

## Executive Summary

### Leadership Voices: Report on the *Aging in Shambhala* Survey

The Shambhala Working Group on Aging, with funding provided by the Shambhala Trust, conducted this survey of Centre leadership in the fall of 2014 to see how we are equipped to handle the ever-increasing numbers of our aging sangha. Our view is not just whether we are delivering needed services and supports, but is based on realizing that we are all engaged in the warriorship of aging. While the results show that basic goodness is alive and well in Shambhala, there are challenges. This survey will hopefully inform planning and offer ideas for meeting these needs.

Overall there are requests for information, education, and structures of service delivery around caring for each other and also on how to overcome obstacles to practice caused by issues of aging. Centres have also come up with a lot of creative solutions which are brought out in the report (organized by subject.)

The survey was more narrative than statistical in nature. We encourage the reading of the report, which contains many heartfelt and moving quotes from the survey responders, inspired to create a culture of kindness.

The survey was designed and conducted by Ann Cason and Jack Bodner.

#### **Survey Statistics and Demographics**

Overall, 150 responses were received from a total of 116 Centres worldwide, with most responses coming from Centre Directors and Societal Health & Well-Being Directors. Responses were received from almost all of the larger Centres (those with over 50 members.) 70% of the responses came from North America and 30% from Europe, Latin America, and other areas of the world.

#### **What does a Shambhala Centre do when someone needs help?**

All of our centers aspire to care for each other. We are impressed with our centers in their creation of a “culture of noticing”, as Dan Peterson of Seattle calls it. We are doing better than we think, with our grass roots approach to care and kindness.

##### **a. Mid-size and Smaller Centres (under 200 members)**

When a situation of need arises at the mid-size and smaller Centres, care often arises organically and naturally. Quite often, the situation is brought to the attention of the SHWB Director, the Desung or the Centre Director (where there is no SHWB Director or Desung), and she/he will put out a call for help. Friends of the person, or people who have established a connection to the person at the Centre, naturally are inspired to help and a care team will self-organize. More information on the dynamics and also the limitations of this process are brought out in the report.

Most Centres have limited organization beyond the SHWB Director, although a few have a Community Care Coordinator, some form of organized care teams, or other ad hoc structure. One place where there is organization is Amsterdam, where an established care team structure and process is in place. This is all described in more detail in the report, as well as the challenges that are coming up for them.

### **b. Larger Centres**

Halifax, Boulder, New York and Boston are experiencing the most challenges. These centers have a high proportion of members who are over 60 (in Halifax, it is over 50%.) At these Centres, it is hard for leadership to keep track of everyone and a fear that some people who need help may be falling through the cracks. They generally have top-level committees (within SHWB or the Desung) and they can sometimes put out a call for help, but their ability to initiate care teams is limited. Generally, this works well for individuals who are well-connected to the sangha, but harder where the person has withdrawn or has more marginal connections.

The situation at each of these Centres is described in more detail in the report.

### **c. Discussion**

It is clear that providing care has to be a community effort and can't really be entirely organized by the Centres. The Centres can support and help to connect. However, further organization and support from within the Centres is obviously desirable. How to find manpower for leadership is an issue. Many centers are requesting information, education, and structures to grow with.

The post of Director of Societal Health and Well Being has been an important addition to Shambhala. The survey shows how well it is beginning to take hold, demonstrating to the sangha that health and well-being is important, and providing a point person for situations of need.

Responders expressed that it is sometimes hard to find out what people need, particularly when a person has become more isolated from the Centre, due to ill health or alienation, so there is the danger of people falling through the cracks. Caregiver burden is another challenge which is mentioned.

### **Obstacles to Participation for Aging Sangha**

Many kinds of obstacles to participation are described in the report, as well as some creative solutions. Many Centres are not wheelchair accessible and/or have bathrooms that are not wheelchair accessible, or have stairs which are challenging for people with mobility issues. Some initiatives are described for actually installing elevators or chair lifts on stairs. Some centres have gotten grants or are working with building owners to improve accessibility.

Some Centres are also exploring ways to Skype programs and practice sessions for people who can't physically be present. However, many older people have trouble with computers. Amsterdam actually has a committee of people who help elders who are technologically challenged.

Issues related to hearing and vision problems, having comfortable and safe seating, etc. are also brought up well as some solutions, such as improving a Centre's sound system. Many elders don't want to go out at night and there are suggestions for daytime programs at the Centres. However, transportation to the Centre is another common obstacle for many elders.

Physical and financial obstacles to participation at land centre programs were also brought up. Land centres are becoming more sensitive to this issue. Dorje Denma Ling, for example, offers elders a choice not to participate in rota, and tries to provide places to rest during program breaks. Land centres are often offering some discounts, although financial obstacles remain for many.

### **Financial Obstacles – Not Meeting Basic Necessities**

Needless to say, an obstacle for some seniors is not having enough money for basic necessities, and it is feared that Centres may not be aware of some of these situations. Davis Shambhala Center has an Emergency Support Fund and in Boulder, there is a trust for those in financial need.

### **Communication between Young and Old**

Based on the survey, at most of the centres, communication is good between the generations, based on people coming together at programs or in volunteering, plus a natural respect for the wisdom of the elders, who are often the teachers. There are some centres where there are challenges related to elders having trouble letting go and learning to appreciate the energy of young leaders. There are many quotations in the report from survey responders; reading those gives a feeling for the various dimensions of this issue, which is so important for the continuity of Shambhala.

### **Aging Groups, Programs and Outreach**

Aging groups which meet regularly have formed at several Centres. New York, Denver and Portland all have thriving groups; the structure and format of each of these groups are described in the report. Other centers have had organized classes, programs and workshops on both the view of aging and dying, as well as on practical issues that come up for older people, including preparation for dying (such as making wills, advanced directives, etc.)

Aging has also provided a natural situation of interfacing with the greater community, such as involvement of the South Shore Shambhala Centre (in Nova Scotia) with a local seniors program and the plan by 100 Mile House Meditation Group (in British Columbia) to give a training presentation to the local hospice regarding mindfulness and palliative care.

### **Activities, Programs and Supports that Centres would like to See**

Responses fell into a number of categories. There are requests for information on what resources are available from Shambhala and how to access them. Also, for information about the Rites of Passage ceremony.

Also, for information about what other centres are doing (which is one of goals of this report.) Specifically, Centres are looking for information on how to start community care and also aging groups. What kinds of structures work well, and how to find leadership and people willing to spearhead the starting of a group. They are also looking for ideas for local workshops and programs on practical, earthy topics.

Many people expressed appreciation for the Shambhala Online Series on Aging and would like to see more, including programs on more practical topics. The desire for more online courses and also live online access to teachings where people can not physically be present was also expressed. Some people thought local surveys of membership would be helpful in finding out what the interests and needs are.

## **Shared Housing**

Lennart Krogoll, Director of Dorje Denma Ling, reported he was in the process of “convening a small working group, looking at developing an elders community housing project here that will be attached to DDL in a way that can be supported by the younger folks who run DDL, while giving elders an active role in a multi-generational community.”

One place where shared housing is already in place is in Lexington, Kentucky. It is described as “a practice house that houses older members of our sangha. It is a valuable resource for the inhabitants and for the center.”

In Davis, there is a shared housing cooperative that “has three Shambhalians and several Buddhist-leaning members ..., which could become sort of Sangha housing if enough people move in.”

## **Conclusions and Next Steps**

Hopefully this report will provide a mirror and help to spread ideas and inspiration around the sangha, both to the Working Group on Aging and Shambhala leadership, as well as to local Centres. In the responses we received worldwide, it seems that the commonality of challenges and opportunities far outweighs regional and cultural differences.

Some people took time on their surveys to express concern that we are only beginning to see the tip of the iceberg, and worried about the impact of aging sangha on the Centres. But with that observation in mind, maybe we should consider: How can coming up with ways to meet the needs of our elders, who are engaged in the warriorship of aging, be a factor in promoting the wisdom of Shambhala? There is kindness and wisdom and effort being engaged throughout the mandala. Here is hoping the survey will be a springboard of benefit and a small step in creating enlightened society.