



Promoting Older Adults' Engagement in Disaster Recovery Through Supportive Relationships, Partnerships, and Collaboration: Perspectives of Social Work Practitioners and Human Service Professionals

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Abstract

Shifting demographics—that is, the growing number of older adults in Canada and internationally—and intersecting climatic risks create a complex landscape of aging in place in disaster contexts. Some older adults are vulnerable due to their underlying health conditions and limited physical mobility. Yet they also exhibit resilience in a distinct manner, owing to their wealth of knowledge, wisdom, and ability to navigate adversities. This article elucidates potential avenues for promoting the involvement of older adults in disaster recovery efforts. Our intention is to recognize and foster older adult resilience and mitigate vulnerability by drawing upon insights from the study titled “In the Aftermath of the 2016 Alberta Wildfires: The Role of Social Work Practitioners and Human Service Professionals in Long-Term Disaster Recovery.” Employing a qualitative research approach, that study recruited 51 participants for semistructured interviews and focus groups. A thematic analysis of the collected data unveiled the pivotal roles played by social workers and human service practitioners in facilitating recovery from the 2016 wildfires in the research. Notably, three overarching themes emerged concerning the promotion of older adults' involvement in disaster recovery: fostering supportive relationships, building partnerships and enhancing collaboration, and addressing ongoing challenges. These findings offer valuable insights into how social work practitioners and human service professionals can effectively facilitate the engagement of older adults in disaster recovery initiatives. This article emphasizes the significance of actively promoting the participation of older adults in disaster mitigation efforts, thereby fostering greater resilience within communities.

Keywords Alberta wildfires · Canada · Disaster recovery · Older adults · Partnerships and collaboration · Social work

1 Introduction

The frequency and intensity of extreme weather events is increasing due to climate change, often contributing to natural hazard-related disaster events such as severe storms, extreme heat, droughts, floods, and wildfires (Agrawal et al. 2021; Warren and Lullham 2021). Simultaneously, there is a large and growing proportion of older people living longer in all countries (WHO 2022). Despite their considerable adaptive capacity and resilience, some older adults face particular risks and vulnerabilities (Gamble et al. 2013; Fountain

et al. 2019). Older adults may face greater challenges than younger adults during a disaster due to impaired physical mobility, diminished sensory awareness, chronic health conditions, and social and economic limitations that influence their ability to prepare for disasters and to respond, adapt, and recover from these events (CDC n.d.). There is a need for service providers and practitioners in social services and disaster and emergency management to consider an aging population in the context of climate change, disasters, and sustainable development. This is particularly important given the lack of research on natural hazards and older adults in an era of climate change and an aging population (Fountain et al. 2019).

Social workers and human service professionals are taking on a growing responsibility in disaster management across the spectrum of mitigation, preparedness, response,

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and recovery phases (Drolet et al. 2022). Social workers' unique competencies allow them to identify shortcomings, barriers, and strengths as well as devise and implement emergency preparedness, response, and recovery strategies specifically tailored to meet the needs of older adults (Barusch 2011; Gallo et al. 2018). To date, there is limited understanding in terms of the role that social workers can play in promoting older adults' engagement in disaster recovery. This article documents the perspectives of social workers and service providers in promoting older adults' engagement in disaster recovery.

This article shares findings of the study "In the Aftermath of the 2016 Alberta Wildfires: The Role of Social Work Practitioners and Human Service Professionals in Long-Term Disaster Recovery" with a focus on older adults. The research was conducted in 2018–2023 during the disaster recovery phase that intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary goal of this article is to share perspectives of social workers and service providers in promoting older adults' engagement in disaster recovery. After discussing the current state of literature on aging-in-place and methods of the study, key findings are presented in three themes: fostering supportive relationships, building partnerships and enhancing collaboration, and addressing ongoing challenges.

2 Conceptual Considerations

This section addresses an aging demographic in Canada, emphasizing the risks and vulnerability facing some older adults to climate-induced disasters, and examines the significance of social work values and guiding principles with respect to aging-in-place within disaster contexts. Specifically, Sect. 2.1 outlines the projected growth of Canada's older adult population, the associated challenges they encounter, and the necessary support systems. Section 2.2 delves into the specific situation of older adults to climate-induced wildfire risks. Section 2.3 discusses ongoing debates regarding the vulnerability and resilience of older adults in disaster situations, while also exploring the key role of social work values and principles in facilitating aging-in-place during such events.

2.1 Older Adults and Population Aging

Canada's older adult population is projected for unprecedented growth in the coming decades. The demographic aging process is currently accelerating as individuals born between 1946 and 1965—known as the large baby boomer cohort—reach more advanced ages (Statistics Canada 2022a). In 2022, Canada's population aged 65 and older accounted for around 19% of the

population. This proportion is expected to increase to between 22 and 30% by 2068 (Universities Canada 2023). One-third of women and one-fifth of men aged 65 and older live alone in Canada, whereas nearly half of Canadian older adults are accompanied by a partner (Statistics Canada 2022b). Additionally, data show that living alone increases with age. Older adults may face challenges related to social isolation, especially if they live alone or have limited social connections, and there is a need for programs and initiatives promoting social engagement and community involvement.

As an expression of agency, many older adults would like to remain in their own homes instead of opting for long-term care facilities, while accessing the support they need (Ratnayake et al. 2022). For older adults aging in place, the safety and accessibility of one's neighborhood is an important consideration, as well as transportation options, social connections, and informal support systems (Ratnayake et al. 2022). To support the autonomy and promote the well-being of older adults, supportive and consistent health and social care systems are required (Oluwagbohunmi et al. 2023). Wistow et al. (2015) discussed the significance of formal and informal networks in providing care for older individuals at the time of disasters, emphasizing the critical need to prevent disruptions in care networks that could jeopardize their health and well-being.

With an increasing number of older populations, sectors such as healthcare, employment, and housing may face challenges in adequately meeting the support needs of older adults. These sectors also face challenges in disaster mitigation. For example, staff shortages among healthcare workers that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic have only been exacerbated due to workload and working conditions (Statistics Canada 2023). The deficiencies within Canada's long-term care system and substandard conditions frequently experienced by older adults residing in these facilities were brought to attention by the pandemic. Approximately 7% of all older adults, including nearly one in three Canadians aged 85 or older, were living in a collective dwelling such as a nursing or long-term care home (Statistics Canada 2017). The mistreatment of older adults, poor quality of care, and disproportionate rates of COVID-19-related deaths in long-term care settings demonstrated the lack of attention and resources in addressing older adult needs (Government of Canada 2024).

In response to an aging population, Canadian policymakers, social service and healthcare professionals, and communities are working to develop strategies that promote healthy aging, address healthcare needs, and create supportive environments for older adults to live active and fulfilling lives. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines healthy aging as "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age" (WHO 2020, para 3). Healthy aging is also

taking place in an increasingly diverse social environment. In Canada, the percentage of older adults belonging to racialized groups is projected to increase by 190% from 2021 to 2041, rising from 1,020,000 in 2021 to 2,950,000 in 2041 (Statistics Canada 2022c). Older Canadians require culturally appropriate care that considers language and cultural background among other factors. This a multidimensional challenge that requires collaboration across sectors to ensure the well-being of the aging population, particularly in the context of climate change and disasters, and to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion.

2.2 Wildfires and Older Adults

Climate change influences the frequency, intensity, and patterns of various natural hazards, which, in turn, can lead to an increased risk of disasters. Canada already has a warming climate, which will be exacerbated by anthropogenic activities. This increasing warming trend will lead to greater intensity and frequency of some weather extremes (Bush and Lemmen 2019). Climate change and disaster events often exacerbate existing social and economic disparities within communities (Islam and Winkel 2017). Some populations, including low-income individuals, marginalized groups, and those with limited access to resources, may experience disproportionate impacts and face greater challenges in all phases of disaster. Older adults, particularly those in low-income communities, may be more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change due to a wide range of factors (Government of Canada 2022). This may include vulnerability due to an existing health condition, exposure to a hazard, or facing challenges in taking needed protective measures (Government of Canada 2022). Due to societal inequities related to racism, poverty, disability, colonialism, homelessness, sex and gender discrimination, as well as access to healthcare, certain older adults may face increased vulnerability to the impacts of climate change (Government of Canada 2022).

Climate change can have direct and indirect effects on human health. Extreme weather events, heatwaves, and changing patterns of infectious diseases can pose significant health risks. Older adults may be more susceptible to socioeconomic vulnerability and to physiological stress, illness, and an increased risk of mortality resulting from exposure to extreme heat (WHO 2018). Poor air quality can have adverse effects on respiratory health, which can be more pronounced in older adults with pre-existing respiratory conditions or respiratory illnesses (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2023). Understanding the context of disasters is crucial for developing proactive and adaptive strategies to reduce risk, enhance preparedness, and promote resilience (Kwan and Walsh 2017). It involves interdisciplinary approaches that consider environmental,

social, economic, and political dimensions to create more sustainable and disaster-resilient communities. Canada, like many other countries, is experiencing demographic shifts, including an aging population, which is an important consideration in emergency and disaster management.

Canada's 2023 wildfire season was fuelled by record high temperatures and widespread drought conditions across the country. The 2023 wildfires led to multiple evacuations that displaced thousands of residents and community members, including older adults. In the province of British Columbia, nearly 900 older adults were forced out of care facilities due to the wildfires (Bains 2023). Most older adults were transferred to safer areas in the Interior region of the province, but some were displaced to Vancouver, about 400 km away (Bains 2023). The process of relocating patients from long-term care facilities is prolonged because patients with cognitive disabilities needed to be accompanied by staff who knew them. In some cases, older adults were transferred to a new jurisdiction, which created challenges in accessing support from visiting families. Efforts are underway by grassroot organizations such as Healthy Aging Alberta to collect input from community-based senior serving organizations to better understand older adults' immediate and ongoing needs for assistance due to the 2023 wildfires in Alberta, the Northwest Territories, and British Columbia (Healthy Aging Alberta 2023). Given recent events, there is an urgent need to consider an aging population in the context of climate change and disasters by the profession of social work.

2.3 Social Work Values, Guiding Principles, and Aging-in-Place in Disaster Contexts

Literature on older adults' engagement in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery is growing. Numerous studies consider the physical and mental health hurdles faced by older adults during disasters, often portraying them as vulnerable and weak (Bell et al. 2020; Andrade et al. 2023; Kino et al. 2023). However, older adults exhibit resilience in unique ways due to their accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and ability to withstand shocks (Matyas and Pelling 2014; Merdjanoff et al. 2019; Navarrete-Valladares et al. 2023). This research acknowledges the inherent strength and resilience of older adults despite their susceptibility stemming from physical limitations and underlying health issues. Consequently, their active involvement in preparedness and recovery efforts will not only empower them but also bolster their resilience. Moreover, their active engagement in disaster recovery efforts may link them with social protection programs, which can further enhance their ability to absorb shocks (Rao and Enelamah 2024).

Phraknoi et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review highlighting the needs of older adults in disaster response,

revealing a deficiency in advocacy that directly amplifies their voices, rather than indirectly addressing their needs. Acknowledging that disaster response and recovery are interconnected processes underscores the importance of encouraging and facilitating the active participation of older adults across all phases of disaster management to enhance their resilience. Furthermore, older adults' active involvement is essential in directing their voices, thus enabling the customization of recovery processes to address their specific needs and challenges (Hrostowski and Rehner 2012). Disasters present significant challenges to older adults, as the disruption of systems and services upon which older adults rely, such as transportation, communication, healthcare, and social supports, are affected. Resources are needed to enhance communities' social networks, connectedness, and integration of assets before disaster strikes (Goldman et al. 2014).

With the growing number and diversity of older adults, it is essential for professionals such as social workers, case managers, and gerontologists to assist in effectively preparing for various climate-related emergencies in a culturally sensitive and efficient manner (Gallo et al. 2018). Frontline professionals, including care managers and gerontologists, occupy a unique position to aid vulnerable older adults in crafting personalized emergency preparedness plans. Through their assessments, social workers can identify characteristics such as social isolation, sensory impairments, limited mobility, cognitive decline, and frailty, which elevate the risk of adverse outcomes during disasters (Bayraktar and Yilmaz 2018). Older adults can be supported in assembling emergency kits containing items tailored to their specific needs, such as dietary requirements, medications, spare eyeglasses, and wearable headband flashlights.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) launched the new Code of Ethics that outlines social work values and guiding principles in 2024, as a foundation for the ethical practice of social work in Canada. The Code states that “all values, principles and guidelines have equal importance and work together to describe the ethical conduct, behavior, and professionalism necessary to provide ethical social work services in Canada” (CASW 2024, p. 2). The Code of Ethics is consistent with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW 2018), which requires members of CASW to uphold the values and principles established by both CASW and IFSW. The seven core values stated in the Code (CASW 2024, p. 4) are:

- (1) Respecting the Dignity and Worth of All People
- (2) Promoting Social Justice
- (3) Pursuing Truth and Reconciliation
- (4) Valuing Human Relationships
- (5) Preserving Integrity in Professional Practice

- (6) Maintaining Privacy and Confidentiality
- (7) Providing Competent Professional Services.

According to CASW (2024, p. 4) “ethical decision making involves sensitivity to ethical issues, which can include gathering relevant facts, considering the circumstances from multiple points of view, and contemplating a decision option that best respects the rights of all involved and does the greatest good and least harm.” This informs the practice of social workers in disaster contexts and in working with older adults.

3 Study Context and Methods

This section presents the study context (Sect. 3.1) and methods (Sect. 3.2). Section 3.1 elaborates the loss, damage, and human suffering resulting from the 2016 wildfires in Alberta, highlighting the critical role played by social work practitioners and human service professionals in addressing the needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities affected by the wildfires. In Sect. 3.2, the research approach, data collection techniques, participant recruitment methods, and data analysis procedures are documented.

3.1 Study Context

Provinces in Western Canada are experiencing extreme wildfire seasons due, in part, to changing climactic conditions. The 2016 wildfires in Alberta and 2023 wildfires in Canada were unprecedented. The 2016 Alberta wildfires caused unprecedented human suffering, significant financial loss and damage, and adverse environmental impacts. In May 2016, wildfires erupted in northern Alberta, marking the costliest disaster in Canadian history. The city of Fort McMurray, situated within the Athabasca oil sands region, was severely affected by a large-scale wildfire that spread across the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. As a result, a state of emergency was declared and a mandatory evacuation order was issued for approximately 88,000 residents by the provincial government of Alberta.

During the 2016 Alberta wildfires social work practitioners and human service professionals played an important role to meet the needs of individuals, families, groups, and affected community members (Drolet et al. 2021). Social work practitioners and human service professionals were also involved in disaster and emergency response with older adults, and offered unique contributions given their ethical commitment and scope of practice. Research was undertaken from 2018 to 2023 in the disaster recovery phase that intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic to better understand the roles and responsibilities

of social work practitioners and human service professionals after the wildfires.

3.2 Methods

The research adopted a constructivist framework to recognize that people's lived experiences are socially constructed (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Creswell and Creswell 2018). A social constructivist approach to research recognizes that knowledge is actively constructed by individuals and groups through their interactions with each other and the world around them, and that reality is socially constructed through shared meanings, interpretations, and experiences (Creswell et al. 2003). Researchers' goal is to interpret the meaning people attach to certain objects or events, for instance, people's vulnerability to natural hazards. Individuals' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations shape their understanding of the world. The study employed research methods involving individual interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 51 participants took part in the study, consisting of 40 individual interviewees and six focus groups with 11 participants. The interviews and focus group discussions centered on examining the roles of social work practitioners and human service professionals in long-term disaster recovery following the 2016 Alberta wildfires. However, the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and some participants shared their disaster recovery experiences and perspectives in this context.

The study participants were recruited from diverse community organizations, non-profit agencies, and government bodies that were engaged in disaster recovery efforts. The inclusion criteria for participation were to have direct experience in the provision of social services in the aftermath of the 2016 Alberta wildfires. The recruitment of participants was promoted through diverse networks, such as social work education programs and the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) online newsletter. Interviews took place from June to September 2020, while the focus groups were conducted in April and May 2021, with no overlap in participant involvement. The study received prior approval from the University of Calgary's Human Research Ethics Board before data collection commenced.

Participants were briefed on the study's objectives and provided their informed consent before each session. Interviews and focus groups lasted approximately 45–60 min and were conducted via Zoom or telephone to comply with COVID-19 protocols. Each session was recorded with consent from participants, and detailed notes were taken. Transcripts of the recordings and notes were then coded for thematic analysis to identify common responses and address the research questions and objectives. Transcripts were analyzed using open coding, axial coding, and selecting coding to identify emerging themes, associations, and

links. Themes were generalized to identify key aspects of experience. Data collected through the interviews and focus groups were separately analyzed and then integrated for final analysis. Each participant was given a CAD 20 e-gift card as a token of appreciation and incentive for their participation.

4 Findings

Participants worked in diverse professional roles such as administration, children's services, mental health and addictions, trauma counselling, income support, school social work, private practice, psychotherapy, immigration, housing, and community development. Most of the participants worked full time and were registered social workers with the Alberta College of Social Workers. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that social workers and human service practitioners fulfill numerous essential roles in disaster recovery. These roles encompass advocacy, assessment, education, community development, counseling, crisis intervention, knowledge mobilization, trauma-informed care, peer support, policy evaluation and recommendations, service and program provision, long-term recovery support, research, and assistance for first responders. Three themes were identified in relation to promoting older adults' engagement in disaster recovery: fostering supportive relationships, building partnerships and enhancing collaboration, and addressing ongoing challenges. The findings are discussed below.

4.1 Fostering Supportive Relationships

Social workers and human service professionals collaborate with individuals and families to assess their needs and facilitate connections with suitable community services. Participants in the study described how fostering supportive relationships played an important role in their practice. At the micro level, a participant described how disaster recovery from the wildfire intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in social isolation and lack of connection.

Social isolation is critical, the lack of connection, especially people that were predisposed or maybe had depression and anxiety before [the pandemic] and it's just been exacerbated. (Interview Participant)

At the community level or mezzo level, a study participant explained their role in how community members can support and be empowered to help one another.

Community development where you have the community come together to support one another and empower them to help one another so that doesn't

always have to be the experts doing it, but we are the catalysts in getting it started. (Interview Participant)

Study participants agreed on the important need for older adults to have some support, recognizing that some may not have natural or informal supports in the community.

I can see it in a number of different ways, both from the preparedness, response and recovery aspects, and I think human services and social workers play a role in all those areas and I think particularly for vulnerable populations how critical it is for [older] people to have some support. Especially for folks that maybe don't have natural supports out in the community. (Focus Group Participant)

The importance of supportive relationships among older adults through social connections was discussed as relevant to disaster recovery and preparedness. Participants explained that a continuum of services was needed that included informal supports that could be readily accessed. The sustainability of supports in the community was also identified as a critical factor to enhance preparedness and to allow older adults to feel a greater sense of agency and control.

There needs to be a continuum of services [including] informal supports that people can access ... we just redeveloped our E-Prep program, which is an emergency preparedness program, and we're looking at using [it] to bring [people] together just to talk about people's experiences in a very informal and supportive way. This kind of opens the door for people that might need more therapeutic [support] referrals for longer term. It needs to be sustainable, and it needs to be embedded in community. We also can't forget that preparedness is critical, even in a recovery point of view, because that will mitigate some of the trauma in recovery ... people being prepared and making those social connections and having more sense of control before an event. (Focus Group Participant)

Social workers utilized their expertise in trauma, crisis intervention, and other mental health strategies to inform first responders and emergency management professionals on the psychological needs of community members during crises. Another participant discussed the importance of creating opportunities for people to come together to share their experience in an informal setting through non-therapeutic ways. The continuity of services along a continuum was identified as necessary to meet a diverse range of needs.

There needs to be a continual you know from meeting people's basic needs as a start to making sure people have what they need for housing and shelter,

medication, and opportunities for people to come together and share their experiences and in a non-therapeutic way. (Interview Participant)

A study participant described the challenge associated when relationships that provided informal support were disrupted due to a disaster, or in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic.

I think the grief and loss piece is huge, you know, particularly for older adult populations, there's a lot of disenfranchised grief. People haven't been able to be with their loved ones, when they passed, or you know some of the long-term care outbreaks have been really traumatic for the residents and the caregivers. Staff that have been caring to have 50 to 70 people in a facility that passed away, that's huge. (Focus Group Participant)

During all stages of disasters, social workers highlighted the importance of addressing psychosocial and mental health needs, ensuring access to comprehensive services, promoting safety and well-being, and providing ongoing support and care alongside long-term planning following a disaster.

We know there's going to be more disasters and there's going to be more events, and we need a formalized recovery structure that is always in place. We so strongly believe in the relationship building that is so critical both prior to an event. (Interview Participant)

Participants described engaging in a wide range of community development activities to build partnerships and enhance collaboration to establish and sustain programs focused on fostering resilience. These efforts aimed to bring together distressed neighbors to cultivate mutual support and solidarity.

4.2 Building Partnerships and Enhancing Collaboration

Social workers and human service professionals possess substantial expertise regarding community needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities, which can be leveraged to enhance disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. In this context, social workers serve an essential role alongside emergency management. Study participants described their role in building partnerships and enhancing collaborations with a focus on psychosocial dimensions and supporting vulnerable older adults facing diverse challenges in navigating the system.

One of the things that we've learned along the way is that a typical disaster response from a first responder point of view is very much looking at the infrastructure and the hard services. I think

that social work [focuses] on that psychosocial piece and supporting people where they're at, to figure out [how] to navigate the system which is often very challenging, especially for people with vulnerabilities like economic or mental health or like for seniors' cognitive impairment. I think we play a pivotal role in supporting people to get back to a place of equilibrium. (Focus Group Participant)

The need for collaboration was regarded as particularly important. The following example provided by a study participant discusses the role of collaboration in providing supports for older residents in long-term care settings for system improvements.

Collaboration is critical even now, as we're talking about recovering from COVID-19. One of the congregated long-term senior housings [facility] reached out to say that there was really a need to support [older] residents. With the number of deaths that had happened and staff that we're dealing, supporting, and like caring for these folks [who] were traumatized, and I can only imagine administration has had a really tough go in all these long-term care settings. [They] reached out to our agency to see if we could support, and we have some groups that could do that. But in thinking about that, it's not our problem to solve necessarily, it is a much, much bigger problem. So, we started to do an environmental scan and [how] non-profits play a role and Alberta Health Services plays a role, the city plays a role, but who is the backbone? Somebody needs to be the strategist around this and pull everybody together, and right now I think we're still in response, so I think it's hard to think about what recovery looks like. But somebody needs to drive it, and somebody needs to be the holder of it and there's no point in all of us doing little things on our own, we should be really leveraging and not duplicating. So, I think that one of the big things is to have the right people at the tables and I'll add a strategy that is inclusive. (Focus Group Participant)

The role of collaboration across systems was discussed by study participants in disaster contexts. Study participants identified their role in relationship building to support coordination and collaboration to build back better to improve recovery and enhance preparedness.

And then, and like you say, to build better so every time we've been part of a disaster, we've learned a lot about infrastructure and preparedness and relationship building and collaboration and I think that we also play a role in that sector coordination and collaboration. (Interview Participant)

Study participants discussed how they utilized their familiarity with community social services to foster collaboration and partnership between organizations during recovery. Their goal was to ensure continued access to essential services for those affected by the disaster. Social work and human service professionals are involved in building capacity within the community to provide informal and formal supports. A strong focus of the work is to help people make better social connections that can provide supports when needed.

Because I think the other role that we really do play is about building a community capacity so there's social connections. So, amongst the community and that community development piece, I think, is so critical around people getting back to functioning places is to know that you have supports whether it's informal and formal supports, but the informal are so important, and we do a lot of work right now around trying to help people make better social connections, so that when they the event happens, they have more natural supports as well. (Focus Group Participant)

Drawing from their experience, participants explained that people's needs change over time in disaster recovery, and a diverse range of supports were needed to be readily accessible with few barriers.

I think it does need to be a continuum all the way, and it might change over time for people, you know they might be fine for a while and then not so fine and it needs to be readily accessible and with not a lot of barriers, whether their economic, you know with a sliding scale ... (Interview Participant)

There was a recognition by study participants of the need for preparedness to ensure future disaster events had less impact.

I know that if we can prepare people better then the impacts of the event are less. How do we support people well when [the] disaster is happening and how do we lessen the psychosocial impacts? I don't think we ever get back to a normal after disaster, but to mitigate some of the impacts of the disaster. (Interview Participant)

Social workers described participating in informal debriefing sessions at the end of long recovery-focused workdays to reflect on their strategic practices. The next section presents ongoing challenges identified by study participants.

4.3 Addressing Ongoing Challenges

Interview participants provided instances of advocating for tailored services targeting older adults who are particularly

vulnerable to elder abuse, fraud, and mistreatment in the aftermath of a disaster. Several study participants mentioned advocating for the needs of evacuees during the response and when displaced from the community. The need for psychosocial support in disaster and emergency response was found to be more receptive than previously.

I think it's getting better understood and I think it's certainly evolved ... how critical the psychosocial support is and it's starting to get embedded more in the traditional emergency responses. (Interview Participant)

Study participants recognized that, based on their experience, there was more financial support for disaster response than long-term recovery. This was perceived as a major challenge that resulted in a lack of sustainable funding for services and programs. There was agreement that community agencies that were embedded in the community need longer-term financial support to deliver programs in the recovery phase.

But that longer-term recovery is often hard because they're not necessarily embedded in community, they kind of parachute in for the event [they] are really, really good at getting the money out the door and some of the funding, but then longer-term recovery maybe isn't as effective because they're not embedded in community. The community agencies coming together really are going to be dealing with the recovery after an event. There needs to be programs, but there needs to be sustainable funding because again it's all very much grant related [not sustainable]. (Focus Group Participant)

Similarly, another study participant discussed the challenge of maintaining momentum for recovery and preparedness in the long term. Participants raised concerns about the sustainability of programs after a disaster event to ensure continued access to services in the mid- to long term.

... there's lots of money right after the event, but that long-term disaster recovery is a bit hit and miss. We have the psychosocial disaster network, which was really focused on recovery and pulling agencies together to work around recovery, but it's been hard to keep that going outside of the disaster. You know I think it's hard because there's so much turnover and people leave and it's hard to get those recovery efforts, and I know, right now, even in the pandemic, we're starting to talk about what is the plan for recovery. And it's hit or miss [because] we don't know who's doing it, who's leading it and there isn't that coordinated response. (Focus Group Participant)

Another challenge identified by study participants was vulnerable populations, including older adults, navigating services.

Sometimes that system navigation is really difficult for folks that are more vulnerable so one-on-one system navigation, I think, is important. (Interview Participant)

Participants agreed that social workers and human service practitioners have the necessary knowledge of community organizations and their roles to provide referrals to the appropriate services. At times, social workers undertook research and advocacy to identify and promote relevant disaster recovery programs offered by federal, provincial, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that could support their clients when displaced from the community.

5 Discussion

The experiences of social work practitioners and human service professionals during the 2016 wildfires in Alberta revealed broad themes affecting older adults that can be used to inform strategies for promoting healthy aging and aging in place in disaster contexts. The findings underscore the significance of (1) nurturing supportive relationships by bolstering both formal and informal support networks, which can mitigate vulnerability while enhancing existing strengths and resilience; (2) fostering partnerships and collaborations across various systems to effectively address the multifaceted needs of older adults; and (3) tackling persistent challenges, particularly those critical for achieving long-term and sustainable recovery.

A wide array of studies investigated and documented the vulnerability and differential needs and challenges of older adults to disasters (Bell et al. 2020; Andrade et al. 2023; Kino et al. 2023). As opposed to such "deficit model," other studies documented greater resilience and psychological strength of older adults than younger adults (Barusch 2011; Merdjanoff et al. 2019; Navarrete-Valladares et al. 2023). The findings from this study underscores the importance of fostering supportive relationships at the individual and community levels that can potentially reduce vulnerability and build resilience of older adults to disasters by fostering both formal and informal support networks. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, research conducted across diverse cultural contexts, including Asia and North America, indicates a consensus that older adults demonstrate greater mental, emotional, and psychological resilience compared to younger populations (Chan et al. 2022; Herron et al. 2022; Sterina et al. 2022). "The work of helping older adults become more resilient to disasters provides an opportunity for older adults to engage with others and

learn skills needed to remain safely living at home as they age” (Shih et al. 2018, p. 2). In this manner, older adults exhibit resilience by actively participating in community and outdoor activities while leveraging both formal and informal networks (Lee et al. 2022). Similarly, Chen and Cong (2024) indicated that social workers have the opportunity to integrate the knowledge and expertise of older adults into disaster management initiatives, devising interventions tailored to their age group to encourage proactive behaviors in anticipation of future crises. Enhancing the day-to-day interactions of older adults with family, friends, neighbors, and trusted institutions contributes to preparedness by reinforcing informal connections and cultivating information networks (Shih et al. 2018).

Decades of literature on emergency and disaster management call attention to the importance of institutional partnerships and collaboration for effective disaster response and recovery (Haque and Etkin 2012; Choudhury et al. 2021). Partnerships and collaboration can help overcome resources constraints and address the complex needs of vulnerable people. The findings from this study align closely with this prevailing understanding. However, it can be challenging to foster such connections across disciplines like social work and disaster and emergency management. Participants in this study discussed the role of collaboration across systems and their role in relationship building to support coordination and collaboration to build back better to improve recovery and enhance preparedness at the community and systems level. Other studies also documented the need for collaboration for sustainable disaster recovery for older adults. For example, Bushong and Welch (2023) found the disproportionate impact on the health of older adults during Hurricane Ian. Lack of critical health facilities for older adults resulted in fatalities. They highlighted the need for greater collaboration between public health and emergency planners for effective recovery. Similarly, Pendergrast et al. (2021) found that aging-in-place organizations are often engaged in various disaster-related activities. They concluded that effective collaboration and communication-focused efforts can help meet the unique needs of older adults.

An implication of actively engaging older adults in disaster response and recovery efforts and fostering institutional partnerships is the effective mitigation of persistent challenges. This includes safeguarding older adults from abuse and fraud following disasters and overcoming financial constraints for sustainable recovery. Concerning the safeguarding of older adults from fraud and abuse, Gallo et al. (2018) recommended that social workers should enable older adults to access community-based educational programs designed to empower them with essential abilities for recognizing Internet and phone scams, especially those linked to the introduction of new products or software.

Not all older adults who experience a disaster are affected the same way. At the societal level, structural inequities contribute to marginalization and this call for critical examination and innovation. The study findings show the need to continue to address ongoing challenges in disaster recovery, such as the sustainability of psychosocial services and programs to foster resilience in the long term.

Major disasters inevitably attract the attention of public, private, and non-profit sectors, both domestically and internationally. As a result, these entities provide external assistance in the form of immediate relief following a disaster to help affected communities navigate numerous challenges (Imperiale and Vanclay 2021). However, over time, this initial attention and support diminish, posing obstacles to achieving long-term sustainable disaster recovery. Active engagement of older adults and collaboration and partnership among different service providers can help overcome long-term recovery challenges (Pendergrast et al. 2021). Shih et al. (2018) found that public health programs and policies must actively promote the resilience of older adults and promote disaster preparedness. There is a need to engage older adults in emergency planning to ensure that emergency services are adequate, appropriate, and accessible to meet their basic and healthcare needs.

Climate-related emergencies and disasters can disrupt informal and formal care networks that older adults rely on for their health and well-being. As more older adults “age in place” there is a need to strengthen individual and community-level support systems in the context of climate change and related disasters. Interventions to address social and health needs for older adults aging in place are needed to encourage individual and community preparedness and accessing complex governmental support (Bell et al. 2021). There is an important role for the profession of social work to engage in nurturing supportive relationships through formal and informal support networks, to enhance strengths and build resilience. Social work practitioners and human service professionals can foster partnerships and collaborations across various systems including disaster and emergency management to better meet the diverse needs of older adults. Given the challenges of disaster recovery, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital to address persistent challenges in order to achieve long-term and sustainable recovery.

6 Limitations

The research has several limitations. First, older adults are not a homogeneous group. Their age-specific vulnerability and resilience may intersect with other forms of identities (that is, race/ethnicity, gender, and rural/urban) and capabilities, creating differential needs, challenges, and

aspirations. This research does not take into account such intersecting dimensions of vulnerability and resilience. Second, this study documented the perspective of participants from diverse community organizations, non-profit agencies, and government bodies that were engaged in disaster recovery efforts. As such, lived experience of older adults are not documented here. While the study provided a rich description of the experiences of the participants, it is noted that the findings are not generalizable to a wider population.

7 Conclusion

The specialized knowledge of social work practitioners and human service professionals in assisting populations enables them to fulfill a vital role in aiding those facing risks and vulnerabilities during times of disaster. Social workers contribute to disaster preparedness and recovery efforts, especially focusing on individuals experiencing greater social disadvantages (Harms and Alston 2018). As noted by Fordham and colleagues, “vulnerability is embedded in complex social relations and processes and is situated squarely at the human-environmental intersection requiring social solutions if successful risk reduction is to occur” (Fordham et al. 2013, p. 12). Social work practitioners in Alberta are more actively engaged across all stages of disaster management, encompassing preparedness and extended recovery efforts, and their roles include advocacy, assessment, community revitalization, outreach, social service provision, coordination of services, psychosocial assistance, and trauma counseling (Drolet et al. 2021). As climate-related emergencies and disaster events continue to increase, in the context of an aging population, so will the demand for social work practitioners who provide a holistic approach to disaster prevention and recovery. Social work practitioners provide a unique yet often overlooked role in disaster and emergency management in Canada. Social work values and principles inform social work practice. These values and principles include upholding the dignity and worth of every individual, advocating for social justice, advancing truth and reconciliation initiatives, prioritizing meaningful human connections, upholding professional integrity, safeguarding privacy and confidentiality, and delivering proficient and ethical professional services (CASW 2024).

Social work and emergency management professionals are increasingly focused on addressing the needs of diverse populations that bear a disproportionate burden in disasters (Enarson and Walsh 2007). These findings highlight the importance of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships to bolster recovery efforts for individuals, families, groups, and communities following disasters.

Social workers have a critical role in engaging diverse populations in disaster planning alongside emergency managers and other interested parties. This could include community-based workshops for developing emergency plans, neighborhood events for social connections, and developing new partnerships at the community level. Further research is necessary to explore how social work practitioners and emergency managers can enhance collaborations to adopt a comprehensive approach that integrates “aging in place” considerations across all phases of disaster management. Future research should consider the voices and perspectives of older adults impacted by disaster events. This is essential to address the numerous challenges posed by disasters in the twenty-first century.

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