaluate innovative program models, products (including technological) to respond to the needs and interests of L/SI immigrants 65+.
4. Increase the ability of the community to collectively respond to the needs of immigrants 65+ by training front-line staff and community volunteers to effectively recognize, and act upon, risk factors that contribute to L/SI.

Relevance and Significance of Objectives of the Proposed Research
   Population aging is a defining characteristic of the times in which we live. In 2011, an estimated five million Canadians were 65+; that number is expected to more than double to 10.4 million by 2036. By 2051, about one in four Canadians is expected to be 65+ (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011). This demographic shift, its speed and its impact and implications will dominate the Canadian social, political and economic landscape for the foreseeable future.
   Sheridan College has campuses in the Ontario Regions of Halton and Peel and our founding partners work in these regions. They and, other, community organizations strive to ensure that all individuals have the capacity to live active, engaged lives. However, these organizations all acknowledge the challenge of finding, reaching out to, and engaging older adults who, by choice or by circumstances, may be isolated and/or lonely.
   Retirement, social isolation, changes in health or marital status or financial stresses may preclude active engagement in the community and can lead to loneliness, a subjective experience that is commonly believed to be increasing among older adults. Research has shown that loneliness can be as harmful to our health and quality of life as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2010) and can increase the risk of cognitive decline (James et al, 2011) and suicide in older age (O'Connell et al, 2004).

Goal and Project Description

   While older adults are at a greater risk of L/SI than younger persons, older immigrants may be even more vulnerable. This reality raises concern about the capacity of community groups and agencies to effectively reach out to and, serve, this growing group.
   Seeking solutions to address the challenges and opportunities presented by these three societal challenges will be of great significance and interest to our partners, collaborators, older immigrants themselves as well as to the communities at large. The proposed work will also lead to recommendations that will benefit the broader communities (see details in the Knowledge Mobilization attachment).

Significance and Expected Contribution to the Advancement of Knowledge
   The proposed research can be expected to contribute to knowledge in the social sciences and have social significance by strengthening communities and increasing community engagement by L/SI immigrants 65+. The social sciences community will benefit from research documenting the experiences and perceptions of older immigrants living in Canada. The results will have implications for, among others, policy makers, immigration settlement services and the education sector. Finally, the proposed research will contribute to the literature about L/SI, particularly as it relates to older adults, and specifically, older immigrants. A more thorough understanding of these issues can be expected to help service providers at all levels to better identify, address, and reduce risk factors in their clients/constituent groups.

Background and Literature Review
   As previously mentioned, the Regions of Halton and Peel are experiencing increases in both their older adult and immigrant populations. Recognizing that the boundaries for the Local Health Integration Networks (LHIN) do not completely align with those of the Regions of Halton and Peel, it is the LHIN catchment areas we will use to describe our target population as their reports are more detailed in nature. According to the Mississauga Halton (MH) LHIN website, the percentage of people aged 75+ will grow by approximately 55% over the next 10 years (compared to a 40% growth across Ontario). In addition, while only 28.5% of Ontarians identify themselves as immigrant, 44.3% of the MH LHIN population identifies themselves as immigrant.
   The Central West (CW) LHIN, as reported on their website, also projects a significant increase in older adults. The CW LHIN has the lowest proportion of adults 65+, comprising 11% of the LHIN's total population compared to 14% for Ontario. However, the CW LHIN anticipates huge growth in the 65+ population, rising 64% by 2021 (compared to the 43% growth expected for Ontario). The CW LHIN also represents one of the most diverse communities in Ontario. Over half of local residents belong to visible minority groups (the provincial average is 26%); almost half are immigrants (47%) and 13% are newcomers to Canada, arriving within the last 5 years. These numbers are compelling, and Bernhard et al. (2010) highlight the importance of implementing and supporting regional-level programs, policies and strategies.
   Ethnically diverse older adults are under-represented in all areas of research across North America (Acharya and Northcott 2007; Newbold and Filice 2006) and there is little research addressing their needs. Immigration represents a major life change that may be made more challenging by language barriers, loss of status (real or perceived), disrupted social networks, conflicting family values and social and cultural isolation. In addition,

many older immigrants, living in their adult children's homes, are constrained by lack of mobility and transportation options, and these multi-generational homes may increase the potential for conflict (Hossen, 2012). Many older immigrants report feeling lonely and socially isolated in spite of ways to maintain ongoing contacts with their homeland (e.g. availability of air travel, inexpensive international phone service) (Simon et al., 2014; Burholt & Martin, 2012).

Inconsistencies exist in definitions of social isolation. For the purposes of the proposed research, social isolation is defined as "a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and they are deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships" (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1346). Simon et al. (2014) also suggest that intense feelings of emptiness, loneliness, abandonment, and forlornness are linked to an insufficient quality or quantity of an individual's network of social relationships. Estimates of the prevalence of social isolation in community-dwelling older adults indicate that it is as high as 43%, ranging from 10 to 43% (Nicholson et al., 2010; Smith & Hirdes, 2009).

Previous literature indicates that older immigrants may be even more vulnerable to loneliness because of social isolation and lack of social communication, compared with their counterparts in the country of origin (Victor, Burholt, & Martin, 2012). Taylor, Taylor-Henry and Doan (2005) concluded that later-life immigration and a lack of dominant language competency present many challenges to mental health for older adults, including increased loneliness. Simon et al. (2014) claim that we have limited understanding of loneliness in minority aging populations. Furthermore, men and women experience loneliness differently and may also differ in their strategies to seek out social services (Centre for Indo Canadian Studies, 2009).

Finally, in the 2013-2014 Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors released by the National Seniors Council (NSC), the NSC recommended that the federal government encourage a culture of social innovation in part by building the capacity of organizations to address isolation of older adults through social innovation. One gap in the NSC report is that it is generic in nature with few substantive references to older immigrants. The proposed study seeks to close this gap through its focus on older immigrants.

Research Questions

The literature is over-represented with articles that focus on older adults in general and does not explore, to the extent warranted, the particular vulnerabilities that may be encountered by older immigrants. Compellingly, Hossen (2012) cites an observation by Disman (1994) that "…seniors are the most powerless, least influential, and most 'forgotten' segment of the ethnic population". Further research is needed to explore loneliness and social isolation with individuals representing different ethnic backgrounds. One must be cautious, however, not to end up with a generic approach to supporting older immigrants. Customized solutions and approaches must take into consideration individual ethnic backgrounds, language and cultural nuances. We will ask the following research questions, the results of which respond to the four previously stated objectives:

1.What do immigrants age 65+ perceive and report as the barriers to and opportunities for forming meaningful social connections in their communities?

2. How do ethno-specific organizations, mainstream agencies and faith communities in the Regions of Halton and Peel currently identify and reach out to immigrants 65+?

3. How can ethno-specific organizations and mainstream agencies effectively measure the impact of loneliness and/or social isolation on their immigrant clients 65+?

4. What are the most effective strategies (new or currently in use) for collectively identifying and reaching immigrants at risk for loneliness and/or social isolation?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology, Data Collection and Analyses

Participants – Immigrants 65+: The first step to addressing the research questions above will be to interview older immigrants to uncover the barriers and opportunities they experience when forming social connections and accessing services. We will recruit up to 200 older (65+) participants in Peel and up to 100 in Halton (equally split between men and women) through ethno-specific organizations, mainstream agencies and faith communities. We will equally target both settled immigrants (lived in Canada 6 or more years) and recent immigrants (arrived between 2010-2015) who immigrated directly to Canada through their country of origin (i.e. did not arrive in Canada after living in other countries). Our rationale for seeking both recent and settled immigrants is our belief that there may be qualitative differences in their experiences. Participants must be community dwelling (living alone or with family) with no identified cognitive impairments (self-reported). Individuals from China[1], South Asia (individuals originating from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other people from the South Asian Diaspora), the Philippines and Poland will be targeted and we will leverage all the resources at our disposal to reach individuals who may be lonely or socially isolated. These target groups have been selected based, in part, on a Social Planning Council of Peel report (2013) and are the groups our founding community partners have identified as being of most significance to them.[2]

Participants – Staff: Front-line staff, administrators and volunteers affiliated with ethno-specific organizations and/or mainstream agencies, and key representatives from faith communities representing Christianity, Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism[3] will be recruited for participation in this study.

Recruitment: In addition to other recruitment strategies, a snowball sampling method will be used to increase the number of isolated immigrants 65+ reached in this study. This method of sampling identifies respondents who are then asked to refer the researchers to other respondents, increasing opportunities for reaching hidden and hard-to-reach individuals. Staff and volunteers will be recruited through our formal partners.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach, using a combination of surveys, individual interviews, focus groups and case studies will be used to collect data. The instruments will be co-created with our newly-formed research collaborative, translated as required, and will specifically ask questions that address issues related to the experience of aging in Canada as an immigrant, barriers to social engagement, current strategies to engage isolated individuals and unique stories of loneliness or isolation. The facilitators/

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[1] The two largest groups of people of Chinese origin in Peel are Cantonese and Mandarin as indicated in the 2013 Social Planning Council of Peel report

[2] It should be noted that the results of the research can form the basis of customized culturally appropriate strategies for other groups.

[3] The top 3 religious groups in Peel in the 2013 Social Planning Council of Peel report were Christianity (56.9%), Sikhism (9.5%) and Islam (9.4%).

interviewers will include Sheridan researchers as well as trained Sheridan student Research Assistants (see Training attachment for details).

Data analysis: The over-arching lens through which the data will be viewed will be based on the social exclusion framework (Silver 2007). This framework considers dimensions of the immigrant experience that lead to exclusions; in our case, we would evaluate these dimensions as they relate to exclusion from social or community networks. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is most appropriate for the qualitative aspect of the proposed research. Within this theoretical framework, researchers will review, code and compare data collected from participants to inform new strategies to address loneliness and/or social isolation for immigrants 65+. SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) will be used to evaluate the quantitative data (from the surveys) and include covariates such as age, gender, length of time in Canada et cetera.

Outcomes based on the research results: Once the data are analyzed, in consultation with our partners, we will create new culturally competent program models, resources, products and implementation guides. Recognizing the pervasive use of technology in today's society, our plan includes the development of technology solutions (i.e. an interactive website or a smartphone application) that would allow front-line staff in both ethno-specific and mainstream organizations to easily access resources, contact information and maps to help them better serve immigrant clients at risk of loneliness and/or social isolation. (See Expected Outcomes document for details.)

Appropriateness of Project Duration Chosen to Achieve the Objectives
Community development is, at its core, focused on building relationships and trust. We are committed to hearing the voices of immigrants 65+, especially those experiencing L/SI, but reaching them can be exceedingly difficult. It will take time to overcome any language and cultural barriers to establish trust and form the necessary relationships.

Alignment with the Insight Program Objectives
Build knowledge and understanding: A newly created cross-college research team, representing social workers, psychologists, social scientists and mobile computing specialists will collaborate with a wide range of community leaders to build knowledge and greater understanding about aging in a foreign land.

*Support new approaches to research on complex and important topics***:** The triple jeopardy of aging, immigration and L/SI brings complexities that transcend current approaches to supporting at-risk individuals. The newly formed, interdisciplinary research collaborative will bring their collective experiences to bear on these issues.

Provide a high-quality research training experience for students: The Centre for Elder Research has over eleven years of experience training students from Sheridan and from other post-secondary institutions. (Please see Training and Mentorship plan).

Relationship to societal challenges and opportunities: We plan to address societal challenges and opportunities related to population aging, the particular challenges of older immigrants and the growing prevalence of loneliness and social isolation.

Mobilize research knowledge to lead to influence, benefit and impact: A number of strategies will be used to ensure that what we learn as a result of this research flows from the Sheridan team to the community and back to Sheridan Please refer to the Knowledge Mobilization attachment for specific details of the planned dissemination channels.