

September 2017

Dear members of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

We are aware that the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities has agreed to undertake a study of how the Government can support vulnerable seniors today while preparing for the diverse and growing seniors population of tomorrow.

Our organisation is delighted that the Committee has chosen this as a study, noting that one of the *major themes of this exercise is ascertain how the Government can improve the overall quality of life and well-being for seniors including community programming, social inclusivity and social determinants of health.*

We provide below a brief statement outlining what we regard as the impact, value and outcomes for older men from participation in Men's Sheds in Ireland over the past decade.

In Ireland, men have long gathered together in clubs and pubs as well as after church on a Sunday and at football matches to talk and to share ideas and discuss life in general. However, combining *social chat* with *men's work*—the fixing, building and repairing that men have historically done alone— marks a new and exciting development for service providers charged with supporting vulnerable groups. Older men have historically enjoyed less well-established social networks than older women (McGivney, 2004; Ruxton, 2006) and have been at greater risk of social isolation (Williamson, 2011, Carragher & Golding, 2016), having largely been socialized to be self-reliant. This in turn has exacerbated the difficulties for service providers of involving them in group activities and initiatives to improve their health and well-being (Carragher, 2013).

In contrast, the strength with which the Men's Shed movement has developed in Ireland is quite extraordinary. The first Men's Shed opened in Ireland in 2009 and within three years had grown to 55 Sheds, with over 1,000 participants. As a social gerontology Centre, we were naturally keen to understand men's readiness to engage in informal learning activities in Men's Sheds and the attributes that brought them to learning in such large numbers. Thus in collaboration with the Irish Men's Shed Association and Professor Golding, patron of the movement in Australia, we conducted the first national survey of Men's Sheds in Ireland (Carragher, 2013). By the time we published our report some 12 months later in early 2013, there were over 100 sheds, with around 2,500 participants. Today, the number of Men's Sheds in Ireland stands at 350, with over 8,500 participants, making this the largest men's network nationally.

The results from our research suggests Men's Sheds offer therapeutic spaces for men, especially older men, to gather together and support each other through difficult life transitions and changes resulting from altered roles and relationships in later life (Ricardo et al. 2014). Within Men's Sheds, older men

have found a space where they can do meaningful voluntary work in the company of other men. Our evidence suggest they are readily engaging in a wide range of hands-on learning activities and are eager to carry on learning. In contrast to this, previous research has shown older men to be one of the most difficult groups to engage in learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2009; Golding, Brown, et al., 2007; McGivney, 2004; O'Connor, 2007; Owens, 2000).

Transition and change are an inevitable part of human lives, but for older men, the transition from paid work to retirement can be especially difficult and can impact negatively on their mental well-being (Carragher & Golding, 2015). This is because older men typically adhere to traditional notions of gender that emphasize the importance for men of independence and self-reliance (Ruxton, 2006). They construct meaning and identity around paid work, (Golding, 2011) and often feel a deep sense of loss on retirement. The critically important social determinants of health that extend far beyond good material conditions have long been known (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). To enjoy good health, older men—just like the rest of us—need friends, they need to feel useful, and they need to exercise a degree of control over meaningful work (Carragher & Golding, 2015). Without these social determinants in place, older men become more prone, as do all adults, to depression, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003).

Given that Men's Sheds are conducive to men's learning, we therefore argue that they can also provide the context for future targeted interventions to improve the quality of life of older men. We understand that the Men's Shed movement is growing in Canada, with some 17 Sheds open to date. In the face of a growing older population and evidence of the benefits of adult learning, both for the individual and society at large, we strongly urge the Committee to recognize the importance of Men's Sheds in Canada. It is based on grassroots participation, community empowerment and acts of reciprocity within a network of vulnerable individuals, providing a powerful tool for social inclusivity and the social determinants of health.

If you need any further information or assistance, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Regards, Lucia Carragher

Dr. Lucia Carragher
Research Fellow
The Netwell Centre
P J Carroll Building
Dundalk Institute of Technology
Dublin Rd
Dundalk
Co Louth
Ireland

Tel: ++ 353 (0)42 9370497 ext: 2677

Email: lucia.carragher@dkit.ie

Web: www.NetwellCasala.org

References

- Carragher, L & Golding, Barry (2016) Informal learning through Irish men's sheds: the company of men. *The Adult Learner: The Irish Journal of Adult and Community Education*.
- Carragher, L & Golding, Barry (2015). Older Men as Learners: Irish Men's Sheds as an Intervention *Adult Education Quarterly* 1–17. doi: 10.1177/0741713615570894.
- Carragher, L (2013). *Men's Sheds in Ireland, Learning Through Community Contexts*. Irish Men's Sheds Association. <http://menssheds.ie/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Men%E2%80%99s-Sheds-in-Ireland-National-Survey.pdf>
- Department of Education and Skills. (2009). *Increasing men's participation in adult learning: Guidelines to enhance men's participation in back to education initiative funded programmes*. Dublin, Ireland: Stationery Office.
- Golding, B., Brown, M., Foley, A., Harvey, J., & Gleeson, L. (2007). *Men's sheds in Australia: Learning through community contexts*. Adelaide, South Australia, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research.
- Golding, B. (2011). Social, local, and situated: Recent findings about the effectiveness of older men's informal learning in community contexts. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 61, 103-120. doi:10.1177/0741713610380437
- McGivney, V. (2004b). Understanding persistence in adult learning. *Open Learning*, 19(1), 33-46.
- O'Connor, M. (2007). *Sé Sí gender in Irish education*. Dublin, Ireland: Department of Education and Science.
- Owens, T. (2000). *Men on the move: A study of barriers to male participation in education and training initiatives*. Dublin, Ireland: AONTAS.
- Ricardo, R., Tavares, N., Coelho, A., Lopes, H., & Frago, A. (2014). Learning in informal spaces in the community: A case study from Southern Portugal. In S. J. Krašovec & M. Radovan (Eds.), *Older men learning in the community: European snapshots* (pp. 63-78). Ljubljana, Slovenia: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani.
- Ruxton, S. (2006). *Working with older men: A review of Age Concern services*. London, England: Age Concern.
- Williamson, T. (2011). Grouchy old men? Promoting older men's mental health and emotional wellbeing. *Working With Older People*, 15, 64-76.
- Wilkinson, R., & Marmot, M. (2003). *Social determinants of health: The solid facts* (2nd ed.). Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization.

ABOUT US

NetwellCASALA is multidisciplinary research centre based in the School of Health and Science in Dundalk Institute of Technology (Dundalk IoT), Ireland. Our high quality teaching and innovative research programmes has earned Dundalk IoT a reputation for being one of the leading Institutes of Technology in Ireland. Within NetwellCasala our research is focused on the development of more integrated community-oriented services, more sustainable home and neighbourhood design, and more age-friendly technologies.