CJNSER / ReCROES
Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research
Revue canadienne de recherche sur les OSBL et l'économie sociale

CJNSER / ReCROES
Vol. 16, No. 2, 2025
pp. 1 – 18

Policy on the Frontlines: Community Nonprofit Organizations Working with Older Adults During COVID-19 in Montréal

Meghan Joy, Concordia University
Laurie Fournier, Concordia University
Kate Marr-Laing, McGill University
Shannon Hebblethwaite, Concordia University

ABSTRACT

Community nonprofit organizations (CNPOs) are a vital component of the social infrastructure that addresses the needs of older adults aging in place. Despite this, CNPOs are overlooked in political research and relevant policies, such as the age-friendly cities program. This article examines CNPO work during the COVID-19 pandemic in Montréal, Québec. Policy analysis, surveys, and interviews with CNPO staff, local policy actors, and older adults reveal that CNPOs became increasingly essential frontline social service providers during the pandemic. While CNPOs fill gaps in public and private social infrastructures, they are facing considerable service, labour, administrative, and financial challenges due to inadequate policy support. Policy on aging must incorporate CNPO work in different sectors and communities, facilitate partnerships that respect CNPO autonomy, and improve CNPO funding.

RÉSUMÉ

Les organismes sans but lucratif (OSBL) communautaires sont une composante essentielle de l'infrastructure sociale qui répond aux besoins des aînés vieillissant chez eux. Pourtant, malgré leur importance, les OSBL communautaires sont négligés dans la recherche politique et dans la mise en œuvre de politiques, comme on le voit dans le programme des villes « amies des aînés ». Cet article examine le travail des OSBL durant la pandémie de la COVID-19 à Montréal, au Québec. L'analyse des politiques—ainsi que celle de sondages et d'entrevues effectués auprès du personnel des OSBL, de responsables locaux et d'aînés—montre que, pendant la pandémie, les OSBL sont devenus des fournisseurs de services sociaux de première ligne de plus en plus essentiels. Cependant, même si les OSBL communautaires comblent les lacunes des infrastructures sociales publiques et privées, ils font face à des défis considérables en matière de services, de main-d'œu-

Joy, M., Fournier, L., Marr-Laing, K., & Hebblethwaite, S. Policy on the Frontlines: Community Nonprofit Organizations Working with Older Adults During COVID-19 in Montréal. ©2025 *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research 16*(2),1–18. doi:10.29173/cjnser694

vre, d'administration et de finances en raison d'un soutien politique inadéquat. Les politiques sur le vieillissement doivent tenir compte du travail des OSBL dans différents secteurs et communautés, faciliter les partenariats qui respectent l'autonomie des OSBL, et augmenter le financement des OSBL.

Keywords / Mots clés : community nonprofit organizations, social infrastructure, age-friendly cities, aging in place, COVID-19 pandemic / organismes sans but lucratif communautaires, infrastructure sociale, villes adaptées aux aînés, vieillir chez soi, pandémie de la COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the important role of community nonprofit organizations (CNPOs) in the field of policy on aging, in a context where aging in place is a public policy goal and age-friendly cities (AFCs) are a popular policy solution. There is an expectation that CNPOs will inform the design and be involved in actioning local AFC initiatives to enable older adults to live in their existing residences and neighbourhoods for as long as possible. Yet, there is little research that directly explores the unique role of the community nonprofit sector in AFC policy and practice. The research suggests that there are overwhelming expectations being placed on the nonprofit sector in a neoliberal context of social welfare cuts, policy devolution, individual and family responsibilization, and marketized contractual partnerships between the state and nonprofit organizations (Joy, 2020). The nonprofit sector was struggling with these expectations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a major public health crisis that was particularly marginalizing for older adults and those offering them care. While the pandemic brought to light longstanding systemic problems in the formal healthcare sector, the topic of older adults aging in place and the role of CNPOs remains largely under-researched. This article argues that a study of local CNPOs in the pandemic is vital for understanding how our polity cares for older adults, and thus the extent to which we have supported aging in place by fostering AFCs.

This article highlights the results of a project that examined how CNPOs supported older adults in Montréal during the COVID-19 pandemic through policy analysis, an environmental scan, descriptive data from surveys of CNPOs, and interviews with CNPO staff, local policy actors, and older adults. As elsewhere, the pandemic exposed major policy failures in Québec, such as precarious housing and inequalities in the social support and healthcare system, that contribute to the marginalization of older people (Hebblethwaite, Young, & Martin Rubio, 2021). Yet, Québec is considered a world leader in AFCs and supports an autonomous community nonprofit sector. This research offers insight into how well these strategies and supports prepared CNPOs for a major health crisis that was particularly challenging for older adults.

COMMUNITY NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AS POLITICAL AGENTS

Community nonprofit organizations are mission-based organizations that provide services, programs, opportunities for connection and identity formation, mutual support, knowledge-building, and policy advocacy for their communities, be they geographic or identity-based (Richmond & Shields, 2024). They operate on the frontlines of policy, meeting human needs for resources and

connection directly and through policy advocacy, and are thus political agents. Moreover, there has always been a relationship between the state and nonprofit sector, the character of which has gone through many iterations depending on the existing sociopolitical economy (Joy & Shields, 2020). The pre-World War II era of classical liberalism in English speaking Canada was characterized by the preponderance of local religious charities, philanthropic donations, and ad hoc local government support, whereas in Québec, the Catholic Church was predominant. The postwar social liberalism context of welfare-state building led to the formation of "junior partnerships" between some nonprofits and the central state. In Québec, this occurred with the provincial government, where the nonprofit sector has fought to establish political autonomy and institutionalize a partnership model rooted in the principles of social democracy (White, 2001; Caillouette, 2004). During this time, favoured equity-seeking agencies received core funding to fulfill their missions to bring marginalized groups into the status quo, sometimes actively pushing against systems of inequity. The neoliberal political project of the 1980s onward sought to put an end to these winds of systemic change. The partnership relationship between the state and the nonprofit sector was reoriented through new public management (NPM) to a private market model of nonprofit alternative service delivery through contracts (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005). Research on the political economy of the nonprofit sector has illustrated systemic challenges with NPM: a contract culture that creates competition and inequity between agencies; a shift from core mission and program funding to project-based funding that is short-term and requires incessant reporting and reapplication/rebranding; increased reliance on private funding and own source revenue; pressure to prove value for money; and chronic labour challenges such as limited salaries, benefits, and job security that incites staff burnout and turnover (Evans & Shields, 2018; Richmond & Shields, 2024; Salamon, 2015; Cunningham, Baines, Shields, & Lewchuk, 2016). Community nonprofit organizations in Québec have organized against this neoliberal onslaught to retain their autonomy, social justice and transformative missions, as well as institutional support and core public funding (Caillouette, 2004, Laforest, 2011b).

Despite the important political role of CNPOs, they remain underexamined in the fields of political science and policy studies in Canada (Joy & Shields, 2020). When the nonprofit sector is examined in these disciplines, the focus has been on larger organizations and central government policymaking, be that federal or provincial (Laforest, 2011a, 2011b). Research on community-based agencies situated locally and providing various forms of care and advocacy for populations that have been marginalized is still limited in political science (Smith, 2005), and even in nonprofit sector studies (Phillips & Wyatt, 2021). The neoliberal period seems to have marked a shift in nonprofit studies to a more managerial and positivistic orientation, moving away from a tradition of sociopolitical analyses of power through rich case study and comparative research (Laforest, 2011b; Coule, Dodge, & Eikenberry, 2022). Together, these research gaps result in a major lacuna in our understanding of the practice and effects of policy in everyday life. An analysis of local CNPOs offers an important vantage point to study how and whether the sociopolitical and potentially transformative roles of the nonprofit sector around identity expression, mutual care, social engagement, and political activism are understood, valued, and supported.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrates an important moment for the nonprofit sector which has the potential to change its relationship with government, perhaps away from neoliberal NPM. In some cases,

core funding and human resource support, long advocated for by the nonprofit sector, flooded in from governments at all levels as emergency assistance (Shields & Abu Alrob 2020; Lasby & Barr 2021). This suggests that there was a reinforced recognition that governments needed nonprofits, and that public support enabled the sector's capacity to reach and assist people (Shields, Joy, & Cheng, 2024). There is thus the potential to lay the foundations for a mutual relationship between the state and the nonprofit sector that expands on and transforms social liberalism. This article examines this relationship in the context of older adult community care.

THE COMMUNITY NONPROFIT SECTOR AND POLICY ON AGING

Research suggests that CNPOs form a vital component of the social infrastructure, or "the places and organizations that facilitate social interactions and connections," that enables aging in place in urban environments (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024, p. 95; Joy, 2020). Aging in place tends to refer to aging in one's existing neighbourhood residence (be it rental or ownership) rather than in public long-term care institutions. Aging in place is preferred by both older adults and governments, particularly provinces, as they govern and fund public healthcare. Aging in place has thus become a major policy goal, and it is the work of CNPOs that enables this for many older adults. The age-friendly cities (AFC) program is a popular policy approach intended to support older adults to age in place. The AFC concept was developed by the World Health Organization and includes a comprehensive checklist of policy actions in the areas of affordable and accessible housing and transportation, health and social care, planning and urban design, and accessible communication, as well as efforts to combat ageism and encourage social participation and civic engagement (2007).

While in Canada, some provinces (such as Québec) administer and offer limited funding support for AFCs, the bulk of the responsibility to design, fund, and implement AFC strategies and projects is left to local government and CNPOs. Despite this, there is little research that explores the unique role of CNPOs in AFC policy and practice. Buffel and Phillipson (2024) argue that local social infrastructure is an undervalued and underexamined component of aging in place and age-friendly city practice and research, which tends to focus on physical infrastructure change. The authors highlight the importance of CNPOs as a component of social infrastructure, noting challenges presented to this sector in a context of neoliberal policy devolution and funding cuts, though their analysis is more provoking than empirical (Buffel & Phillipson, 2024). We reviewed studies and papers on AFC policy and implementation, as well as nonprofit activity regarding AFC services and supports between 2007 and 2023; notably, many did not distinguish between the role of the public sector and CNPOs in advancing age-friendly initiatives. The focus of most studies was on local government action, and while this often comprised of work that would be carried out by nonprofit agencies, an understanding of the nonprofit sector and its relationship with the state with respect to resource support, organizational dynamics, and power relations was rarely addressed. Four studies addressed the important role of the nonprofit sector, recognizing that AFC projects rely on community-based, often volunteer-run programming (Buffel, Phillipson, & Rémillard-Boilard, 2021; Menec, 2017; Russell, Skinner, & Fowler, 2022; Joy, 2020). Much of this programming received government funding, which is often short-term, challenging its sustainability. The purpose of this article is to understand the nature of the CNPO policy role in AFCs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic,

and to offer policy insights to ensure that nonprofit autonomy is respected and that they are celebrated, supported, and integrated into a fulsome age-friendly policy and research agenda.

METHODOLOGY

The project methodology consists of an instrumental case study of the role and importance of CNPOs in supporting older adults to age in place and to realize an AFC in Montréal in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The island of Montréal is a particularly fascinating case because it is fragmented into the City of Montréal and its 19 boroughs and 16 de-amalgamated municipalities, each with distinct community characteristics and governance. The City of Montréal has an age-friendly city strategy, and some boroughs and de-amalgamated municipalities also have their own strategies and action plans. Québec is considered a leader in policymaking on aging in place and in supporting AFC programs (Joy, Marier, & Séguin, 2018). Moreover, the province is known for its policies and administrative support for the community sector, which includes a core funding program funneled to eligible autonomous community action organizations through Québec ministries (Caillouette, 2004). As such, we would expect CNPOs to be supported in their work to enable aging in place and AFCs.

Methods for this project included a literature review on the role of the nonprofit sector in supporting older adults and the realization of an AFC, as well as a policy analysis on aging in place and AFCs in Québec and Montréal, particularly looking at how CNPOs are included, understood, and supported in these policies. The authors also conducted an environmental scan of CNPOs in Montréal offering support to older adults in key areas of the age-friendly checklist (transportation, housing, social care, social participation, communication/technology). In November 2021, surveys in both French and English were sent to 60 CNPOs identified in the environmental scan and 20 were completed by representatives from unique organizations (15 French, five English). The survey response rate of 33 percent is within acceptable parameters for quantitative measures. Low response rates are not unexpected in this sector given the limited number of staff employed in these CNPOs, particularly since the survey was distributed in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when these CNPO staff were working considerable overtime hours to support older adults. The survey data were gathered to provide a preliminary understanding of the landscape of the work of the CNPOs. Statistical analysis was not conducted with the survey data. Rather, the survey data helped us to construct the qualitative interview guide and recruit interview participants. Survey questions explored the services CNPOs provided, the needs of older adults, pandemic adaptations and challenges, and partnership relations. Finally, 32 online and in-person in-depth interviews were conducted in English and French with 15 CNPO staff, 12 older adults who participated in the programs and services provided by those CNPOs, and five local policymakers who worked with and funded this sector. Community nonprofit organization participants and policymakers represented different-sized organizations (from 75 members to over 1000) and boroughs (represented 13 of Montréal's 19 boroughs) and had been working in the field for between five and 30 years. Participants were primarily involved in CNPOs in the health and social service sectors. Interviews were conducted in the winter of 2022 and were used to explore the nature of CNPOs, the needs of older adults in Montréal during the pandemic, and an assessment of Montréal as an age-friendly city. Given the breadth of ages of people targeted by these CNPOs, the authors did not set an age

limit for participation. Instead, participants could self-identify as older adults, so as not to exclude anyone participating in relevant services.

The interview data contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experience of local AFC policies, programs, and services from the perspective of policymakers, CNPO staff, and older people themselves. As the core focus of this article is on the role of the CNPO sector, the bulk of the data from the interviews is from them and serves to elaborate on survey data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with French interviews translated to English, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, which facilitated an exploration of the "sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable individual accounts" (p. 85) and shape the social realities of participants. The transcripts were coded by the research team using Atlas.ti software. As the purpose of this article is to understand the political nature of the CNPO policy role in AFCs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Montréal in a broader sociopolitical context of welfare-state restructuring, three broad questions served to organize the data: 1) What is the role of CNPOs in supporting AFCs? 2) What challenges and opportunities did CNPOs face in supporting AFCs during the pandemic? 3) How are CNPOs supported, or not, by governments to realize AFCs? The authors reviewed each code and grouped them into larger themes that corresponded to each of the three questions. The following section outlines the core findings of this analysis.

FINDINGS

The findings highlight that CNPOs form a local age-friendly social infrastructure for older adults, providing a mix of social participation activities that foster local democracy, social services, and policy advocacy that maintains the welfare state. The innovative sociopolitical work of these agencies is challenged by the ways in which the CNPO sector is filling growing gaps in health and social services, as well as physical infrastructure. These agencies are becoming increasingly essential public service providers and were a lifeline for many older adults during the pandemic. Despite this, these CNPOs are vaguely incorporated into AFC policy and are precariously financed.

What is the role of community nonprofit organizations in supporting age-friendly cities?

Social participation as political participation

Community nonprofit organizations working with older adults provide a variety of sociocultural and educational activities crucial for the social participation component of AFCs. In effect, 85 percent (17 out of 20) of survey respondents identified social participation as part of their work. These include free or low-cost gatherings around food and special events; opportunities to engage in creative endeavours such as watching films and art making, game nights, outings to museums and cafés; walks in neighbourhoods and parks; workshops on various topics; and discussion groups for caregivers or to establish intergenerational learning and connection. Community nonprofit organization activities provide opportunities for the creation of social networks and bonds that foster inclusion and community belonging. These activities help members navigate the social isolation that can occur through life transitions that often come with aging, such as changes in physical appearance and health, the illness and death of loved ones, and changes in employment, housing, and mobility.

The situatedness of CNPOs in neighbourhoods is crucial as they become place-based institutional anchors of care that are present for people on a regular basis, making them an essential social infrastructure for AFCs, as was highlighted by Buffel and Phillipson (2024). An older adult participant identified the importance of the public nature of nonprofit spaces that foster mutuality:

> Because we need to have spaces that aren't just commercial. We need to have spaces where people can go, you know, no matter what their finances—whether they're wealthy, they're poor, they're in between—we need meeting places for people that share the same interest, or places where you can get to know your neighbour, … And, you know, help interact and inter-help with each other, it's very important. And you know, to share skills and different things. (OAEN05)

Free social participation activities thus serve and expand a public purpose, especially in urban contexts where so many services and infrastructures that are needed to survive and thrive have been privatized (Hamel & Autin, 2017). The interviews highlight that these CNPOs act as a hub that is vital not only for the wellbeing of older adults living in the community but also for the community.

> Our centre is not a place for recreation; it's really a place to maintain the community. So, we offer tools that will help people learn, get computer skills, food skills, at all levels, so that they can remain as independent as possible in the community. And to be able to participate in the community as well, not just in the organization, but in the whole neighbourhood. (CNPOFR07)

Social participation programming acts as a venue for relationship-building and "active listening" (CNPOFR04) between older adults and CNPO staff. A staff member highlights how social activities offer the opportunity for a wrap-up discussion that can serve as a check-in on the mental health of participants as well as an opportunity to "offer them another service or … talk to them about a resource or … just chat and talk about our passions" (CNPOFR04). The multipronged role of these agencies serves to create a local "safety net" (CNPOFR03). An older adult participant explained this enthusiastically:

> Social contact, personal growth, self-affirmation, learning to say … learning … you know, to understand each other better … That's what it is, a social net, a life balance, you know it makes us better citizens. (OAFR03)

The social participation work of these CNPOs is vital for older adult civic engagement, a central component of the AFC program, but also for democracy broadly as it expands local belonging, mutuality, and social redistribution.

Social services as public services

Community nonprofit organizations also provide social services for older adults. These services can include medical accompaniment, mental health support individually and in small groups, telephone check-ins, transportation, and training programs in the health and social care system. Participants emphasized the important role of CNPOs to provide human services that are immediate, personalized, and preventative. Community nonprofit organization staff are often the first to observe or be told that there is a health and social service need from a member. This is due to CNPOs' "human

scale" (CNPOFR06) and role in the everyday lives of older adults, which can facilitate bonds of trust and understanding between staff and older adults. Policymakers acknowledge CNPO expertise, identifying that they "rely a lot on the community sector" (POLFR02) and that "it's the community that takes charge" (POLFR04).

Community nonprofit organizations also know how government policies, programs, plans, and infrastructures (and lack thereof) affect older adults in their everyday lives and intersecting identities to support or limit their rights. These organizations are thus policy experts who can and do contribute to policy change.

> So how I see it is that our mandate is really to bring up the chain, the famous hierarchical chain of command, you could say, the realities on the ground, what we observe on a daily basis. What are the needs that we have observed and that are tangible, that have not been distorted by figures, by tables, by statistics or anything else, really what we have been able to observe with our own eyes, to bring them up the chain so that they reach the right places. (CNPOFR05)

While this unique form of social service provision supports AFCs, several older adults remarked that CNPOs are taking on more and more public work:

> … the nonprofit sector is kind of taking over the work that the like religious communities in Québec used to do and the government used to do. They've kind of let go of the reins a bit for that, and now it's all community organizations. (OAEN05)

As is the case in other Canadian provinces and cities (Marier, 2021; Joy, 2020), the community sector is being relied upon more and more to fill gaps in, or even replace, public services in the context of a dwindling welfare state in Québec (Hebblethwaite et al., 2021; Hamel & Autin, 2017). A nonprofit participant highlighted this predicament:

> I would say that, theoretically, it is a complementary role to the institutional services of a neighbourhood. That's in theory, but in reality, sometimes we are more. … At the moment, there's a lack of … of resources in the public service, which means that sometimes it's these institutions that come to us and not the other way around. So, sometimes it's worrying because we say to ourselves, "Oh boy, there's a real lack of services," but for me, … we're there to complete the offer made by the public service. (CNPOFR08)

The interviews suggest that the public system would not be able to function without these CNPOs, highlighting the essential role that these agencies play in AFCs. This has professionalized the sector in ways that have been inadequately acknowledged by governments and the public.

> … we often still have this old image of the community sector being all "hippies," the "kumbaya" attitude. But not all, we're super professionals. (CNPOFR02)

> So now it's time for the government to sort of recognize, okay, this is not just some sort of … You know, the 60s are over. It's not some fringe movement or counterculture. That this is a big part of how we support society. (CNPOEN02)

The crucial role of CNPOs in supporting society was put to the test during the pandemic.

What challenges and opportunities did community nonprofit organizations face in supporting age-friendly cities during the pandemic?

Service adaptation

The COVID-19 pandemic was a challenging time for older adults engaged with CNPOs. Several participants talked about how the mental health of older adults suffered as a result of forced isolation coupled with inadequate mental health investments in society, which in some cases led to suicidal ideation, depression and anxiety, addictions, and agoraphobia. Older adults lost loved ones to COVID-19, witnessed media portrayals of the horrendous deaths of older adults in long-term "care," and lost precious time with friends and family. For some, periods of lengthy isolation exacerbated or caused physical health challenges such as reduced mobility and incontinence. According to the survey, 75 percent (15 out of 20) of CNPO staff identified new needs of older adults as a service challenge, with social participation (80%; 16 out of 20), housing (25%; 5 out of 20), transportation (45%; 9 out of 20), food security (75%; 15 out of 20), technology (75%; 15 out of 20), and other (70%; 14 out of 20) as the major categories of need. The high number of "other" refers, in part, to the various forms of personal care needs staff were observing and meeting, as discussed below.

Given the role and character of CNPOs to act as anchors in their communities and the close relationships they have with older adults, they were quick to adapt to meet needs during the pandemic. Indeed, shutting down was not an option for these agencies, as staff knew the essential nature of their role as a local safety net. Some organizations adapted outreach via telephone check-ins and house calls, which was a difficult task for staff.

> … hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of phone calls all the time. And it was very difficult because many people quickly … went into despair. There were people who coped, but then other people went into severe despair and became suicidal. And my team had to deal with this on a regular basis. (CNPOEN02)

> At the beginning, we said: "We'll make 20–30-minute calls, we'll try to keep it short," but it didn't work, you know, it was 50 minutes, one hour, one hour and a quarter, you know. So, it was very heavy for the work team. (CNPOFR04)

Community nonprofit organizations faced increasing demands for food services and various forms of personal care, such as going to the pharmacy for people isolating, fixing and purchasing personal items such as showers, televisions, mattresses, and air conditioners, and tending to needs around hygiene such as incontinence and dental care. One CNPO staff member admitted that given this need for personal care, they "used a lot, a chunk of our emergency money to pay for things like this" (CNPOEN02). An older adult participant advised that the pandemic illustrated that the CNPO sector cares for the emotional and psychological needs of its membership and that these agencies served as an "oasis … to get through the desert" (OAFR02). Several agency staff spoke about how it has been difficult to balance addressing these new personal and emergency-oriented needs and how they were brought to the last resort measure of initiating waitlists because demands exceeded their capacity. It is also a challenge to balance emergency-oriented needs with CNPO social infrastructure missions to promote the social participation that helps maintain quality of life.

> … the more time we spend on individual follow-ups and emergency situations, well, the less time we have to do what I consider to be the heart of community organizations, you know, really the solidarity of being together, all that. (CNPOFR04)

The CNPOs interviewed shifted many of their activities online, and staff devoted time and energy to ensuring access to technology for older adults. The pandemic funding context offered opportunities for some agencies to develop innovative programming to meet new or pre-existing needs and expand expertise. According to the survey, 65 percent (13 out of 20) of organizations expanded services and 80 percent (16 out of 20) initiated new services during the pandemic, particularly in the areas of social outreach, food security, and technology. The pandemic changed the program of work for some agencies and led to popular programs and supports that are now expected by their members, leading one staff to claim that "we literally have been a victim of our success" (CNPOEN02). According to the survey, 100 percent (20 out of 20) of organizations experienced challenges related to their service levels, a finding confirmed in recent research on the Canadian nonprofit sector during the pandemic (Shields et al., 2024). New programming has led to new administrative problems, with 100 percent (20 out of 20) of CNPO respondents experiencing logistical challenges, with the costs of digital devices (60%; 12 out of 20), technology platforms (45%; 9 out of 20), and internet services (25%; 5 out of 20) being major logistical issues.

Community nonprofit organizations were also relied upon by the healthcare sector to transport and accompany people to get vaccines, which was a complex task, as illustrated in the following quote by a CNPO staff member:

> So, we got 100 appointments, and we had to slot in these people, who were so deteriorated at this point. All they knew was that they were going to get the shot that would save, potentially, their life. But everything else, it was in winter and they were so deteriorated. And the weather and everything. So, we managed to get, hire extra drivers. We got my entire board to be on the site … we had to bring these people, wheelchairs lined up. Staying with them, driving them back home. Trying to keep track of everybody. Everybody had to be accompanied through the whole thing. We couldn't just drop them off. They didn't know where they were. It was completely awful. And actually, we were given the appointments and then they changed them. They changed the slot, I have to add this in. So, then we had to reschedule about 70 appointments with people who were already confused. (CNPOEN02)

Once again, the interviews highlight that the work of CNPOs is not just essential for older adults but for the Québec welfare state, which has undergone waves of centralization and austerity (Hamel & Autin, 2017).

> I would say that our role became even more essential during the pandemic, because we acted as a transmission belt between the public health authorities and the more isolated populations to transmit messages, to raise awareness, to help people get vaccinated, to distribute personal protective equipment, and to detect cases of psychological distress that might otherwise have passed under the radar of the public health authorities, who, perhaps because of the waves of centralization they have experienced, have a micro-so-

> ciological vision of the reality of older people, which is less refined than it might have been before. (CNPOFR05)

Staff burnout

The interviews suggest that while CNPO staff were extraordinarily resilient during the pandemic, this has come at a personal cost. Many staff were working from home, some offering difficult telephone calls at all hours of the day, making personal house calls, and retrieving needed items to support the mental health of community members.

> … everyone I know, myself personally, I mean, my workload exploded. It was all day. It was in the evenings. It was the weekend and weekdays, and I'm sure that's the case with so many executive directors. It's just one big blur. (CNPOEN03)

Eighty percent (16 out of 20) of survey respondents identified staff burnout as an organizational challenge, which dovetails with trends in the Canadian nonprofit sector (Shields et al., 2024). Our interviews suggest that staff have experienced considerable vicarious trauma in the context of the pandemic as well as distress related to their working conditions.

> I don't know, now that I think about it, I'm getting palpitations. Just the pressure that we were under, and I don't know how my staff did it. I really don't know how they all just didn't quit. But it was just sheer dedication and empathy with the suffering that they were hearing every day. And I think that's what it was, because I'm sure they would've been much better off, personally, if they had all just left. Because, you know, I thought about it every day. I'm like, "Am I crazy? What am I doing? What am I doing?" So, we survived that. (CNPOEN02)

Related to staff challenges is the loss of volunteers over the pandemic, due to burnout, health concerns, changing priorities, and shifts to virtual work, which limits engagement. According to the survey, 100 percent (20 out of 20) of organizations are experiencing challenges related to volunteers, which is again a sector-wide issue (Shields et al., 2024). Survey respondents indicated these challenges were a shortage of volunteers (70%; 14 out of 20), volunteer turnover (40%; 8 out of 20), adapting skills among volunteers (35%; 7 out of 20), and volunteer burnout (30%; 6 out of 20). What is particularly important to note is that for many of these organizations, the volunteers were also older adults who were forced to confine. They were thus not allowed to volunteer when CNPOs needed them most, and perhaps when their social participation as volunteers was most important.

How are community nonprofit organizations supported, or not, by governments to realize age-friendly cities?

Inadequate policy partnerships

Despite the findings that CNPOs are a core component of an age-friendly social infrastructure, they are not particularly well integrated into AFC policy. When we asked CNPO staff about age-friendly city strategies in Montréal, many first struggled to situate themselves into this program, which they understood as being predominantly about municipal physical infrastructure. This reflects Buffel and Phillipson's (2024) argument that local social infrastructure is both undervalued and underexamined

in the concept, policy, and practice of AFCs. There is also a problematic false separation between social and physical infrastructure, as CNPOs offer a keen perspective on everyday challenges relating to inaccessible public transit, insufficient adapted transit, and underfunding in affordable housing.

> When we talk about adapted transport, it's complicated because it's never on time, and … You know, there are people who come to activities, they arrive an hour and a half before the activity and then they leave an hour after it ends … we compensate a little bit … there are some of my colleagues who have cars, but sometimes we'll … pick the person up on the way … To make their life easier, but it's still on a voluntary basis … You know, we're not rendering a taxi service either. (CNPOFR04)

As highlighted by the limited research that exists on the nonprofit role in AFCs (Joy, 2020), CNPOs and staff are making up for inadequacies in public services by taking on additional work on a volunteer basis.

Social and physical infrastructure is also inseparable because CNPOs often operate in physical spaces. Local governments play a particular role in the realm of space and can allow agencies to operate out of public facilities such as community centres and libraries at low cost or for free.

> So, basically, they occupy our main hall here Monday to Thursday during the day … I haven't really sat down to crunch the numbers. But normally, using this hall is $900.00 for a day … You know, if we look at the value, economic value of the free space is huge. (POLEN01)

This provision of space was not offered systematically by all boroughs and municipalities across the island. According to the survey, 55 percent (11 out of 20) of staff identified appropriate space as an organizational challenge. In-kind resource provision is a considerable support, as rent in the city is expensive and can pose a challenge to small organizations. However, these spaces are not always physically accessible to their members:

> I'm in a building of the city, and no, we don't even have universal accessibility here. You know, the fact that they know that it's a seniors' organization that's been here for like 30 years in their building. We could be a priority on the list. (CNPOFR03)

Furthermore, relying on city space was a challenge for some agencies that were forced to close their space during the pandemic lockdown. These agencies were not considered essential, and this was problematic for staff who were indeed providing essential check-in and service work. Again, we see inconsistencies in the local response due to fragmented governance in Montréal:

> We were lucky, for example, that the borough let us work. I have partner organizations; it was more difficult because even their borough forbade them to access the building. We were lucky in that respect. (CNPOFR03)

Furthermore, some city workers volunteered for CNPOs during the first wave of the pandemic when municipal services were suspended, but this was not the case everywhere. Relationships between the city and CNPOs appeared to be strengthened by the existence of local networks and formal concertation tables in some neighbourhoods. These were vital points of emergency response, in-

formation sharing, and referral during the pandemic. The survey identifies that the most significant partnerships CNPOs developed and fostered during the pandemic were with other CNPOs (60%; 12 out of 20) and local concertation tables (55%; 11 out of 20). Community nonprofit organizations also partnered with federal (20%; 4 out of 20), provincial (30%; 6 out of 20), municipal (20%; 4 out of 20), and borough (30%; 6 out of 20) governments. Thus, government partnerships were important, but more essential for these CNPOs was the existence of networked groups of local actors who formed a social infrastructure that operated as a local social safety net to support older adults during the pandemic.

Our review of policies reiterates the lack of consistent relationship between CNPOs and the provincial and local governments charged with maintaining AFCs. The provincial plans to support local AFC programs consulted over 200 experts and representatives from nonprofit organizations, but there is no indication that this relationship has been systematized (Gouvernement du Québec, 2018). This provincial plan also promises financial support for cities already pursuing AFC initiatives, though this funding is competitive and for one-off projects (50% eligible expenses up to $75,000 over three years). The Montréal AFC plan in place during the time of this project mentions consulting nonprofits, but it is unclear how many agencies were consulted and if and how this relationship has been maintained (Réalisons Montréal, 2018). While the municipal plan promotes cross-sectoral partnerships, it does not mention the extensive role of the nonprofit sector in age-friendly social infrastructure, and no actions are listed to improve community-municipal cooperation. To make it possible for CNPOs to be partners in AFC policy, the constraints of these organizations must be considered, and their involvement accompanied by a clear action plan along with human and financial resource support. A staff member explained this position:

> … there is a lot of listening, a lot of listening, but things don't change quickly, and for a community organization to invest, say, two years on a project to change … three lines in a document from the city, it's … It's a lot of energy, and I think that's not where we … where our strength lies. But it's certain that we act as a counter-power at a certain point. (CNPOFR04)

Thus, while Québec might be considered a world leader in AFCs, it has work to do to fully understand, incorporate, and support the breadth and diversity of age-friendly social infrastructure in its policy.

Inadequate financial support

Consistent with the literature on CNPO-state relations (Richmond & Shields, 2024), CNPO staff raised considerable challenges around financial support from government. While the federal government is perhaps the most far removed from the everyday lives of older adults and has limited jurisdiction over the key elements of the AFC program, it provides competitive project-based funding that several agencies interviewed have received. Furthermore, some CNPOs received core funding through the province's support for autonomous community action organizations. While this level of support for the nonprofit sector is unique in Canada and should be commended, accessing this funding requires that organizations be of a certain size and degree of professionalization, for instance, having charitable status and audit statements. This can exclude smaller CNPOs that support

particularly marginalized populations, rendering them unable to expand to meet community needs. Those CNPOs that did not receive provincial core funding, either because they were small, recently established, and/or lacked charitable status, advised that the province did not provide adequate support for mission and program funding and had to look to the federal and local government instead. Some staff and policymakers talked about small ad hoc funding from local government for specific community projects and to subsidize rents.

Despite growing needs, funding for CNPOs working with older adults continues to be inadequate and precarious, reflecting similar trends in the literature on nonprofits working with older adults (Joy, 2020; Buffel et al., 2021). According to the survey, 80 percent (16 out of 20) of CNPOs were experiencing funding-related challenges, 60 percent (12 out of 20) identified the lack of long-term funding as a challenge, and 30 percent (6 out of 20) identified short deadlines as a problem. Again, reflecting sector-wide complaints with neoliberal contracting (Evans & Shields, 2018), CNPO staff criticized the move away from core and program funding toward project funding that is short-term, competitive, uncertain, and comes with administrative burdens. Forty percent (8 out of 20) of staff surveyed identified cumbersome reporting as a financial challenge.

> … we're always running on one-off grants where sometimes we're asked to reinvent ourselves, to be creative and so on when sometimes we have a specific mission … it's a bit frustrating to have to reinvent the wheel when you have a program that works … That could just be funded on the mission and on a recurring basis. (CNPOFR01)

Staff spend considerable time searching for and applying for project funding from all three levels of government and different departments, boroughs, agencies, and foundations, which have varying eligibility requirements and guidelines. In the survey, identified challenges were unclear guidelines (25%; 5 out of 20) and cumbersome applications (20%; 4 out of 20). This funding environment is thus highly fragmented and chaotic, and the pandemic exacerbated this with small, short-term emergency grants that required constant re-application. There was also confusion around the timing and communication of funding, as some agencies found out they received money three months after their project was supposed to start, leaving them rushed to prove outcomes.

Project-based funding does not support hiring permanent CNPO staff and fails to consider the staff labour required to find funding opportunities, apply for it by coming up with incessant project innovations, and to hire and train new temporary staff. Funding also inadequately pays these staff members, resulting in considerable turnover. According to the survey, organizational challenges were identified as problems related to staffing (100%; 20 out of 20) as well as recruiting and hiring (35%; 7 out of 20). These staffing challenges are sector-wide (Shields et al., 2024) and create precarity for workers:

> And the working conditions, the salaries, we don't have any social benefits, pension plan, dental programs, health programs, etc. You know, it's not normal, and it's not the fault of the boards of directors, you know, we do what we can with the money we have … That's a little bit disappointing because I find that … we recognize that these are essential services, meals on wheels, home support, but we don't give you the means to do them in decent working conditions. (CNPOFR06)

These systemic problems with CNPO funding and the staff precarity that ensues again illustrate a failure on the part of governments in Québec to adequately support age-friendly social infrastructure as a key component of social welfare.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research illustrates that CNPOs form a local care infrastructure that supports aging in place and serves as a social safety net for many older adults on the island of Montréal. Buffel and Phillipson (2024) thus rightly identify nonprofit organizations as an important component of social infrastructure, and this study reveals that CNPOs do not just exist alongside but facilitate access to other forms of public and private social and physical infrastructure. Through a mix of social participation, service, and advocacy work, CNPOs challenge the intersecting social marginalizations and exclusions that can come with aging in the current sociopolitical context. While social participation initiatives tend to be valued instrumentally in public policy on aging to reduce the social isolation that raises health expenditures (Joy, 2020), the interviews highlight that the ultimate value of this work is in fostering community belonging and connection, identity expression, and skill sharing, and it is of mutual benefit to members as well as volunteers and staff. The proximity of CNPOs to the everyday lives of older adults can create trusting relationships between staff and members that can foster active listening as well as keen observations of policy effects and gaps that can inform policy change. The social participation work done by CNPOs is thus not just nice to have but central to the formation of a potentially transformative local politics rooted in civic participation, redistribution, and social solidarity for people of all ages. A political system and academic discipline that undervalues and underexplores social infrastructure and the local community nonprofit sector fails to recognize both how policy actually works and this transformative potentiality (Smith, 2005).

While the potential for transformative politics is present in CNPO work, the study reveals myriad ways in which this is circumvented in the existing sociopolitical context. Community nonprofit organizations are on the frontlines of systemic policy failures in essential services such as healthcare and housing in a polity that has adopted neoliberalism as a dominant political project (Richmond & Shields, 2024). Moreover, aging, which in an ageist and ableist society can result in marginalization, intersects with identities that have been socially oppressed and have led to difficult and unjust life course experiences. The pandemic has magnified pre-existing policy failures, and the nonprofits in this study have experienced ever more urgent and complex needs from the populations that they work with, especially around mental health and personal care (Hebblethwaite et al., 2021). Many agencies created new programming to meet urgent and new needs during the pandemic, essentially filling gaps in public programs. While the interviews highlight incredible stories of human perseverance and care, this positioning means that CNPO workers and volunteers are expected to martyr themselves because they know that if they were not there, some of their members would not survive. These CNPOs are effectively positioned as a social safety net of last resort. As has been observed sector-wide in Canada (Shields et al., 2024), this has led to new service expectations and additional work for staff, yet the funding is temporary and precarious as the so-called pandemic "emergency" ends, inflation and rents increase, and there are serious workforce and volunteer shortages in the CNPO sector.

As local needs become more emergency-oriented, CNPOs' capacity to offer social participation programs, let alone to engage in political change work, is challenged. The current sociopolitical economy and policy system in Québec is failing to respect this local care infrastructure at the same time as it relies on it and extracts from it for broader system functioning (Hamel & Autin, 2017). The pandemic has illustrated that this functionality is hanging on by a thread, and more specifically on the backs of precarious labour and workers who are beginning to say no for the sake of their own physical and mental health. This research confirms existing studies (Joy, 2020) that argue that the local community nonprofit sector cannot act as both a local and global social safety net. A transformative local social infrastructure requires broader forms of public redistribution and provisioning in the areas of income support, healthcare, affordable and accessible housing, transportation, food security, and technological infrastructure. Community nonprofit organizations can and must inform and partner in the policies and plans that govern these areas of social and physical infrastructure but cannot replace them.

The omission of CNPO staff talking about their work in relation to age-friendly policy is interesting given that social and civic participation is a crucial aspect of the World Health Organization's AFC approach (2007). This means that the everyday practice of age-friendly cities is not fully informing policy and is likely the result of CNPOs not having the capacity to systematically participate in policymaking. Provincial and local AFC policies are equally vague on the role of the nonprofit sector. This research suggests that social infrastructure and the CNPO sector is underexamined and inadequately understood by policymakers as a core component of the social welfare system that supports older adults. Moreover, AFC policy in the Québec and Montréal context, as elsewhere, is not particularly systematic (Ball & Lawler, 2014). Age-friendly cities policy is multidimensional, encompassing social and physical infrastructures that are governed interjurisdictionally. Social services and sociocultural policy are the responsibility of the provincial and municipal governments, and much of the provision is undertaken by CNPOs. Physical infrastructure, such as urban planning, transportation, and housing, is also the responsibility of the provincial and municipal governments, with some involvement from the federal government in the form of regulation and funding. Several domains intersect, such as the provision of social housing for older adults. There is no intergovernmental agenda for aging in place and AFCs in Canada that can align these policy areas more systematically, at least identifying who does what and who funds what. Such a large-scale mapping exercise would be helpful. This exercise must identify the nonprofits that support older adults and the kinds of programs they offer. This would also allow for a clear geographic illustration of where there are gaps in provision. Such a database could be maintained and updated regularly, perhaps by a research institute to maintain a political and administrative separation from government.

This multi-scalar policy mapping exercise must be coupled with tangible support for the nonprofit sector that respects its essential nature and its labour as a core component of social welfare. This includes expanded core funding to support agencies with their missions and program funding that is multi-year and has reasonable reporting requirements, that includes envelopes for staff salaries and benefits and that is adjusted for inflation, as well as funding for technology and for volunteer management and training (Richmond & Shields, 2024). Criteria to access funding should be examined for systematic inequities, such as if requirements for CNPO size, age, and professionalization

limit access for marginalized population groups, with any inequities rectified through program change. This funding must support agencies to have an autonomous political voice, and this could be coupled with regular sector-government meetings and local policy tables that respect CNPO expertise and schedules. Local governments need to be much more systematic in their provision of in-kind support to CNPOs regarding funding and the provision of space. Other levels of government can offer support in their own buildings and with funding to purchase buildings, renovate them to ensure universal accessibility, and rent spaces in private facilities. This could all be systematized in AFC and aging-in-place policy action plans.

This article and research project speak to the need for a wider research agenda in the field of aging-in-place and AFCs on the role of CNPOs and their relations with central and local governments. There is much to learn about local models of mutuality and community care from CNPOs. Such an agenda must examine the full diversity of the sector—nonprofits working with different groups of older adults, on different policy issues, with different leadership and administrative models, and of different size and degree of professionalization—comparing and contrasting the ways in which they support the practice of aging in place and AFCs and how they relate to different governments to do so and the power dynamics involved. This agenda would also examine the political geography of nonprofit provision, comparing how different municipalities, provinces, and nations govern the sector. Specific attention must be placed on the experiences and needs of nonprofit staff and volunteers and how they can be supported and sustained collectively through aging in place and AFC policy.

REFERENCES

Ball, S., & Lawler, K. (2014). Changing practice and policy to move to scale. A framework for age-friendly communities across the United States. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 26*. 19–32.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Buffel, T., & Phillipson, C. (2024). *Ageing in place in urban environments: Critical perspectives*. Milton Park, NY: Routledge.

Buffel, T., Phillipson, C., & Rémillard-Boilard, S. (2021). Age-Friendly cities and communities: New directions for research and policy. In D. Gu & M. E. Dupre (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Gerontology and Population Aging* (pp. 149–158). New York, NY: Springer, Cham.

Caillouette, J. (2004). *The community and social economy movement in Québec: Development and recognition (1989–2003).* Centre de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales, no ET0415.

Coule, T.M., Dodge, J., & Eikenberry, A.M. (2022). Toward a critical non-profit studies: A literature review. *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 51*(3), 478–506.

Cunningham, I., Baines, D., Shields, J., & Lewchuk, W. (2016). Austerity policies, 'precarity' and the nonprofit workforce: A comparative study of UK and Canada. *Journal of Industrial Relations, 58*(4), 455–472.

Evans, B., Richmond, T., & Shields, J. (2005). Structuring neoliberal governance: The non-profit sector, emerging new modes of control and the marketisation of service delivery. *Policy and Society, 24*(1), 73–97.

Evans, B., & Shields, J. (2018). The third sector, the neo-liberal state and beyond: Reshaping contracting and policy advocacy. In C. Dunn (Ed.), *The handbook of Canadian public administration* (pp. 489–500). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Gouvernement du Québec. (2018). *Un Québec pour tous les âges. Le plan d'action 2018–2023. Report*. Québec, QC : Secrétariat aux aînés du ministère de la Famille et Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux.

Hamel, P., & Autin, G. (2017). Austerity governance and the welfare crisis in Montréal. *Alternate Routes, 28*, 165–188.

Hebblethwaite, S., Young, L., & Martin Rubio, T. (2021). Pandemic precarity: Aging and social engagement. *Leisure Sciences, 43*(1-2), 170–176.

Joy, M. (2020). *The right to an age friendly city: Redistribution, recognition, and senior citizen rights in urban spaces*. Montréal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Joy, M., & Shields, J. (2020). The political economy of the non-profit sector. In H. Whiteside (Ed.), *Canadian political economy* (pp. 215–233). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Joy, M., Marier, P., & Séguin, A-M. (2018). La démarche villes-amies des aînés. Un remède universel pour vieillir chez soi? In V. Billette, P. Marier, & A-M. Séguin (Eds.), *Les vieillissement sous la loupe : entre mythes et réalités* (pp. 75–84). Laval, QC : Presses de l'Université Laval.

Laforest, R. (2011a). *Voluntary sector organizations and the state: Building new relations*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

Laforest, R. (2011b). "L'étude du tiers secteur au Québec : Comment saisir la spécificité québécoise? *Politique et Sociétés, 30*(1), 43–55.

Lasby, D., & Barr, C. (2021). *The uneven impact of the pandemic on Canadian charities. Sector Monitor*. Imagine Canada.

Marier, P. (2021). *The four lenses of population aging: Planning for the future in Canada's provinces.* Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Menec, V.H. (2017). Conceptualizing social connectivity in the context of age-friendly communities. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly, 31*(2), 99–116.

Phillips, S.D., & Wyatt, B. (2021*). Intersections and innovations: Change for Canada's voluntary and nonprofit sector*. Edmonton, AB: Muttart Foundation.

Réalisons Montréal. (2018). *Plan d'action municipal pour les personnes aînées 2018–2020. Montréal, métropole à l'image des personnes aînées* [Report]. Montrèal, QC : Service de la diversité sociale et des sports de la Ville de Montréal. https://www.realisonsmtl.ca/aines [March 20, 2025].

Richmond, T., & Shields, J. (2024). *The Canadian non-profit sector: Neoliberalism and the assault on community.* Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Russell, E., Skinner, M.W., & Fowler, K. (2022). Emergent challenges and opportunities to sustaining age-friendly initiatives: Qualitative findings from a Canadian age-friendly funding program. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy, 34*(2), 198–217.

Salamon, L.M. (2015). *The resilient sector revisited: The new challenge to nonprofit America*, (2nd edition). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Shields, J., & Abu Alrob, Z. (2020). *COVID-19, migration and the Canadian immigration system: Dimensions, impact and resilience. Building Migrant Resilience in Cities (BMRC) Project.* Toronto, ON: York University.

Shields, J., Joy, M., & Cheng, S.M. (2024). The limits of the community nonprofit sector resilience: Evidence from Canadian nonprofit sector surveys during the pandemic. *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research, 15*(1), 1–21.

Smith, M. (2005). Diversity and identity in the non-profit sector: Lessons from LGBT organizing in Toronto. *Social Policy & Administration, 39*(5), 463–480.

White, D. (2001). Maîtriser un mouvement, dompter une idéologie : l'État et le secteur communautaire au Québec. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research, 2*(2), 132–141.

World Health Organization. (2007). *Global age-friendly cities: A guide*. Geneva, CH: WHO Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Meghan Joy is Associate Professor of Political Science at Concordia University. Email: meghan.joy@concordia.ca

Laurie Fournier is Research Assistant at Concordia University. Email: laurie.fournier@mail.concordia.ca

Kate Marr-Laing is a student in the Master of Political Science program at McGill University. Email: kate.marr-laing@mail.mcgill.ca

Shannon Hebblethwaite is Professor in the Department of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University. Email: shannon.hebblethwaite@concordia.ca