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BEYOND BOOKS:
The Library as a Lifeline for Older Adults

An exploration of how older adults engage with the Seattle Public Library.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

With the growing older adult population in Seattle, the harmful health implications of the loneliness epidemic, and the accessibility and prevalence of the public library as a third place, this research sought to address:

What is the role of the **Seattle Public Library** (SPL) in **mitigating loneliness** and **social isolation** among **older adult patrons** (ages 60+)?

I used a mixed-methods approach in attempts to portray both patron and staff experiences and to identify areas of growth for SPL. In a survey of older adult library patrons, I captured rates of loneliness using the UCLA-LS-3 loneliness scale, library usage frequency, and perceived social benefits of the library. Further, I interviewed six Seattle Public Library staff and conducted a comparative program analysis of other libraries with unique specialized programming and resources for older adults.

This research found limited, inconclusive results from the patron perspective. Meanwhile, interviews determined that many older adults turn to the public library for social support, but the SPL is in many ways not equipped to meet their needs given their limited staffing, funding, and resources. Comparative program analyses identified how social services and specialized programming can be integrated into library practices to better serve older adults' social health. Future research should employ a qualitative research approach to engage older adults, such as focus groups.

INTRODUCTION

The global population is aging. Seattle is projected to experience a 300 percent increase in adults aged 85 and older by the year 2050 (City of Seattle, 2024, p. 15). Following an aging population is a diverse, complex set of needs that most cities are not built to meet.

Undeniably, one primary challenge faced by older adults is feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is the subjective, emotional experience of having unmet social needs, while social isolation is the objective amount of social interaction one has in their life (OSG, 2023, p. 7). Loneliness and social isolation are not uniquely experienced by older adults. However, adults 65 and older have been found to experience the highest rates of social isolation of any other age group (Kannan and Veazie, 2023). Approximately 57% of older adults report feelings of loneliness (Taylor, 2020). Further, both loneliness and social isolation have been associated with many negative health outcomes, including dementia, stroke, premature death, depression, and cardiovascular disease (OSG, 2023, p. 4). While social isolation and loneliness are not mutually exclusive, they have been identified as correlated for some individuals (Taylor, 2020).

In Seattle, efforts have been made to better serve the older adult population. In response to the global aging population, the World Health Organization has called for cities to more deeply consider the needs of older adults in planning and health-related practices (WHO, n.d.). The City of Seattle committed itself to being an "Age Friendly" city in 2016 (Age Friendly Seattle, n.d.). This declaration demonstrates the local government's intention to better serve older adults, though there is limited research from the perspective of older adults in Seattle as to whether these needs are being better addressed since this commitment.

INTRODUCTION

Within Seattle's 27 public library locations, efforts have been made to support older adult patrons. A variety of programs are offered for adults 50 and older, providing information and support across topics such as technology, employment, and healthy aging (The Seattle Public Library, n.d.).

Using the public library as a means to support older adults is not an original concept. Within Seattle's 27 public library locations, a variety of programs are offered for adults 50 and older, providing information and support across topics such as technology, employment, and healthy aging (The Seattle Public Library, n.d.). The American Library Association (ALA) first published guidelines for supporting the older adult population in 1975 (Lenstra et al., 2019). The most recent rendition, published in 2017, outlines a series of eight best practices for American public libraries to follow when developing programs and serving older adult library users (American Library Association, 2017). In addition, the ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services has provided public library staff with information to help support older adults (Lenstra et al., 2019). These guidelines and practices have been implemented varyingly across the United States (Bennett-Kapusniak, 2013) and fall short in providing library staff funding, training, and specific regional support.

METHODOLOGY

Three different research methods were used for this project: a survey, group interview, and comparative program research.

Survey:
The survey's purpose was to capture the perspectives of older adult public library patrons: their self-reported feelings of loneliness, how frequently they visit a public library, and whether they feel like their library usage contributes to their social capital. The survey had 19 questions and took participants less than 15 minutes to complete.

The survey flyer was distributed using the following methods:
- Age Friendly Seattle listserv
- Age Friendly Seattle Facebook
- 8 Seattle senior/community centers
- 3 Seattle Public Library branches (Lake City, Capitol Hill, Central)

Additionally, one in-person outreach session was conducted a Sunday afternoon at the Central SPL location. Library patrons were approached and asked to complete a printed version of the survey.

METHODOLOGY

Group interview:
A group interview was conducted with five SPL staff. Information regarding interviewee's specific roles and branches they serve are outlined in the table below. Additionally, if the library staff is affiliated with a specific location, included is their location's RSEI priority level is included to contextualize their area's historical investment (or lack thereof).

Interviewee Number	Title	Location	Census Tract	Race and Social Equity Index Priority Level
1	Librarian	Northgate	12.01	Highest
2	Librarian	West Seattle	96	Lowest
3	Librarian	Central	81.02	Second Highest
4	Librarian*	Mobile Services	N/A	N/A
5	Older Adults Program Manager*	N/A	N/A	N/A

*This SPL staff is not affiliated with one location.

METHODOLOGY

Group interview:

Staff were interviewed using a circle process, an Indigenous-derived facilitation method, semi-structured in format. Interviewees responded to six questions:

1. What do your daily interactions with older adult library patrons typically look like?
2. Which activities and programs do you find most successful among older adults?
3. What unique needs or preferences do older adult library patrons have?
4. How relevant is the "loneliness epidemic" in serving older adults in the library? How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how you see older adults using the library, if at all?
5. What barriers or limitations do you experience in serving older adult library patrons?
6. From your perspective, how could SPL better meet the needs of older adult library patrons? What support would you need to meet these goals?

Responses were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed. This group interview took approximately 70 minutes to complete.

METHODOLOGY

Comparative program analysis:

To identify feasible solutions for the Seattle Public Library to implement, research about other public library programs was conducted. Specifically, programs that served older adults, or could be modified to the benefit of older adult patrons, in innovated, health and socialization-centered methods were selected to be included in this research. Other factors considered were the program or service's replicability, sustainability, and potential for impact. The guiding questions for this aspect of research were:

How are older adults being served by other public libraries? What implementations are innovative and successful in meeting the needs of older adults, and how can these learnings be applied to the Seattle Public Library?

Based on this criteria, the following three public libraries had programs worth considering for implementation in Seattle:

- Athens Comics Library (Athens, Greece)
- Hamilton Public Library (Ontario, Canada)
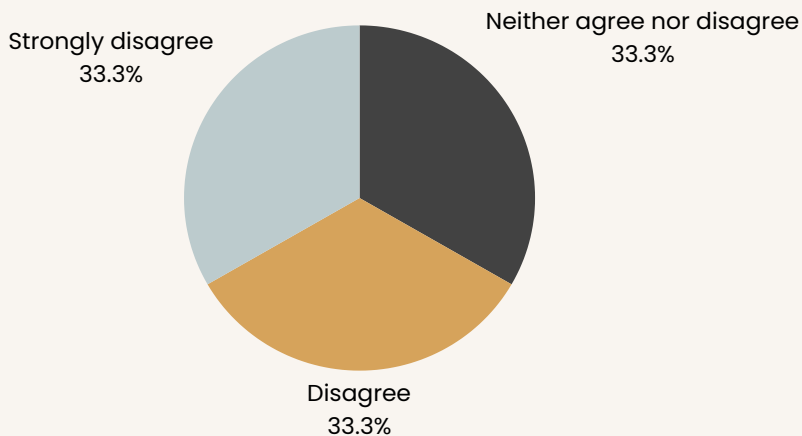- San Francisco Public Library (San Francisco, CA)

RESULTS

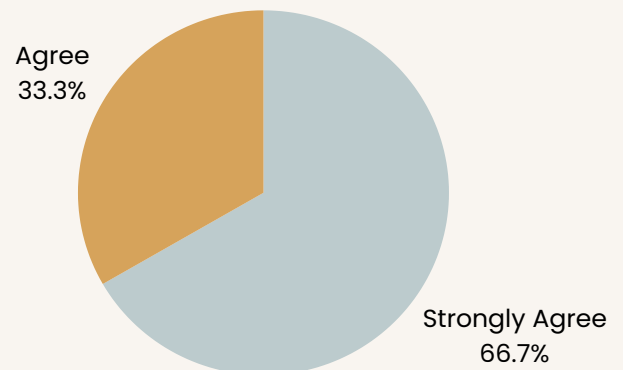The results of each methodology were as follows:

Survey

The survey received 8 responses in total. While these results are not statistically significant nor representative of all older adults in Seattle, some questions revealed that there are older adults who feel like the SPL impacts their social connectivity.

"Visiting the public library has **no** impact on my health or overall wellbeing."

"I have made new friends and acquaintances through visiting the library."

Strongly disagree
33.3%

Neither agree nor disagree
33.3%

Agree
33.3%

Disagree
33.3%

Strongly Agree
66.7%

Ultimately, this survey's low response rate was itself its most significant finding. This indicates that this is not the most effective method of reaching this population, highlighting qualitative engagement methods like focus groups as likely preferred by this demographic.

RESULTS

Interview

The library staff raised the following themes throughout their interview:

- Socialization & connection
- The unique needs & preferences of older adults
- The influence of the pandemic
- Barriers

Below is data for the theme "socialization and connection."

Pull quote:

"We have a lot of people that come in every single day and they tell us everything about their lives, and it's really like a ritual for them to be out in the community and interacting and so and, you know, we notice if they don't come in for a day, and that kind of thing too."

Qualitative analysis chart:

	Socialization & connection				
	Library as social hub	Connection with staff	Routine	Influence of local communities	Taking time/not being rushed
Staff 1	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree
Staff 2	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree
Staff 3	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned
Staff 4	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Staff 5	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned

Key:
- Agree
- Disagree
- Mixed responses
- Not mentioned

RESULTS

Interview

Below is data for the theme "the unique needs & preferences of older adults."

Pull quote:

"I keep thinking about this all the time, and I feel like it's important to note that the older adults that we serve are largely interested in the same things that everybody else is interested in. Everybody's engaging in similar activities. Because it's really easy to look at older adults who have greater needs, particularly like around technology or around like physically getting to something in the collection, or like being able to see or hear it, and kind of lump all older adults in with that."

Qualitative analysis chart:

	Unique needs and interests of older adults	
	Older adults have unique interests	Older adults have unique needs
Staff 1	Disagree	Mixed responses
Staff 2	Not mentioned	Agree
Staff 3	Not mentioned	Agree
Staff 4	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Staff 5	Agree	Not mentioned

Key:
Agree
Disagree
Mixed responses
Not mentioned

RESULTS

Interview

Below is data for the theme "influence of the pandemic."

Pull quote:

"I think what we've really learned… is just how isolated caregivers were during the pandemic, and how programs like [bookclub for caregivers], where you're talking about your caregiving experience in a supportive space with we have a social worker and a librarian leading the group, is so important to feel less isolated and to feel more connected to people around you."

Qualitative analysis chart:

	Influence of the pandemic			
	Fewer gathering spaces	Decreased staffing	Older adults need more social support	Increased comfortability with technology
Staff 1	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Staff 2	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree
Staff 3	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree	Agree
Staff 4	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Disagree	Agree
Staff 5	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned

Key:
Agree
Disagree
Mixed responses
Not mentioned

RESULTS

Interview

Below is data for the theme "barriers."

Pull quote:

"[Older adults] just need somebody who's going to listen to them and not rush them. And I won't say on record that I have come back on my lunch hour to sit with somebody who needed help, that I knew I could help, that I couldn't do on my paid time. But gosh, that kind of thing is tempting because there's really no other solution for it."

Key:
- Agree
- Disagree
- Mixed responses
- Not mentioned

Qualitative analysis chart:

	Barriers									
	Time	Boundaries	Staff capacity	System navigation	Tech access	Physical access	Language access	Restricted to in-house programs	Funding	Need for institutional support
Staff 1	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Mixed responses	Agree	Agree
Staff 2	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Agree
Staff 3	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree
Staff 4	Agree	Agree	Agree	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Agree
Staff 5	Agree	Not mentioned	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree	Agree

RESULTS

Comparative Program Analysis

1. Athens Comics Library (Athens, Greece)
Service: **Libraries on Prescription**.
Social prescribing is a concept originating in the United Kingdom, where professionals are trained to meet the holistic needs of people seeking resources and mental health support. One collaborative project executed by Refugee Week Greece, Athens Comics Library, and The Europe Challenge, titled "Libraries on Prescription," offers support through "psychosocial and creative services" to promote healing. This program was piloted at one library location, but since has created a toolkit and implemented their program in at least five other European libraries (Tsene et al., 2023). While this research is not directly aiming to determine the public library's therapeutic qualities, nor overtly practice social prescribing, the idea that a place can promote positive health outcomes through social interaction is a fundamental understanding that underscores the importance of authentically understanding the wants and needs of the people utilizing these spaces.

2. Hamilton Public Library (Ontario, Canada)
Services: **Phone programs**, **centralized online resource center**.
The Hamilton Public Library offers phone programs for Hamilton residents 55+. These meetings are conference calls, which is especially approachable for those who may be comfortable with a phone call, but not a virtual meeting. They offer a variety of short health- and socialization-centered activities over the phone, including Story Times, Family Feud, and Trivia (City of Hamilton, 2025). Further, Hamilton Public Library's website was particularly accessible and resource-oriented for older adults. While the Seattle Public Library links community centers and other resources on one of their pages, the Hamilton Public Library has a centralized research center embedded into their site, meaning that older adults only have to visit one site to find out which older adult events are happening in their community (City of Hamilton, 2025). Both of these activities are unique, accessible, affordable, and sustainable, making them ideal for the SPL to consider.

RESULTS

Comparative Program Analysis

3. San Francisco Public Library (San Francisco, CA)

Services: **Computer Corps, Workshops, Library Health and Safety Associates**.
 The San Francisco Public Library developed a pilot program to increase access to technology and technological support. Select library staff at each branch were designated as Computer Corps members, where they specialized in creating materials, curriculums, and providing on-site technology assistance. The SFPL reports high metrics of success for patrons. While this program was not developed only for older adult library patrons, it was created to address the technology gap experienced by people over 50 (Urban Libraries Council, n.d.). This library also offers an Aging Mastery Program (AMP) Workshop series and a Healthier Living six-week workshop for older adults who experience a chronic health condition.

Further, SFPL's Library Health and Safety Associates conduct outreach to unhoused library patrons. These health and safety associates are formerly unhoused themselves, providing lived experience, empathy, and workforce development opportunities (National Association of Counties, n.d.). This model is currently unique to SFPL, but has the potential to work for other American libraries. While this research is not focused on unhoused patrons specifically, this model of employing people with specialized knowledge of what patrons experience is a transferable model that can be used to better support older adult patrons.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, these findings highlight how, from the perspective of library staff members, older adults do visit the Seattle Public Library to socialize. It also identifies barriers SPL staff members experience when serving older adults, and the ways in which other libraries around the world are interacting with this demographic.

Given these results, SPL may consider the following five recommendations to better meet their mission of serving older adult patrons.
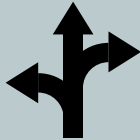
Integrated, frequent older adult **engagement**	Stronger **navigator** role & social services	More detailed **training** & **strategic planning**	Increased **funding** for staff **capacity** & **programs**

CONCLUSION

Recommendations

1. **More integrated, frequent older adult engagement**
As learned from the low survey response rate, older adults experience barriers to participating in online surveys, and/or are not comfortable with this medium. Integrating opportunities for feedback into programs SPL hosts from trusted sources is key to ensuring this population's voices are heard. Qualitative methods such as focus groups are recommended for this demographic. Engagement with older adults also serves to produce data for the SPL to justify increased funding for older adult programs and resources.

2. **Stronger navigator role and social services presence**
Considering the barriers SPL staff are facing in serving older adult patrons, more support navigating resources and the presence of social services at library locations is critical. According to the experiences of fatigue from librarians, and the knowledge that they are frequently interacting with patrons with needs they are unable to support, four "social services librarians" is a step in the right direction, but not enough to fully support all SPL branches.

Similarly, librarians expressed that they are not confident in their ability to be a resource navigator for patrons with complex needs. Librarians refer patrons to other resources, but they expressed that they wished they were more confident in the follow-up aspect of resource navigation. Thus, a more flushed out strategy for supporting librarians in supporting their patrons would benefit older adult patrons who seek their resources, for social isolation or otherwise.

CONCLUSION

Recommendations

3. **Thorough training and strategic planning**
Similarly, more detailed training for staff and a stronger institutional commitment to serving older adult patrons would help staff serve older adults and justify investment in older adult resources. In the Seattle Public Library Strategic Plan, older adults are only mentioned once. Librarians mentioned that if the institution were to better "rise to the mission," they would feel more supported.

The SPL could promote a stronger culture of service for older adults through more thorough training on how to serve older adults. This could include cultural elements of serving older adults, like encouraging staff members to lengthen their time interacting with older adult patrons who indicate wanting that kind of support, and leaning into the "personal touch" aspect of their interactions. It should also address boundary-setting and connect to the stronger navigator role: where to refer to older adults when they approach a librarian with specific questions or issues, and what the follow up process is for those interactions.

4. **Funding, staff capacity, and programmatic prioritization**
Having more explicit support for older adults in SPL mission statements and frequent engagement would help justify the need for increased spending on specialized staff and increased older adult programming. Expanding older adult programs is aligned with the SPL Strategic Plan, and following through on this goal does not necessarily require programmatic feats. As demonstrated by the Hamilton Public Library, phone programs are successful in reaching older adults. Hiring more library staff, especially those with a specialization in resource navigation or serving older adults, is another important step SPL should take to support all library parties.

Additionally, the SPL should improve physical access to library branches that have any form of physical barrier, such as the Central Library branch. This should also involve more budget directed towards staffing and programming specialized for older adults, based on older adult feedback.

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