Men's Sheds Canada Brief to National Conversation on a Men and Boys' Health Strategy for Canada

Men's Sheds Canada (MSC) welcomes the opportunity to join the conversation on building a national Men and Boys' Health Strategy. We are a national charitable organization that supports a growing network of Men's Sheds—grassroots groups where men gather to connect, share skills, and contribute to their communities. Our vision is a Canada where every man feels valued and engaged in his community, experiencing meaning, purpose, belonging, and well- being in his aging journey.

MSC's mission is to grow and strengthen the Men's Shed movement in Canada, and we do this by supporting the creation of new Sheds; connecting existing Sheds for peer learning and mentoring; providing education programs and communications opportunities; working with provincial Men's Shed associations; and engaging in research and other partnerships.

While open to men of all ages, Men's Sheds particularly help address challenges associated with retirement, widowhood, divorce, caregiving, and other life transitions by rebuilding social networks, strengthening social confidence, and fostering purpose and belonging. Sheds have been shown to improve quality of life, reduce healthcare costs, and strengthen communities by keeping older men active, connected, engaged, and productive. There are now more than 200 autonomous Sheds across the country offering low-barrier, peer-led support through a community-led model that demonstrates how social participation, peer support, and community engagement can improve well-being and quality of life and support healthy aging outcomes.

Canada's Men's and Boy's Health Strategy - As the primary national organization focused on older men's health and well-being, MSC draws on extensive experience and research to inform the development of Canada's Men's and Boy's Health Strategy. We believe that to be effective and to ensure health equity, the Strategy must be based on a life course approach that recognizes that the health needs of boys, young men, adult men, and older men differ significantly and require age-appropriate responses. It must shift from a narrow medical model to a broader health promotion approach that integrates gender and age sensitive engagement, community-based prevention, early intervention, research, and system-level change. It must also foster more connections and collaboration among organizations, government agencies, and researchers working on men's and boys' health literacy, prevention, and intervention programs and supports.

Our experience and contribution to this National Conversation is rooted in the primary demographic and typical activities and projects of most Men's Sheds, and on qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the Men's Sheds network. We know too well that older men face higher rates of preventable illness, suicide, and social isolation, yet are

less likely to engage in preventive healthcare or seek support due to *stigma* and *systemic gaps in services*. With about one in four Canadians projected to be over 65 by 2030 the health and well-being of older men is a pressing equity issue and a public health priority.

Men's Sheds offer a remedy, providing natural support networks and recreating social networks that men lose upon retirement, divorce, or widowhood. as well as increasing social confidence and fostering men's engagement in community and purposeful activity. They help older men to be seen as assets in their communities, rather than problems to be fixed. Men's Sheds Canada's own research confirms that Sheds function as preventative mental health spaces rooted in peer support and routine participation, and that they create an environment where, connecting and working "shoulder to shoulder", stigma is reduced and traditional ideas and attitudes about masculinity give way to greater ease in talking about feelings and concerns and asking for help. This increased openness in discussing problems and health concerns also leads many Sheds to introduce more formal health-related activities, such as guest speakers on health-related topics or mental health first aid training. Generally referred to as "*health by stealth*", this approach is an effective health promotion model that can be integrated into many types of community-based programs including those aimed at other life stages and demographics.

Men's Sheds also provide opportunities for intergenerational connections and mentoring that contribute to improved health and well-being of children and youth. When older men share knowledge and skills through in-person hands-on activities, young men and boys are provided with positive role models, as well as opportunities to learn about education and career options from lived experience. Research consistently shows that relationships with supportive non-parental adults are associated with improved self-esteem and resilience; better educational engagement and achievement; reduced risk-taking and behavioural problems; and improved social development and mental health.

Conclusion: International experience, such as in Australia and Ireland, shows that targeted men's health strategies lead to better outcomes and stronger systems of care. Investing in a national strategy that includes addressing the unique needs of older men will improve quality of life, reduce healthcare costs, and strengthen communities by keeping older men active, connected, engaged, and productive. Canada's population is rapidly aging; by acting now, Canada can ensure older men are not neglected and can continue to contribute to families, communities, and society well into later life.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to share our voice, and the voices of older men, in informing the development of a national strategy on the health of men and boys in Canada. While much needs to be done to address the challenges men face in seeking help, we believe that much of the work is already underway. What remains is to build a long-term, pan-Canadian framework to nurture and extend it.