

# ***2SLGBTQ+ Elders Project Community Consultation***

## **Summary Report**

### **Introduction**

Aging is a cultural process just as much as it is a biological one. Different cultures have different attitudes and practices in regard to ageing, the place of the elderly in society, and death. Many cultures celebrate the aging process and venerate their elders. One can look to Asian, South Asian and North American Indigenous communities for examples.

In Canada, few initiatives exist that recognize and honour 2SLGBTQ+ elders who have contributed to the flourishing of their communities through their leadership, altruism and courage. At the same time, younger 2SLGBTQ+ people increasingly express an interest in learning about their histories and in learning from 2SLGBTQ+ elders.

Dignity Seniors Society (DSS) is interested in exploring opportunities to honour and to learn from 2SLGBTQ+ elders in British Columbia. As a first step, DSS undertook a community consultation process early in 2021 to gather input from local queer and gender diverse community members to inform the development of such a program.

### **Community Consultation**

The community consultation consisted of three components: focus groups, interviews, and a survey. All of these were completed virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, although the option to meet in-person was extended to one-on-one interview participants. A total of 71 community members participated in components of the consultation, recruited through social media channels, outreach to allied organizations, personal invitations to key community members, and posters at Vancouver West End venues e.g. Little Sisters Bookstore.

Between February and April 2021, DSS conducted focus groups with a total of 9 participants and 13 one-on-one interviews with community members in British Columbia. An additional 49 participants shared their voices in an online survey.

Specifically, DSS was interested in hearing thoughts and ideas on four pivotal questions:

- What comes to mind when you hear the term 'elder'?
- What do you think are important attributes and characteristics of elders in 2SLGBTQ+ communities?
- What role can/do elders play within 2SLGBTQ+ communities?
- How do our communities go about identifying our 2SLGBTQ+ elders

#### **1. Focus Groups**

DSS organized population-specific focus groups for: seniors (defined as 55+); youth (defined as 30 & younger); 2SLGBTQ+ people of colour; Two-Spirit/LGBTQ+ Indigenous people; transgender/non-binary/gender-nonconforming individuals; and a general group for 2SLGBTQ+ community members not included in the above categories.

Each focus group was run by a lead facilitator and a co-facilitator to record notes. As creating a safe space was critical, the lead facilitator for each focus group was someone who was a member of that focus group's population (e.g. a senior led the seniors' focus group). DSS recruited guest facilitators who identified as Two-Spirit or trans to facilitate the Two-Spirit/queer Indigenous and trans/non-binary focus groups, respectively.

In total, five focus groups were conducted: three for seniors (55+); one for trans/non-binary/gender non-conforming individuals; and one for youth (<= 30). The 2SLGBTQ+ people of colour (QTBIPOC), Two-Spirit/Indigenous, and general focus groups were cancelled due to low numbers. Any registrants were instead invited to participate in a one-on-one interview.

## 2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted over Zoom or by phone although the option for in-person interviews was available to participants. Interviews were not audio-recorded but relied on note-taking by the interviewer. While a few of interview participants were focus group registrants unable to attend a focus group, a large number were identified by the DSS Board of Directors as individuals with a strong history of community involvement and whose perspectives were deemed to be valuable. In total, 13 people were interviewed.

## 3. Survey

An online survey was launched in April for approximately one month to supplement data collected through the focus groups and interviews. Forty-nine community members completed the survey.

## 4. Demographics

Limited, optional demographic information was collected about participants to protect confidentiality and create safety. The following summary is based on written, verbal or online information from participants.

### Gender

- Focus groups and interviews:
  - 14 men
  - 6 women
  - 2 non-binary
  
- Survey:
  - 14 men
  - 11 women
  - 7 non-binary
  - 1 gender-nonconforming
  - 1 two-spirit

## Age

- Focus groups & interviews:
  - 3 participants: 30 or under
  - 15 participants: 55 or over
  
- Survey:
  - 1 respondent: 17 or under
  - 10 respondents: 18-30
  - 10 respondents: 31-54
  - 7 respondents: 55-64
  - 18 respondents: 65 or over

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The result was a rich, thoughtful and engaging conversation about who 2SLGBTQ+ elders are, what roles they play, and how they may be identified. The results were identified by descriptive statistics compiled from the survey and thematic analysis of the focus groups and interviews.

### 1. The term 'elder'

This section of the consultation asked about participants' initial impressions of the term "elder". Overall impressions of the term 'elder' were positive. A large portion of participants associated elder with old age, while only a few expressed that elderhood is not tied to age.

Recurrent themes were that elders are individuals with wisdom, mentors, knowledge keepers, and well-respected people. Still common, but less so, were associations of the term "elder" with Indigenous elders, knowledgeable people (distinct from knowledge keepers and people with wisdom or experience), movement leaders and pioneers, curious learners, and people continuing activist work in old age. Of the few negative first impressions shared by participants, people thought of older folks struggling to navigate disability or failing health, authority figures, or religious figures.

Some participants spoke about elderhood as a type of role to perform or an attribute that some people acquire. According to participants, a designation of elder may be earned, automatic, morally obligatory, or voluntary. Participants felt that elders have roles to communities, and to a lesser extent to individuals, or both. Some spoke to the special relationship elders may have with youth. Elders interacting with other elders in formalized collectives, such as in "circles" or "houses" of elders was also a minor theme. A few people felt it is important to acknowledge Indigenous perspectives of elders while two participants said the term has no relevance to non-Indigenous people. Still others believe the term is "pan-cultural" and relevant to many cultures and communities.

### 2. Key Attributes of 2SLGBTQ+ Elders

In this section, participants were asked to describe attributes, traits and characteristics that are important or useful for 2SLGBTQ+ elders to possess. Participants arrived at the following main attributes:

## Elders

- Are defined by their wisdom and lived experiences, rather than “knowledge”. Having experience is what allows elders to empathize and connect with others.
- Have good self-knowledge, are aware of their limitations, and commit to continual learning.
- Have extensive experience in the communities and a history of activism; a social justice lens is essential which would come naturally from a history of community organizing.

Participants noted that ‘elderhood’ requires time, education, communication skills, and the ability to engage in public advocacy work. Being ‘in the closet’ is a significant obstacle to achieving elder status. Participants spoke to the need of caution in not being overly prescriptive in defining elders and to carefully think about who gets to define elders. For example, participants said elderhood should not be measured in terms of a person’s utility to community or in terms of preferred personality traits.

Participants debated the pros and cons of age limits for elderhood status. They noted the advantages of setting a minimum age in that it creates an objective, practical, and measurable criterion. A minimum age also emphasizes the respect and honour bestowed to older 2SLGBTQ+ people in light of existing ageism within 2SLGBTQ+ communities. On the other hand, participants said that relying on key attributes and characteristics rather than age alone allows the acknowledgment of younger 2SLGBTQ+ people who may have had exceptional life experiences and already acquired wisdom from which others can benefit.

It is important not to regulate what personalities are permissible. For example, focusing on calm, patient elders may mean excluding potential elders who are loud, brash, and opinionated. It is likely these characteristics may have helped some elders in their activists’ roles.

### **3. Roles of 2SLGBTQ+ Elders**

Participants discussed what roles elders play or could play within queer and gender diverse communities.

They offered that 2SLGBTQ+ elders often act as teachers and historians, sharing experiences, histories, and knowledge. They are trusted sources of wisdom. Intentionally or not, they often become role models and inspirations for younger generations. Many participants see elders as having roles to broader communities, while others said they see elders as having roles to individuals. In community roles, participants said that elders are able to use and share the skills and assets they have acquired over the years in such areas as leadership, community organizing, management, mediation, facilitation and advocacy. Examples of roles of individuals include personal mentors, being chosen family to younger people, and being in position to offer support (e.g. housing) to those in need.

A prominent theme was the unique relationship between elders and younger generations, with youth in particular. Many participants shared various understandings of specialized elder-youth roles, sometimes bypassing the “middle generation.” This can result in mutually beneficial relationships between elders and youth. Youth can benefit from having elders as mentors as they begin to navigate their way in both mainstream and 2SLGBTQ+ communities. Participants shared examples in which groups of elders organized to provide care to youth e.g. providing housing for disenfranchised youth.

Reciprocally, youth can fulfill caretaking roles for elders as needed. Being connected to youth can be important and fulfilling to elders, reducing isolation or allowing elders to “live vicariously through youth”.

The path towards creating and/or enhancing the roles of 2SLGBTQ+ elders is fraught with systemic issues, participants said. Because of ageism, elders are often under-consulted and underutilized, and may become socially, culturally, and geographically isolated. A number of examples were highlighted by participants to illustrate this point about elders being pushed to the margins: a hyper-focus on young bodies in gay men’s culture; a digital divide resulting from advances in technology that some elders are not able to bridge; and the financial unfeasibility for some elders of living in urban centres like Vancouver’s Davie Village. Although not intentional, age-segregation occurs to the detriment of elders and younger generations. This is not a unique problem to today and not unique to 2SLGBTQ+ communities. It does however require concerted efforts to reduce the barriers and divisions that prevent elders from fulfilling important roles within our communities.

#### **4. Identification and Visibility**

This final section asked participants about ways to go about identifying elders within 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

A significant part of the discussion focused on the question of visibility. Many participants said that visibility in the community is paramount i.e. people need to be publicly known in order to be recognized or designated as an elder. This approach would be problematic for elders who are not openly out as queer and trans or whose work in queer communities is not widely known, although no less important. Because visibility is often tied to power and privilege, conversations about identifying elders became entangled with discussions about hierarchy and privilege. One suggestion to address possible barriers is to engage more high profile elders to assist in identifying elders who may be less visible and more marginalized. The idea would be to tap into informal networks of ‘elders’ where they exist.

The issue of self-identification also came up in discussion. In identifying elders, it also required that an individual accept this title and role, in the same way that identifying as queer or trans can only be done through self-identification. For various reasons, it may happen that an individual may be reluctant and not comfortable taking on an ‘elder’ designation.

Generally, participants were more focused on identifying living and “active” elders than elders who have passed away. Connected to this, a minor, yet recurrent and important theme was the impacts of HIV/AIDS, resulting in the loss of a generation of potential elders.

Participants said that community organizations, in trying to make elders more visible, should caution against becoming an authority on who is an elder. It is also important not to treat elders as a homogeneous group. To avoid being prescriptive about only including certain types of elders, it is critical that the diversity found within 2SLGBTQ+ communities is reflected in the identities, life experiences and personalities of designated elders.

## Next Steps

This community consultation revealed that the perspectives of 71 community members on 2SLGBTQ+ elders are multiple and varied, but also positive and developed. Participants' concepts of elders drew from Indigenous and Western contexts, personal experiences, the media, and traditional and non-traditional networks.

This consultation was undertaken by Dignity Seniors Society to gauge community interest in pursuing a project to acknowledge and honour LGTBQ2S+ elders in British Columbia. This consultation supports that there is strong interest for such an initiative. From an analysis of the data, the following recommendations emerged that will inform next steps in development of this project:

- Promote the concept of 2SLGBTQ+ elders within mainstream, and queer and gender diverse communities
- Identify and build connections with other projects on elders and 2SLGBTQ+ elders
- Establish some criteria to identify elders being mindful that criteria should not create barriers or be too restrictive
- As a starting point, focus on elders who are older/senior members of our communities; 'non-senior' elders' may be engaged in the project in other ways
- Engage with well known elders to identify other elders, especially those who may be less visible or marginalized
- Focus on elders who are living (instead of identifying elders posthumously)
- Clarify expectations to enable elders to make an informed decision whether to become part of the project
- Create opportunities to leverage elders' wisdom, lived experiences and personal stories

*Dignity Seniors Society Board of Directors would like to thank Aaron Low for his invaluable work in leading the community consultation on the 2SLGBTQ+ Elders Project; and for drafting a preliminary summary report. During this time, Aaron was a 4<sup>th</sup> year B.S.W. practicum student with DSS, studying at the School of Social Work, University of British Columbia.*