

# A Picture of Health

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## B.C. Mobilizes to Support the Most Vulnerable

### Connecting Seniors to Volunteer and Community Supports during COVID-19

*By Donald Den, B.C. Ministry of Health*

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**One of the largest groups** to be affected by COVID-19, not just in B.C., but globally, is seniors. Not only are older British Columbians at higher risk of developing severe illness or complications from COVID-19, but for many seniors, their regular support networks were disrupted by the pandemic.

This created a need to address non-medical supports for seniors, such as delivering groceries, to help ensure they were able to stay safe in their homes. At the same time, volunteers from across the province were needed to support this work. In short, a province-wide response and mobilization was required.

#### Inception

The Ministry of Health, the United Way of the Lower Mainland (UWLM), and bc211 collaborated to create the Safe Seniors, Strong Communities (SSSC) program. The Province provided \$50 million in funding to the UWLM to support seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

The idea to increase access to bc211 and facilitate the connection between seniors and volunteers was

brought forward by B.C.'s seniors advocate Isobel Mackenzie. "At the start of the pandemic, our office was flooded by phone calls and emails from people wanting to volunteer their time to help seniors," said Mackenzie. "It was an easy decision to support the thousands of seniors who were staying home and self-isolating as community centres and adult day programs closed to slow the spread of the virus. To reach seniors quickly, we needed to use existing infrastructure, and bc211 is an organization that specializes in referral services, which was a great match for the goals of our program."

An all-party MLA COVID-19 seniors working group supported the response, which allowed the Province to quickly and efficiently assist seniors in need through the scaling up of existing programs and community efforts.

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This included funding the expansion of bc211, a confidential telephone and online service that refers people to a variety of government and non-government agencies. Previously limited to the



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Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island, bc211 is now available province-wide.

Individuals who wish to volunteer can register online at [bc211.ca](https://bc211.ca) or call 2-1-1 between 8 a.m. and 7 p.m. PT seven days a week. Volunteers undergo an onboarding process and then are connected with a community agency in their area which matches them with a local senior.

bc211 also takes calls from seniors who need support. That information is then referred to local community agencies, who match seniors and volunteers together.

Upon registering with bc211, under the SSSC program, seniors can indicate the services they need from the following menu:

- Virtual wellness checks
- Grocery shopping/delivery
- Meal prep (pre-made drop-offs or in-home support)
- Prescription drop-off/medication pick up

### Starting everything up

To say there was a demand for this service would be an understatement. When the program was first launched on March 26, the response quickly flooded the system. “We were initially overwhelmed,” summarizes Teri Collins, assistant deputy minister of Health Services Division at the Ministry of Health. “There was an immediate need to shore up the infrastructure to meet the demand.”

There was no shortage of volunteers willing to step up and support some of B.C.’s most vulnerable citizens. Shortly after the launch, there was a groundswell of over 5,000 potential volunteers. In addition, the network of UWLM Better at Home programs, which help seniors with simple day-to-day tasks, was ramped up to manage the SSSC response.

### Volunteers helping seniors

Deborah Wiebe and Neil Wong are two of the volunteers in the Okanagan region who answered the call for volunteers when the SSSC program was launched province-wide. Deborah read about the program via her local newspaper and Neil saw the volunteer call-out while browsing the Internet. Deborah describes that she was originally very surprised that there was a call-out for volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic, but quickly moved on it. Both reached out and registered as volunteers through bc211 and were soon assigned to the Seniors Outreach & Resource Centre in Kelowna.



Deborah Wiebe, SSSC volunteer with the Seniors Outreach & Resource Centre in Kelowna, B.C., one of the thousands of B.C. residents who stepped up to support seniors in their community during COVID-19.

Since starting with the program, Deborah has made multiple grocery deliveries, wellness checks, and driven seniors to important medical appointments. Now retired, Deborah made herself fully available to



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be able to contribute back to her community and has been able to help many people in the Kelowna area. “It’s made me feel really good that I’m able to go out and contribute like that,” Deborah says. “I don’t want to sit there and twiddle my thumbs when there are people out there that could use a little bit of help or support.”



Neil Wong, SSSC volunteer with the Seniors Outreach & Resource Centre in Kelowna, B.C., one of the thousands of B.C. residents who stepped up to support seniors in their community during COVID-19.

Newly semi-retired, both Neil (who, coincidentally, was interviewed for this article in his car via hands-free while out on a meal delivery for a senior) and his family got involved in the program and have done multiple grocery deliveries as well as transporting seniors to medical appointments. “There’s one senior couple that I do a food run for every Friday,” Neil says, as he has also made himself available for last-minute requests via texts. “Sometimes I’ll be driving and get a message that I need to make a food delivery within an hour, and I am happy to do it.” Neil and his family chose to sign up together as, due to the additional linguistic skills (fluency in Chinese, German, and Spanish), they could offer aid to those

who may not speak English. Neil says volunteering to support seniors “gives him a sense of satisfaction and peace of mind knowing that he is paying it forward and that he gets to meet new people.”

Speaking to the overwhelming number of volunteers that have stepped up to support seniors in the community through the program, Neil mentions that he recently ran into another volunteer out on a food delivery “to the same apartment building and the same floor, close to the same time” that he was delivering to.

“It is thanks to the countless individuals like Deborah and Neil in communities throughout B.C. who have stepped up to volunteer, that we have been able to provide such a high level of support to so many seniors during this unprecedented time during COVID-19,” Teri highlights.

### **So, what has this meant for seniors in B.C.?**

Between March 26<sup>th</sup>, when the SSSC program was launched, and August 18<sup>th</sup>;

- Over 14,000 seniors and almost 10,500 volunteers have registered with the program
- Volunteers have delivered almost 249,000 services to seniors, including:
  - Over 135,000 needs assessments and wellness check-ins
  - Over 55,500 meals prepared and delivered, and
  - Almost 26,000 deliveries of groceries

At this point now, as B.C. continues “flattening the curve” and has entered Phase 3 of [BC’s Restart Plan](#), registration for SSSC has dropped from its initial influx, but the program is still heavily in use. The program is ready to ramp up services once again to support a potential second wave of COVID-19.

“The program has been a great success so far,” Teri adds. “It is still very much in progress and how it’s



deployed will be modified as things change and as the situation continues to evolve.”

For more information on BC211 and the SSSC program, visit: <http://www.bc211.ca/safe-seniors-strong-communities/>

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