

# GETTING BACK TO OUR NEIGHBOURS REPORT

## HNN ROADSHOWS 2026

### Social Health... Out of the Shadows



## HIGHLANDS NORTH NETWORK (HNN) Community Roadshows 2026

### SOCIAL HEALTH: OUT OF THE SHADOWS

Come help shape the future of aging in our communities.



**DARLING WHITE LAKE CENTRE**  
MONDAY, APRIL 13 11:00 AM-2:00 PM  
**REGISTER BY APRIL 6**



**TATLOCK HALL**  
FRIDAY, APRIL 24 11:00 AM-2:00 PM  
**REGISTER BY APRIL 17**



**NORTH LAVANT COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
MONDAY, APRIL 27 11:00 AM -2:00 PM  
**REGISTER BY APRIL 20**

**ROBERTSON LAKE HALL**  
TUESDAY, MAY 5 11:00 AM -2:00 PM  
**REGISTER BY APRIL 29**

**MIDDLEVILLE COMMUNITY CENTRE**  
MONDAY, MAY 11 11:00 AM -2:00 PM  
**REGISTER BY MAY 4**

#### Free Catered Lunch


- Advance Registration Required
- 🎁 Door Prize Draw
- Registered attendees will be entered into the draw

#### REGISTER TODAY

☎ 343-760-2000

[HIGHLANDSNORTHNETWORK.CA](http://HIGHLANDSNORTHNETWORK.CA)  
VISIT "ROADSHOWS"

CONNECTION • CONVERSATION • SHARING WHAT MATTERS MOST

Ontario  This event is supported by the Government of Ontario

Prepared by the Highlands North Network

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## Setting the Context

The Highlands North Network is guided by three foundational elements: our purpose, our understanding of social health, and our acknowledgement of the land on which our communities gather.

## Our Purpose

The Highlands North Network (HNN) serves as an umbrella organization for the rural communities of northern Lanark Highlands Township, dedicated to advancing social health for adults aged 55 and older. We provide shared resources, funding for supplies and equipment, and coordination to sustain local activities and events. We also foster collaboration among communities and strengthen the well-being and connectedness of Lanark Highlands residents.

HNN advocates for a future where social health and the people who make it possible are recognized and compensated as vital parts of Canada's healthcare system.



# Defining & Prioritizing Social Health

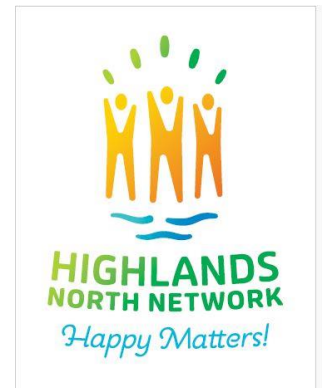
## Definitions:

The **World Health Organization’s 1946 definition of health** — “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” — still stands today, nearly 80 years later.



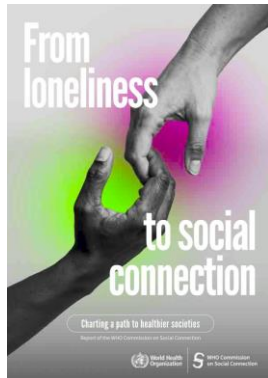
The **Highlands North Network definition of social health (2025)** is the organization’s working definition of social health informed by broader social health and wellbeing concepts.

*Social health is the overall condition of a person’s social well-being, encompassing the ability to build and maintain meaningful relationships, experience connection and belonging within a community, give and receive mutual support, and to participate fully in social and community life—without unwanted isolation or exclusion and without barriers that limit access and opportunity.*



## Priorities:

The **World Health Organization’s Landmark Report - 2025**



“This landmark report from the WHO Commission on Social Connection highlights that social isolation and loneliness are widespread, with serious but under-recognized impacts on health, well-being, and society. Drawing on the latest evidence, the report makes a compelling case for urgent action. It outlines practical, scalable solutions to strengthen social connection – and calls on policy-makers, researchers and all sectors to treat social health with the same urgency as physical and mental health. The Commissioners envision a future where stronger social bonds improve well-being, reduce preventable deaths, boost education and economic resilience, and ease the social and financial burden of disconnection. This report is a call to act – and an invitation to build a more connected, healthier world.”

<https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection/report>

## HNN’s Land Acknowledgement Statement

The land on which we gather for our social activities and events in the northern Lanark Highlands is the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg People. We recognize their enduring presence on this land, and we express our respect and gratitude as we come together in community.

As an organization dedicated to creating greater awareness of social health, we feel a deep sorrow for the children who were taken from their families against their will. We acknowledge the profound and lasting harm caused by removing them from the relationships that mattered most—their families, their friends, and their communities. This loss of connection strikes at the very heart of social health, and we honour the resilience of Survivors, their families, and Indigenous communities who continue to live with the impact of these injustices.



Robertson Lake, Lanark Highlands

## About the Highlands North Network

The Highlands North Network (HNN) was formed in 2023 by Barb Young, Nancy Veary, and Rachel Heleniak in response to the growing isolation and disconnection many rural residents experienced during and after COVID.

The founders recognized that northern Lanark Highlands communities already had important gathering places — their community halls — but needed stronger connections, better communication, and more coordinated support to help residents age well within the communities they love.

Since its formation, the HNN has continued to grow through the addition of board members Larry Paquette and Frank Sodonis, along with the support and guidance of an Advisory Committee that includes Victoria Gibb-Carsley (PDCF), Kara Symbolic (ConnectWell), and Marilyn Bird (Lanark Transportation).



The HNN was created to help strengthen social connection, reduce isolation, support local activities, and encourage collaboration between rural halls and communities throughout northern Lanark Highlands.

Today, the network connects five rural communities through local HNN representatives who serve as important liaisons between the HNN, their hall committees and their communities. These representatives include:

- Karen Cairns — Darling White Lake Centre
- Sandy Geier/Denyse Cass — White Lake Sports
- Carol Alexander — Tatlock
- Elke Walton — North Lavant
- Laurel Crosbie-Michaud — South Lavant
- Nancy Affleck — Middleville

Since 2023, the HNN has:

- developed a regional communication network and website,
- organized quarterly hall meetings,
- supported social, wellness, educational, and recreational activities,
- become the legal operator of the Senior Active Living Centre (SALC) program for northern Lanark Highlands,
- and begun the journey toward operationalizing the third essential pillar of health — social health — right here in the Lanark Highlands.

The HNN strongly believes that strengthening social health may be one of the most important and cost-effective ways to support healthy aging in rural communities moving forward.

## Foreword

The Highlands North Network would like to extend heartfelt appreciation to the communities of **Darling White Lake, Tatlock, North Lavant, South Lavant, and Middleville** for being with us every step of the way throughout the HNN Roadshows: ***Social Health... Out of the Shadows***.

Thank you for helping us spread the word, increase participation, and bring people together for meaningful conversations about the future of aging well in the rural communities we love.



We are especially grateful for the generous use of your remarkable community halls — each unique, each deeply rooted in community spirit, and each carrying a piece of the hearts of the volunteers who helped bring them to life. The results of the roadshow questionnaires strongly confirmed what many residents already feel deeply — our halls are far more than buildings. They are truly the lifeblood of our communities.

Something else came through loud and clear: aside from the beautiful scenery that surrounds us, it is our deep connections with one another that make living here special.

With your support, we were able to welcome **131 participants** to the roadshows, with **98 individuals completing the questionnaire** and **more than 100 residents participating in the interactive sessions** that invited local seniors and community members to identify what services and amenities they believe will be needed to successfully aging-in-place within our rural communities.

We were also very encouraged by the number of new faces who came out to see what the roadshows were all about.

The roadshows included:

- a brief history of the Highlands North Network and acknowledgements recognizing the many people and organizations contributing to this work — Larry Paquette
- a 20-minute keynote address, *Social Health... Out of the Shadows* — Barb Young
- a short mapping segment showcasing a few important details relating to the HNN and the area it services — Frank Sodonis.
- a unique “Grow a Tree” interactive session inviting participants to identify what “branches” are needed to successfully aging-in-place within their communities — Barb Young
- facilitated group discussions and idea-sharing
- questionnaires and data gathering to help guide future planning and grant applications
- opportunities for community networking, conversation, and connection
- and a welcoming lunch that gave participants additional time to gather informally and strengthen relationships with one another

Using the audio recordings from each roadshow’s interactive session, AI-assisted analysis was used to help summarize the major themes and recurring messages associated with each of the ten “branches” explored during the discussions. These summaries are included throughout this report.



The questionnaire component also allowed us to gather valuable baseline data that will help guide future planning and decision-making as we move forward based on what residents told us they would like to see in our aging-in-place-friendly communities.

With 88% of participants indicating they wish to remain in their communities as long as possible, the stakes are high for us to get this right — and together with our neighbours, we feel confident that we can help make that wish come true. See more of the results on the last page of the report.

When we asked people to help in any way they could, they delivered. The willingness of residents to volunteer ideas, energy, encouragement, and support was inspiring and is reflected throughout the findings included in this report.

We were honoured to have the participation and encouragement of several potential future partners and collaborators who share our interest in strengthening inclusive and cost-effective aging-in-place plans for seniors in our Lanark Highlands communities.

Sincere thanks for attending go out to:

- Victoria Gibb-Carsley, Executive Director, Perth and District Community Foundation
- Lisa Jackson, Regional Representative, United Way
- Jessica Hall, Regional Public Health Nurse
- Kara Symbolic and Gabe Thirlwall, ConnectWell Community Health
- Suzanne Charbonneau-Dent, CAO, Township of Lanark Highlands
- Nicole Guthrie, Clerk, Township of Lanark Highlands

We sincerely appreciated you taking the time to join us.

We asked for a word or short phrase to describe partners’ feelings about the roadshow. Here are a few of their comments:

- Victoria Gibb-Carsley — “Inspiring”
- Lisa Jackson — “Absolutely amazing.”
- Jessica Hall — “An enlightened perspective.”
- Suzanne Charbonneau-Dent — “Inspiring and informative”

We look forward to working together with all of you and others in the years ahead.

Special thanks also to:

- HNN Board Member Nancy Veary for welcoming participants at the door, coordinating lunches, and ensuring everyone was properly paid for their services
- Candy Cane Kitchen in Pakenham
- Crossroads Kitchen in Balderson
- Julie Berthiaume and Melanie Burnell for their valuable support services

We are also sincerely grateful to the local businesses and organizations who generously donated draw prizes in support of the roadshows, including:

1. Almonte Independent
2. Red Head Roofing (Hopetown)
3. Lanark Pharmacy (Lanark)
4. Cameron's Maple Products (Lanark)
5. Candy Cane Kitchen (Pakenham)

These free prize draws were a popular highlight at the end of each roadshow. Congratulations to all the lucky winners.

We are also deeply grateful to the Perth and District Community Foundation for providing the grant support that allowed us to enlist the services of Sherry Crummy from Crummy Media. Sherry's marketing expertise played an instrumental role in helping us effectively promote the roadshows and inspire greater participation.



We also sincerely thank ConnectWell Community Health for stepping forward to accept the grant on our behalf, allowing these events to move forward.

Over the next few years, the HNN plans to continue strengthening social health as an essential foundation on which to “grow” inclusive, connected, and age-in-place-friendly rural communities.

The World Health Organization identifies social health as the third essential pillar of health. We believe that taking the first step toward operationalizing this pillar can lead to a more balanced, preventative, and cost-effective approach to supporting health and wellbeing — one that serves rural residents more equitably alongside those living in urban centres.

With the support of creative editor Helen Harwood Snell, we also plan to document our journey as it unfolds — one chapter at a time. It is hoped that, in the years ahead, this work may contribute to the development of a practical guidebook that could help other rural municipalities across Ontario create their own aging-in-place-friendly communities.

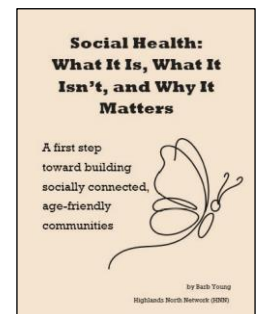
The roadshows confirmed something we already suspected — there remains a significant lack of awareness and understanding surrounding social health. Even here, where there is a steady buzz about social health within our connected communities, 17% of participants indicated they had never heard the term before attending the roadshows. It would be reasonable to assume that this percentage may be considerably higher in communities not yet influenced by the work of the HNN.

For this reason, we felt it was important to release the first chapter of the guidebook early to help provide a foundational understanding of social health.

It is entitled: ***Social Health: What It Is, What It Isn't, and Why It Matters.***

A digital copy is attached for your reference. Please feel free to share it.

As part of this next phase, the HNN will establish the “HNN Dream Team” — a group of out-of-the-box thinkers and community-minded residents who believe in the possibilities ahead. Thanks to all who expressed an interest in joining. Barb will be in touch soon.



#### **The Dream Team will meet monthly to:**

1. review roadshow feedback and identify emerging priorities,
2. explore project ideas, funding opportunities, and potential grant options,
3. consider what proposed projects could realistically look like, including key components, partnerships, resources, and community benefits,
4. evaluate and refine the most promising opportunities,
5. present one or two priority ideas at each HNN Quarterly Meeting to spark discussion, community interest, and potential committee formation,
6. If requested, support the early-stage development of selected initiatives before submission to the HNN Board for final approval.

As part of this next phase of development to bring social health “out of the shadows”, the HNN plans to explore a potential Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant application later this summer. The proposed application would help launch the HNN’s first paid Social Health Facilitators/Activity Leaders Pilot Project, creating one paid community-based leadership position for each supported venue, pending agreement from the hall committees.

The work involved in defining the roles, responsibilities, and overall framework for these emerging social health service provider positions will be led primarily by Barb, together with others of her choosing who bring strong backgrounds and lived experience in the social health sector, community development, and related fields. The initial pilot positions are envisioned as foundational, community-based roles focused on simple but important objectives: helping more people get out and participate, encouraging and supporting local residents to lead activities, strengthening social connection and belonging, and elevating both the importance of social health and the value of those who serve within this emerging sector.

These first positions would focus primarily on organizing and supporting regular hall-based activities that are primarily social in nature. The pilot project reflects a broader shift toward recognizing social health leadership as important community-support work by gradually moving key facilitation and coordination roles from primarily volunteer-based positions to paid community-based roles. Volunteerism will always remain an essential part of the HNN model and continue to be encouraged and supported; however, regular ongoing social health programming would increasingly be guided by dedicated facilitators and activity leaders working alongside volunteers in supportive roles.

At the same time, the HNN views this pilot project as an important step toward advancing broader recognition of social health roles within future funding and service-delivery frameworks. Through ongoing evaluation, measurable outcomes, and community feedback, the HNN intends to help establish practical, evidence-informed models for community-based social health positions that can progressively evolve into more formally recognized and sustainably supported roles within the broader health and community support system.

These new positions would help:

- facilitate regular social and wellness activities
- strengthen participation, belonging, and community connection
- support volunteers and strengthen local programming
- increase the accessibility, consistency, and sustainability of activities
- help reduce social isolation within rural communities
- create meaningful local leadership and employment opportunities within the emerging social health sector
- recognize and elevate the important work of those who regularly strengthen connection, participation, and wellbeing within communities
- help shift social health from an informal and often invisible role to one that is valued as essential community infrastructure
- support preventative approaches that may strengthen resilience, healthy aging, and quality of life while helping reduce pressure on downstream healthcare and caregiving systems.



We believe that intentionally strengthening and supporting social health roles represents an essential step toward building more connected, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable rural communities that better support the strong desire expressed by most seniors to age at home in communities where they feel a deep sense of belonging, participation, and connection.

Most importantly, this is a community-driven vision rooted in the belief that rural residents themselves can be instrumental in shaping the future of aging in place within their own communities.

Thanks to all of you for coming out and for participating. Consider this our first giant step forward. Together, we'll move forward one step at a time, one grant at a time, and through a true “neighbours helping neighbours” approach, with five communities united as one.

If any of you would like to start attending our HNN Quarterly Meetings, please send your request to the HNN through the [Highlands North Network](#) website or call and leave a message at 343 760-2000.

## About the Interactive Sessions



As part of the HNN Roadshows: *Social Health... Out of the Shadows*, participants took part in interactive community discussions focused on the future of aging in rural communities. The sessions invited residents to share ideas, concerns, and opportunities related to aging-in-place and community wellbeing.

To guide the discussions, the HNN used a symbolic “community tree” model during each session. A small tree with removable branches helped groups of participants visually explore the many parts of a strong and connected community. The *roots* represented the values, lived experiences, trust, and identity that communities stand upon. The *trunk* represented social health — the relationships, belonging, participation, and informal supports that connect people to one another.

Participants then selected different “branches” representing key areas connected to aging-in-place and community wellbeing, including transportation, housing, assisted-living supports, expanded use of community halls, emergency services, healthcare access, volunteer opportunities, and communication and representation. Working together, groups discussed:

- what their branch could look like in the future,
- how it connects back to social health,
- and what benefits it could bring to individuals and the broader community.

Rather than traditional fruit, the tree used lanterns hanging from the branches to represent benefits. The lanterns symbolized the idea of bringing *social health out of the shadows* while also “shining a light” on the strengths, challenges, and future possibilities within northern rural communities. The lanterns represented the hoped-for outcomes of stronger social health, including improved quality of life, increased independence, stronger relationships, reduced isolation, and the ability for people to remain in their communities longer.

The sessions encouraged participants to think beyond services alone and consider how communities can intentionally create opportunities for people to remain connected, valued, supported, and involved as they age. Across all five roadshows, residents shared thoughtful insights, practical ideas, and a strong desire to build more connected, supportive, and age-friendly rural communities.

# Summary of Key Findings and Common Themes

While each location had its own unique perspectives and priorities, many common themes emerged across all five roadshows. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of:

- reducing isolation and strengthening social connection,
- improving transportation and access to services,
- supporting people to remain in their communities longer,
- expanding the use of community halls as local hubs,
- building practical supports around aging-in-place,
- and ensuring northern rural voices are heard and represented.

The following sections provide a brief summary of the key findings discussed under each branch of the community tree.

## 1. Affordable and Adaptive Housing

Participants across the roadshows identified affordable and adaptive housing as an important part of helping people remain in their communities as they age. Many expressed concerns about the lack of smaller, affordable housing options within northern rural areas, particularly for seniors wishing to downsize while remaining close to family, friends, and familiar surroundings. Ideas discussed included secondary suites, shared housing models, accessible renovations, and small-scale community-based housing options that would allow people to maintain both independence and social connection. Participants emphasized that housing should not only meet physical needs, but also help people remain connected to community life and informal support networks.

A common theme across locations was that aging-in-place becomes far more difficult when suitable local housing options are unavailable.



## 2. Assisted-Living Supports

Participants across the interactive sessions consistently identified the need for more local assisted-living supports to help people remain safely and comfortably in their homes as they age. Discussions focused on practical day-to-day supports that can make a significant difference in maintaining independence and quality of life.

Common ideas included meal preparation and delivery, snow removal, yard work, housekeeping assistance, grocery delivery, transportation help, daily check-ins, and neighbour-to-neighbour support systems. Many participants emphasized that small supports provided early can help prevent larger crises later.



A recurring theme across locations was that these supports are not only practical in nature, but also deeply connected to social health. Regular check-ins, shared meals, and helping relationships were seen as important opportunities to reduce isolation, strengthen community connection, and help people feel supported and valued within their communities.

## 3. Transportation

Transportation emerged as one of the strongest and most consistently discussed themes across all five interactive sessions. Participants emphasized that transportation affects nearly every aspect of aging-in-place, including access to healthcare, groceries, social activities, volunteer opportunities, and community participation.

Many participants described the challenges created by long travel distances, limited transportation options, winter driving conditions, and the high cost of travel in rural areas. Ideas discussed included volunteer driver programs, dedicated northern transportation services, ride-sharing opportunities, and subsidized transportation supports.



A strong recurring theme was that transportation is about far more than simply getting from one place to another. Participants viewed transportation as a vital connection to social health, helping people remain engaged, independent, and connected to their communities.

## 4. Social Health Supports

Participants across all five interactive sessions strongly emphasized the importance of social connection, belonging, and regular participation in community life. Many identified loneliness and isolation as growing concerns within rural communities, particularly for older adults living alone, experiencing health challenges, or no longer able to drive.

Discussions highlighted the value of friendly visiting programs, intergenerational activities, group outings, neighbourhood support networks, social gatherings, and opportunities for people



to contribute their skills and experiences. Participants repeatedly noted that meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose are essential parts of overall health and wellbeing.

A common theme across locations was that social health should not be viewed as secondary or optional. Participants described it as a foundational part of helping people remain independent, resilient, and connected to their communities as they age.

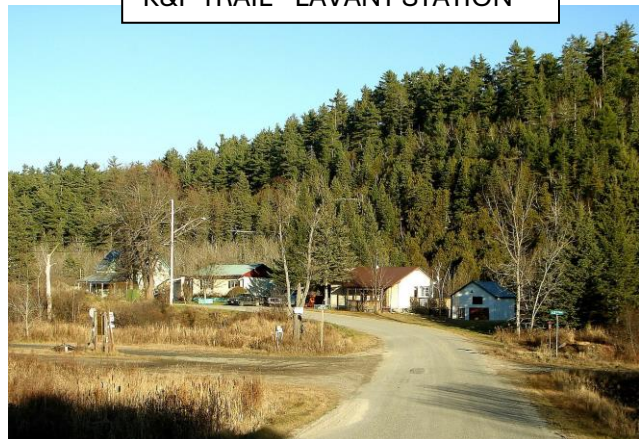
## 5. Safe and Accessible Spaces, Buildings and Infrastructure

Participants across the interactive sessions emphasized the importance of safe, accessible, and welcoming community spaces that allow people to remain active, connected, and engaged as they age. Discussions included community halls, walking trails, roads, parks, beaches, public buildings, and accessibility within homes and gathering places.

Many participants identified rural realities such as winter conditions, long distances, uneven infrastructure, and limited accessibility as barriers for older adults and individuals with mobility challenges. Safe access to buildings, washrooms, parking areas, and community programs was seen as essential to maintaining participation in community life.

A recurring theme across locations was that community spaces are about more than infrastructure alone. Participants viewed these spaces as important gathering points that support relationships, inclusion, physical activity, and a sense of belonging within the community.

K&P TRAIL - LAVANT STATION



## 6. Expanded Use of Community Halls

Participants across all five interactive sessions viewed community halls as important assets with the potential to play a much larger role in supporting aging-in-place and community wellbeing. Many described halls as trusted gathering places that already serve as important social anchors within rural communities.

Discussions explored how halls could evolve into broader community hubs offering expanded programs, services, and supports. Ideas included meal programs, exercise and wellness activities, internet access, information hubs, mobile health clinics, emergency gathering spaces, social events, educational programming, and intergenerational activities.

A strong recurring theme across locations was that community halls are uniquely positioned to strengthen social health by creating regular opportunities for connection, participation, mutual support, and belonging. Participants also emphasized the importance of protecting and sustaining these rural spaces for future generations.



North Lavant Community Centre

## 7. Emergency Response and Alert Systems / Fire and Emergency Services

Participants across the interactive sessions expressed significant concern about emergency response and preparedness within northern rural communities. Discussions highlighted the realities of large geographic areas, long response times, severe weather conditions, power outages, and the challenges faced by residents living in remote locations.

Many participants emphasized the importance of strong local emergency response systems, including fire services, emergency communication networks, neighbour check-in systems, and community preparedness planning. Some groups also discussed the need for designated gathering places and improved systems to support vulnerable residents during emergencies or prolonged outages.

A recurring theme across locations was that emergency preparedness is closely connected to social health. Participants noted that strong relationships, local communication networks, and neighbour-to-neighbour support often become critically important during times of crisis.



## 8. Part-time Jobs for Seniors and Expanded Volunteer Opportunities

Participants across the interactive sessions emphasized the importance of creating meaningful opportunities for older adults to remain active, involved, and connected within their communities.

Many spoke about the value of recognizing the skills, knowledge, and experience that seniors continue to bring to community life.



Discussions included ideas such as flexible part-time employment, community-based leadership roles, mentoring opportunities, local service delivery, and expanded volunteer programs connected to community halls and aging-in-place initiatives. Participants also noted that many older adults wish to continue contributing, but may require opportunities that are flexible, local, and better suited to changing abilities or schedules.

A common theme across locations was that participation itself supports social health. Opportunities to contribute, help others, and remain involved in community life were viewed as important to maintaining purpose, confidence, relationships, and overall wellbeing.

## 9. Access to Health and Home Care Services

Participants across the interactive sessions identified access to healthcare and home care services as an ongoing challenge within northern rural communities. Many spoke about the difficulties associated with long travel distances, limited local services, shortages of healthcare professionals, and the strain placed on individuals and families trying to navigate support systems.

Discussions highlighted the importance of improving access to services such as nursing care, personal support workers, caregiver respite, home support services, and preventative wellness programs. Participants also emphasized the value of bringing services closer to communities whenever possible through outreach programs, mobile services, and community-based supports.

A recurring theme across locations was that aging-in-place requires more than medical care alone. Participants consistently connected health and home care services to broader social supports, relationships, transportation, and community connection, recognizing that overall wellbeing depends on both practical and social forms of support.

## 10. Communication, Representation and Local Voice

Participants across the interactive sessions emphasized the importance of clear communication, local representation, and ensuring that northern rural voices are heard in community planning and decision-making. Many expressed concerns about feeling overlooked or underrepresented due to the geographic size and unique realities of rural northern communities.

Discussions highlighted the need for stronger communication networks, better sharing of local information, increased opportunities for community feedback, and greater recognition of the challenges faced by residents living in remote areas. Participants also emphasized the importance of local leadership and community-driven solutions that reflect the lived experiences of residents.

A recurring theme across locations was that strong communication and representation help build trust, inclusion, and community connection. Participants consistently expressed a desire to have a meaningful voice in shaping the future of their communities and the supports needed to age well within them.

Growing Age-Friendly, Rural  
Communities Together



## Conclusion (Interactive Segment)

The interactive sessions held during the HNN Roadshows demonstrated a strong desire among participants to build communities where people can remain connected, supported, and actively involved as they age. While discussions explored many practical areas such as housing, transportation, healthcare, emergency preparedness, and community infrastructure, a common thread consistently emerged across all locations: the importance of social health.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that strong relationships, belonging, participation, and informal support networks are essential to both individual wellbeing and the long-term resilience of rural communities. Many of the ideas discussed reflected a desire to move beyond isolated services alone and toward more connected, community-based approaches where supports work together rather than independently.

Participants also recognized that the connected nature of rural communities may provide an important advantage in developing innovative aging-in-place supports. In communities where people already know one another, share spaces, volunteer, and support neighbours informally, there is an opportunity to build systems where housing, transportation, social participation, community halls, healthcare supports, emergency preparedness, and volunteer networks become increasingly interconnected.

Across the roadshows, there was a strong sense that this type of integrated, community-driven innovation is needed now more than ever. Participants repeatedly reinforced the idea that bringing *social health out of the shadows* can provide a strong foundation for building more supportive, resilient, and age-friendly rural communities for the future.

The HNN Roadshows demonstrated that northern rural communities are not only aware of the challenges ahead, but are already imagining creative, community-driven ways to meet them together.

# Questionnaire Results

## Demographics and Community Roots

- **97%** of respondents were over age 55.
- **84%** were seniors aged 65+.
- **8%** were over age 85
- **78%** have lived in their communities for more than 10 years.
- **47%** have lived in their Lanark Highlands community for more than 20 years
- **32%** reported living alone.



## Rural Realities

- **81%** travel at least 25 km one way for basic amenities and services.
- **80%** of respondents were from our service area. Others drive fair distances to participate in our hall-based activities.
- **26%** of respondents face home maintenance challenges as the most significant factor affecting comfort

## Financial Wellbeing

- **90%** described their financial situation as manageable or comfortable.

## Digital Access and Communication

- **93%** reported having internet and email access.
- **87%** reported being comfortable using digital technology.

## Awareness of Social Health

- **18%** had never heard of the term *social health* prior to the roadshows.

## Social Connection and Belonging

- **97%** felt social connection is very important or extremely important to health and wellbeing.



- **72%** interact remotely and face-to-face with friends or family daily or several times per week.
- **87%** were somewhat or very satisfied with their level of social interaction.
- **66%** reported a somewhat strong or very strong sense of belonging within their communities.

## Loneliness and Seasonal Vulnerability

- **30%** reported feeling lonely or socially isolated at least sometimes during the summer.
- During winter, this increased to approximately **51%**. – 70% seasonal increase.

## Volunteerism and Keeping Informed

- **53%** have volunteered within their communities for more than 10 years.
- **62%** participate in community activities or events regularly (at least monthly).
- **69%** use word of mouth to stay informed.
- **52%** use social media to get informed.
- **37%** use community bulletin boards.

## Aging in Place

- **88%** wish to remain living in their communities as long as possible.
- **98%** agreed or strongly agreed that stronger social connections can help people remain living independently longer.
- **53%** felt that support with housekeeping or yard work might help them remain living at home longer.
- **40%** felt that transportation support might help them remain living at home longer.
- **35%** felt that social activities and friendly visits might help them remain living at home longer.



## Township Facilities

When we asked which township recreational facilities they use or are important to them, they responded as follows:

- **88%** identified community halls.
- **31%** identified the library.
- **29%** identified trails and parks.
- **24%** identified pickleball courts.
- **18%** identified baseball fields.
- **19%** identified public beaches.



- 12% identified museums.
- 8% identified the arena.

## What Participants Want to See More Of

- 46% would like to see more **social gatherings**.
- 46% would like to see more **educational workshops**.
- 48% would like to see more **community breakfasts, lunches and dinners**.
- 39% would like to see more **road trips**.
- 49% would like more **health education clinics**.
- 54% would like to see more **footcare clinics**.
- 46% would like to see more **heart clinics**.

## Interest in Helping Strengthen Social Health

- 43% said they would be interested in helping strengthen social health in their community.
- 44% said they would be interested in **helping with events**.
- 15% said they would be interested in **leading an activity**.
- 16% said they would be interested in **committee work**.
- 11% said they would be interested in **communications or social media**.
- 23% said they would be interested in **helping connect isolated neighbours**.
- 7% said they would be interested in learning more about becoming a **Social Health Guide** for the HNN.
- 6% said they would be interested in **joining the Dream Team**.

## Rating for the Roadshow

- 93% rated the roadshows as **very good or excellent**.

## Conclusion (Questionnaire)

The findings from the HNN Roadshows make several things very clear. First, there is strong evidence that residents deeply value social connection, community participation, and the ability to remain living within their rural communities as they age. With 88% wishing to remain in their communities as long as possible, 98% agreeing that stronger social connections can help people remain independent longer, and 88% identifying community halls as important community facilities, the results strongly support the idea that social health infrastructure is essential to successful rural aging in place.

The findings also demonstrate that rural realities create unique vulnerabilities that will require community-based solutions. Long travel distances, seasonal isolation, aging populations, transportation barriers, and home maintenance challenges all emerged as significant concerns. Loneliness and social isolation increased substantially during winter months, reinforcing the importance of accessible local gathering opportunities, transportation supports, outreach, and year-round social programming.



### **The Road Ahead: Growing More Connected and Age-Friendly Rural Communities**

At the same time, the data revealed significant community strengths already in place. Residents reported high levels of volunteerism, strong participation in local activities, and a willingness to help strengthen social health within their communities. Interest in additional social activities, wellness clinics, educational workshops, community meals, and opportunities for connection suggests that residents are ready for expanded programming and increased coordination.

One particularly striking finding was that more than 8% of participants were over the age of 85 — more than three times higher than the proportion of Canadians in this age group within the general population. Even more significant was the fact that these older seniors were not just still living, but they were actively participating in community life and attending the roadshows themselves.

Large-scale international research, including studies involving millions of participants, now clearly demonstrates that social connection and belonging are strongly linked to improved health, wellbeing, resilience, and longevity. In many ways, the results we found may have reflected this reality.

At the same time, the HNN recognizes that many of the individuals who attended the roadshows were already relatively connected and engaged within their communities. This raises important questions about the residents who did not attend — particularly those who may already be experiencing higher levels of isolation, transportation barriers, declining mobility, health

challenges, or reduced community participation. This further reinforces the importance of the HNN’s proposed approach. If stronger social health systems, activities, outreach, transportation supports, and community connections can help already-connected residents remain healthy, active and engaged as they age, there is reason to believe that expanding these opportunities may have an even greater impact on those who are currently less connected and potentially more vulnerable.

Taken together, the findings provide strong support for the HNN’s proposed next steps, including the development of community-based social health initiatives and a potential Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant application to pilot the HNN’s first paid Social Health Facilitator/Activity Leader positions. The findings suggest that modest investments in social health leadership and coordination could play an important role in strengthening participation, reducing isolation, supporting volunteers, and helping rural seniors remain connected, active, and independent longer within the communities they call home.

The HNN believes this work is only the beginning. By strengthening social health as an essential pillar of healthy aging, rural communities may be able to build more inclusive, connected, resilient, and aging-in-place-friendly futures — right here in the communities we love.



## The Ripple Effect of Social Health



Social health is like a droplet of water  
falling onto a still pond.

In the moment of contact,  
something beautiful happens—  
the surface stirs,  
and ripples begin to spread.

One small connection between people  
sets off waves of warmth, laughter, and belonging  
that reach far beyond  
the first moment of connection.

One brief interaction between people  
triggers another,  
and before they know it,  
effects are felt inward—  
stirring compassion, empathy,  
and a quiet, deeper awareness of one another.

For some,  
awareness turns into action—  
strengthening connection,  
building trust and belonging,  
and widening the circle of support  
for those who need it most.

This is the quiet power of social health...  
not just creating moments,  
but setting something in motion—  
an expanding, living current of support  
that, like the ripples,  
carry forward into the next.

Barb Young, HNN

## Next Steps

Based on the findings, feedback, and enthusiasm generated through the HNN Roadshows, the Highlands North Network plans to continue building momentum around strengthening social health and working together to “grow” aging-in-place-friendly rural communities.

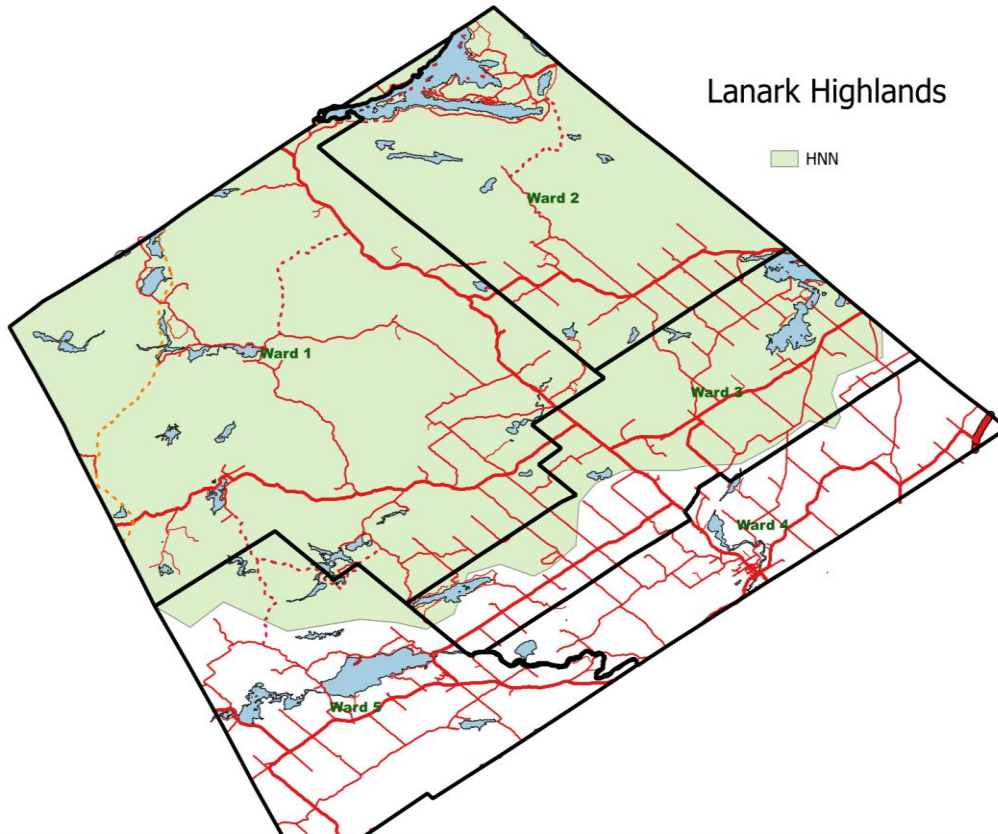
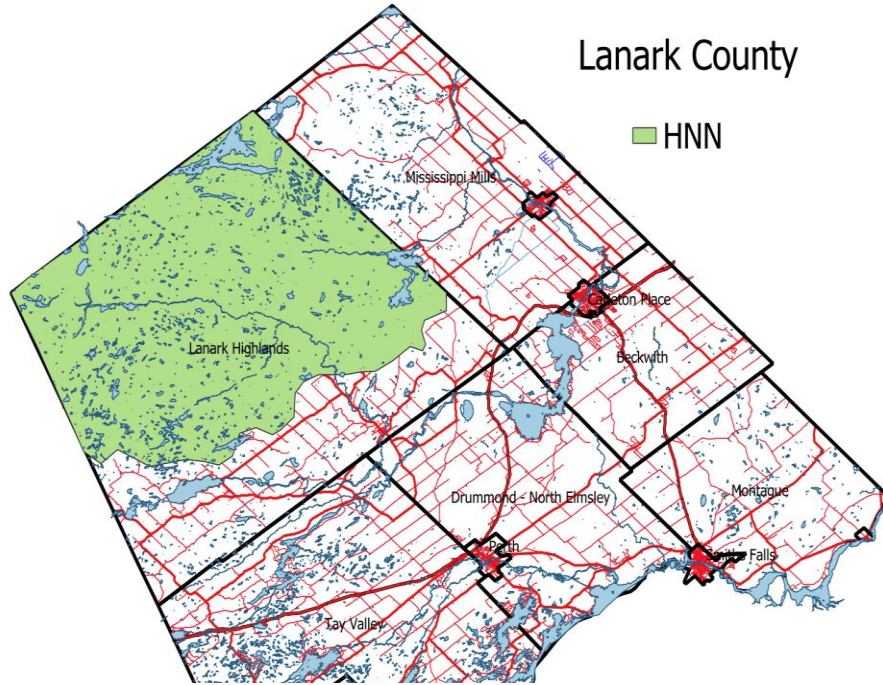
The HNN’s immediate next steps include:

1. Reviewing and organizing the roadshow findings, questionnaire results, and community feedback to help identify priorities and guide future planning.
2. Reaching out to residents who expressed interest in helping strengthen social health through volunteering, activity leadership, outreach, events, communications, and future initiatives.
3. Establishing the HNN Dream Team — a group of community-minded residents and creative thinkers who will help explore opportunities, identify priorities, and support the development of future projects and initiatives.
4. Exploring practical project ideas and partnership opportunities that align with the needs and priorities identified throughout the roadshows.
5. Exploring practical project ideas and partnership opportunities that align with the needs and priorities identified throughout the roadshows.
6. Preparing a potential Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant application to support the development of the HNN’s proposed Social Health Facilitators/Activity Leaders Pilot Project.
7. Continuing to raise awareness and understanding of social health by sharing information, encouraging conversation, and helping bring social health “out of the shadows” within rural communities.

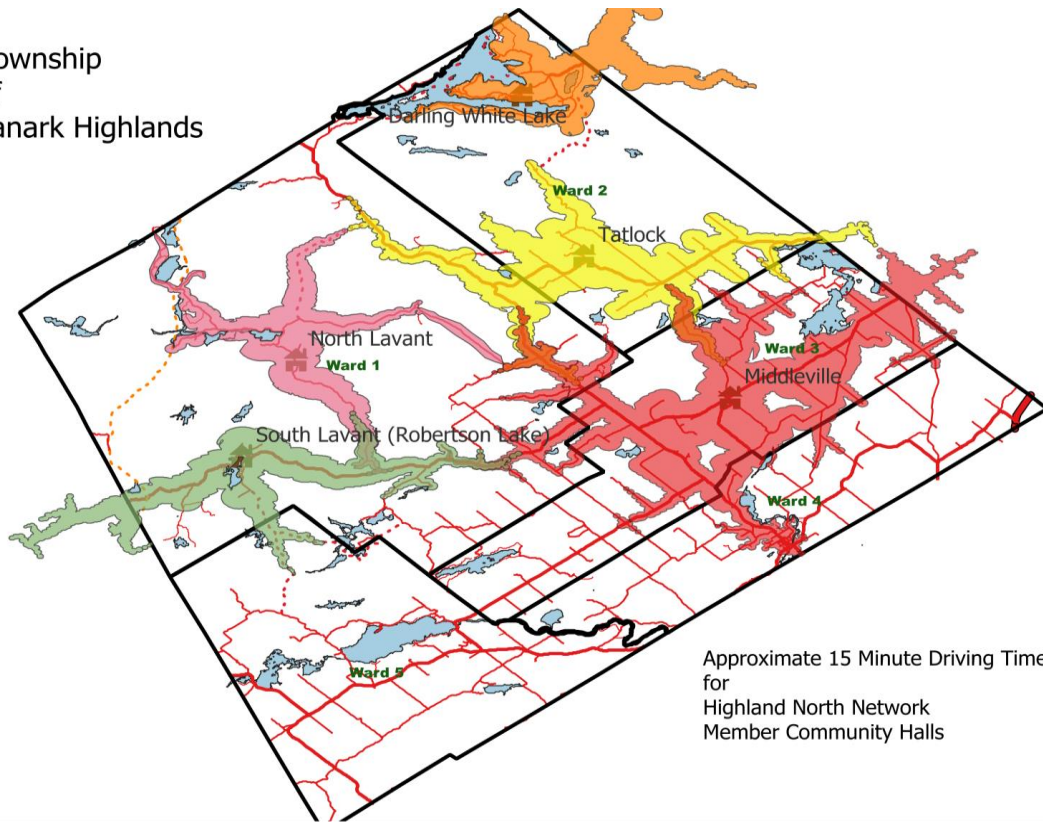


The HNN believes that meaningful change happens one step at a time and looks forward to continuing this journey together with residents, volunteers, partners, and communities across northern Lanark Highlands.

# The HNN Maps (created by Frank Sodonis)

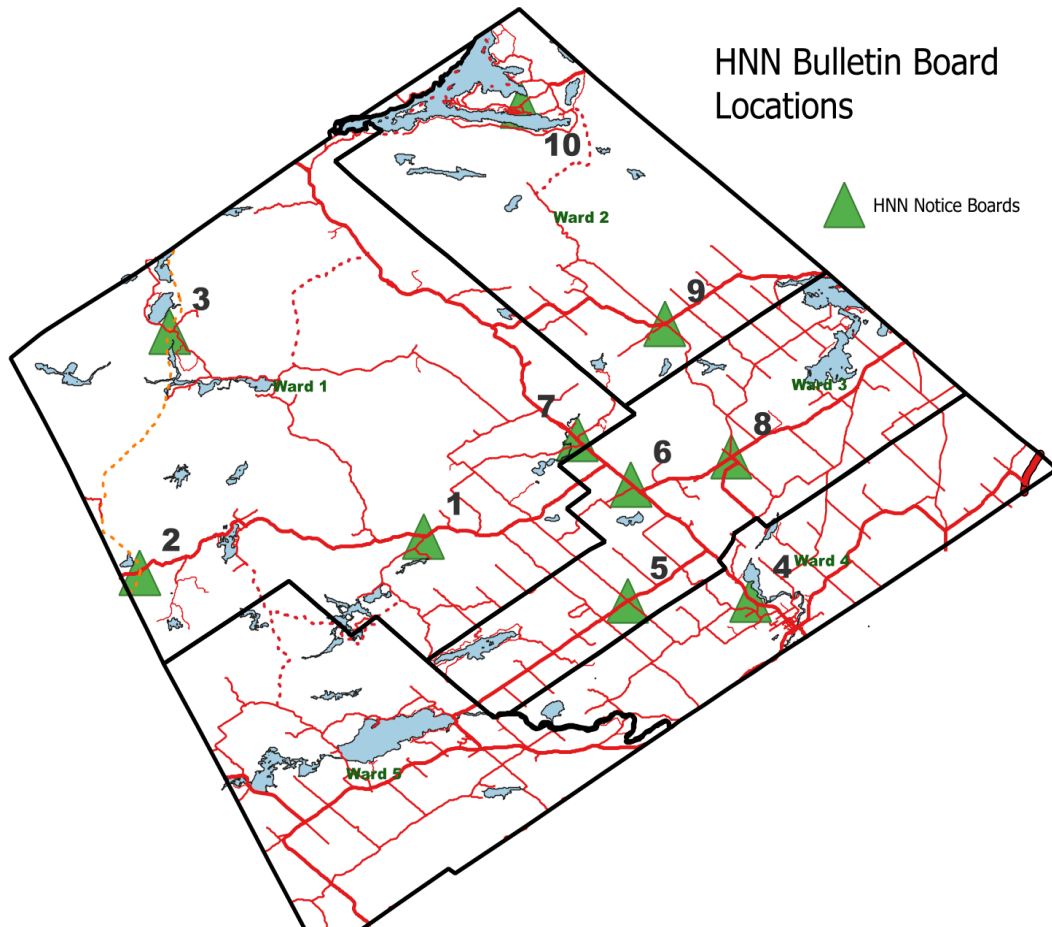


Township  
of  
Lanark Highlands

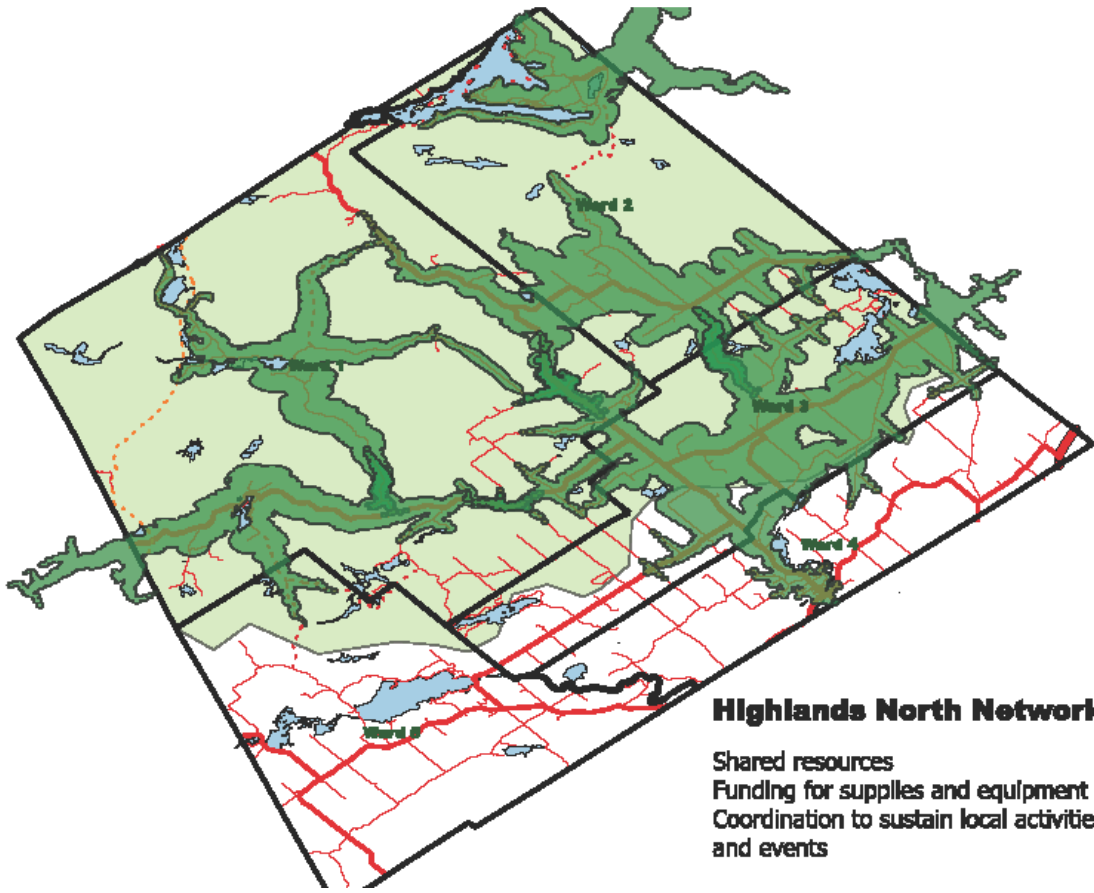


Approximate 15 Minute Driving Times  
for  
Highland North Network  
Member Community Halls

HNN Bulletin Board  
Locations



HNN Notice Boards



**Highlands North Network**

- Shared resources
- Funding for supplies and equipment
- Coordination to sustain local activities and events