



The Belonging Forum

2026 Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program

Partner Organization:

HelpAge Canada



Project Title:

Ageing Connected – Canada’s Belonging Hub for
Older Canadians

2026 Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program: Project

Proposal

Partner Organization: HelpAge Canada

Established in 1975, HelpAge Canada is a national charity and international NGO dedicated to improving the lives of older people across Canada and globally. We are the national backbone of the Community-Based Seniors Serving (CBSS) sector, representing more than 10,000 organizations and reaching over 400,000 older adults through a shared focus on belonging, inclusion, and financial well-being.

As an active member of the HelpAge Global Network (208 organizations in 99 countries), HelpAge Canada works to advance the shared vision of a world where older people live safe, healthy, and dignified lives. Our programs build capacity, foster collaboration, and strengthen the collective voice for ageing well.

Learn more at: www.helpagecanada.ca

Location of the Project: 670 Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario.

This project offers a flexible working environment. Co-located within The Good Companions building – a community-based senior serving organization – we have access to office space and board rooms for meetings.

Most of this work will be done remotely, with weekly team huddles and an opportunity to meet in person once every 2 months with immediate team members if based in Ontario and once every 3 months if based outside Ontario. Most of the team members are based in Ontario.

Access to internet, computer and phone will be required.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Section 1: Description of the Project

The Ageing Connected project will create a hub dedicated to reducing social isolation and loneliness among older adults, with HelpAge Canada acting as the coordinator. This hub will bring together older adults, community-based seniors' services (CBSS) organizations, governments, and other partners to make the issue of loneliness more visible, create stronger community supports, and create policies and funding for long-lasting change. We will create a map of partners to understand who is doing what, so we don't duplicate work, and bring partners together once a year to share learnings and find ways to work together.

At the heart of our approach is a commitment to community-driven solutions; in ways that reflect the cultural, geographical, and demographic realities of older Canadians. By talking to organizations and communities across Canada, we have earned the trust and permission to take action. By listening closely to older people and their communities, we understand their needs and will use this knowledge to drive meaningful, locally relevant solutions.

Working with community-based organizations and our partners, we will study the prevalence and types of loneliness, apply tools like the UCLA Loneliness Scale, and identify 'connection deserts' where supports are lacking. The hub will coordinate evaluation and communications, compile research and best practices, and identify knowledge and program gaps. We will turn these insights into action by creating a national loneliness heat map to show where investment is most needed and publishing an annual report card, offering policy recommendations. We will also create national measurements and benchmarks to track progress year over year.

The flagship initiative of this project is the Age Better granting program. Age Better grants are a way for local organizations to offer programs and services tailored to the specific needs of older people within their communities. We will fund 20 initiatives (scaling up to 45) that help older adults build meaningful social connections, offer culturally relevant

programming, with a particular focus on supporting older adults who have been historically excluded or underserved.

Section 2: Goals of the Project

The Age Better grant program will strengthen the sector by giving community organizations the tools, resources, and coordination they need to better address loneliness among older adults.

The long-term vision of this project is to establish a lasting national infrastructure to address social isolation and loneliness among older adults. We want to shift systems so that loneliness is recognized and addressed as a core public health and social issue. Beyond the timeframe of this grant, the project aims to secure stable funding for CBSS organizations and establish common ways to measure loneliness so progress can be tracked consistently.

We expect to see major progress within 3–5 years, with a fully operational hub, common measures in use, and pooled funding mechanisms in place. By 10 years, our vision is a Canada where loneliness among older adults is measurably reduced each year, where every community has the tools and resources to respond, and where social connection is embedded as a priority in health and social policy. We anticipate 4 outcomes:

- **Outcome 1:** Improve System Coordination to increase sense of belonging for older Canadians
- **Outcome 2:** Reduce the experiences of Social Isolation and Loneliness
- **Outcome 3:** Provide pathways to strengthen engagement of Community partners to create spaces of belonging
- **Outcome 4:** Inform stronger Policies and Long-Term Funding to Address Social Isolation and Loneliness

Section 3: Guiding Questions

Question 1: How do we identify and amplify the diverse experiences of loneliness?

19% of Canadians over 65 report a lack of companionship or feel isolated from others, while 30% are at risk of social isolation (National Institute on

Ageing, 2022). This has significant implications, as loneliness experienced by older adults is associated with mood disorders, cardiovascular disease, and an increased risk of overall mortality.

With nearly a quarter of Canada's population set to be over the age of 65 by 2031, the number of lonely or isolated older adults is set to increase with it, along with the individual and societal consequences. How do we understand these experiences better and how do we develop a way to move the dial in a way that impact can be measured?

Combining surveys as a way to hear directly from beneficiaries, how do we identify belonging and connection deserts in the Country and how can this information be used to inform resource allocation and policy shifts?

Question 2: What are the gaps in policy and benchmarking of loneliness?

Health and social systems including the Public Health Agency of Canada need stronger policies on social determinants of health and on loneliness as a preventative health mechanism, as loneliness is not consistently recognized or measured as a public health issue. What is best practice? And what policy landscape can we recommend in Canada that best places our systems to combat loneliness?

Question 3: How or what do we do to address the demographic disparities in the experience of belonging amongst older persons?

The fastest growing demographic of Canadians is people over the age of 85; the majority of whom are women. However, older women are more likely to live alone, experience poverty and neglect, and face health inequalities, highlighting the need for equity-focused and gender-inclusive programming that keeps older women connected with their communities.

Further, Loneliness is more prevalent among historically excluded or underserved older adults, including Indigenous Peoples, immigrants and newcomers, members of ethno-cultural, Black, and other racialized communities, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, persons with disabilities, those living in institutions, and older adults residing in remote or underserved areas. Addressing this inequity requires targeted support for organizations that provide culturally relevant, accessible, and inclusive programming.

Section 4: Research Methods & Dissemination Approach: The 3

Streams

Within the Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program, we propose three research streams:

- **Creative**
- **Advocacy**
- **Academic**

The tracks are designed to articulate the possibilities of diverse scholarship on belonging. The program recognizes that creative methods, advocacy-focused research, and academic research are all scholarly. All three tracks have the potential to address similar topics. We encourage Fellows and Partners to explore different ways of asking questions and sharing knowledge that instills belonging for the researcher and participants.

Both HelpAge Fellows will be working on the Ageing Connected Project. There are multiple components to this Pan-Canadian initiative. Each Fellow will be tasked with a different component of the project.

Fellow 1 (Academic/Creative): Benchmarking Belonging

Would work on establishing surveys, based on the UCLA loneliness scale, distributing surveys, and analyzing the survey to establish Belonging benchmarks (heat map) per identified administrative boundary. This will be done by identifying the average UCLA likert score per administrative boundary. This will establish the 2026 baseline, on which future scores will be measured.

Fellow 2 (Advocacy): Informing Policy

This Fellow, through conducting international literature reviews of past and present policies, government infrastructure and other National or International level policies, infrastructure and conventions, will develop a suite of 3 to 4 policy recommendations for all levels of government to consider. These will be aimed at strengthening the sense of belonging and reducing loneliness experiences by Older Canadians in all their diversity.

Fellows will work together on knowledge mobilization and building a 6-step path to belonging.

Section 5: Key Deliverables

- **Work plan:** A co-created, phased work plan outlining research activities, community engagement, and dissemination of milestones.
- **1 blog post (500 – 1,000 word):** related to the project the Fellows are working on, posted to the Belonging Forum's website.
- **Final Output:** Based on one, or a combination of research approaches chosen. Examples:
 - **Academic stream:**
 - Mandatory output: 20 – 35-page publishable scholarly contribution supported by primary or secondary source data.
 - This is a mandatory output of the academic stream, however, Fellows are welcome to adopt creative methodologies or produce alternative outputs that encompass components of the other streams.
 - **Advocacy stream:**
 - Mandatory output: 10–15-page piece to document & advance policy/organizing impact.
 - Proposed policy
 - Advocacy toolkit
 - **Creative stream:**
 - Mandatory output: A creative or practical output coupled with an accompanying written component.
- **A Final Presentation:** A presentation to the Samuel Fellows cohort to share findings, community perspectives, and actionable recommendations.

APPLICANT INFORMATION

About the Program/What the Program Offers



The Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program empowers young people, recent graduates, and people with lived experience to engage in meaningful research and community action. At the Belonging Forum, our mission is to build connectedness within and between communities through partnerships, research, programming, learning initiatives, and advocacy. At the Belonging Forum, fostering belonging is central to our work. The Belonging Forum approaches the definition of belonging as connection to **the 4 Ps: people, place, power, and purpose.**

This is to say that belonging comes through our **relationships** with other people as well as through our **rootedness in nature**, our **ability to influence** social, political and economic decision-making, and our **capacity to find shared meaning and purpose** in our lives. The program offers a unique opportunity to apply the lens of belonging to issues that matter, to think intersectionally and holistically about the problems of the 21st century – while working alongside experts and community leaders.

This is a paid opportunity from June 2026 – February 2027. Fellows will carry out the research part-time on a schedule agreed between the Fellow, the partner, and the Belonging Forum. The Fellow will receive a bursary to support their work.

The Program offers:

- A flexible, part-time research opportunity.
- A bursary to support your research calculated based on cost of living where the Fellow is based and number of hours committed.
- Work with national and international community partners.
- Capacity building, skills development, and mentorship.
- Network and team building opportunities.
- All works produced by the Fellows are published on the Belonging Forum website and promoted on our social media channels.

[Equity Statement](#)

We encourage all equity-seeking groups such as immigrants, Black and Indigenous communities, people of color, women, young people, 2SLGBTQ+ community members, and people with disabilities to apply. Please let us

know if you need any accommodation throughout the application and interview process and we will be happy to support you.

Thank you for your interest in the Samuel Fellows in Belonging Program. We thank all applicants for their interest, but only those selected for an interview will be contacted.

Key Attributes and Skills in the Applicant

- Any combination of lived, educational or work experience in sociology, gerontology, social development, human/social services.
- Background knowledge or experience in the areas of ageing, community development, and non-profit/civil society.
- Comfort in conducting research and literature reviews.
- Knowledge in survey development and data collection.
- Data analysis, computer literacy, report and infographic development
- Can work independently and with a team.
- Familiarity with policy development, briefing notes, and public facing documents.
- An intermediate understanding of Government Relations and how government functions.
- Ideally is an older adult and based in Canada; if in Toronto, can meet supervisor on U of T campus.