

PRIORITIES FOR THE AGING POPULATION OF ONTARIO:

The Collective Views of Nine Organizations representing more than 1 million seniors

Members of the Advocacy Consortium

Older Adult Centres' Associations of Ontario

Ontario Association of Not for Profit Homes and Services for Seniors

Ontario Community Support Association

Ontario Gerontology Association

Ontario Society (Coalition) of Senior Citizens' Organizations

Ontario Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

Ontario Retirement Communities Associations

The Retired Teachers of Ontario/Les enseignantes et enseignants retraités de l'Ontario

United Senior Citizens of Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

The demographic shape of Ontario is changing significantly. The population is becoming older. The number of people over 65 will grow from the current 1.7 million as the baby boom cohort joins the ranks of the older population. In the next few years, the number over 65 will exceed those under 15 for the first time in Ontario's history.

In preparation for this very significant increase in the older population, and in anticipation of the October provincial election, nine organizations representing more than a million seniors have together developed a set of priorities. As the election approaches, the Advocacy Consortium requests that all the political parties respond to these priorities.

The needs of the older population can be expressed within these four sets of Priorities:

- 1. Positive Aging: its promotion within Age Friendly Communities**
- 2. Health Care: access and affordability**
- 3. Economic Well-being: including access to employment, adequate pensions, affordability of prescription drugs and care, and affordable housing**
- 4. Supportive Infrastructure: establishing a Cabinet Committee on Aging; providing financial incentives for developing hubs of services where required.**

Before examining each of these clusters of priorities, some background will provide a useful context.

BACKGROUND

Currently, there are approximately 1.7 million people age 65 or older in Ontario. The *baby boom* cohort will begin reaching this age in 2011 and will continue to swell the

ranks of the older population for the following two decades. This growth of the older population will have a significant impact on our society. For the first time, there will be more 'Seniors' than youth. Over 20% of the population will be over age sixty-five. This demographic shift will change the complexion of Ontario's population and the dominant needs in the province. Clearly, the older population will be a major factor in political decisions, including election results, in the province.

The Media and Government in Ontario appear to be aware of the demographic shift that is underway. This *silver tsunami* has been written about often enough for it to be in the minds and jargon of most policy makers. To date, however, this has not translated into action on issues of importance to older adults. This document, therefore, sets out four clusters of priority issues that must be addressed in the near future. The option of waiting until the full effect of the baby boom is upon us would lead to increased costs for provision of programs and services and other constraints. In contrast, addressing these priorities now will involve lower costs and an opportunity to fine tune policies and programs before the full force of the *demographic shift* is upon us.

The priorities outlined here have been developed by a *consortium* of nine organizations, all working in the field of Aging. These organizations have a combined membership of more than a million seniors or about half of all seniors in Ontario.

The four sets of priorities are outlined below.

1. **Positive Aging**

While many priorities in the field of Aging are related to improving access to health care and to addressing financial issues, it is important to recognize that, increasingly, most older people are independent, active and making a contribution to their community and to the economy of their society. This perspective on our older population is more realistic than the current perception on aging which is one of liability: too many older people clogging hospitals and creating a strain on the economy.

Within this priority, of Positive Aging are issues such as:

- ✓ Some physicians do not value older people as much as younger patients since the former often come with an array of medical issues rather than just one;
- ✓ Some employers see older people as ready to retire rather than as experienced workers who can mentor new employees and provide cumulated wisdom and long term expertise;

- ✓ The considerable wisdom, experience, and ability which is being wasted due to negative stereotyping of older people. The contributions of older people need to be recognized rather than only as a burden on society;
- ✓ Many older people are completely retired but are living healthy and active lifestyles as participants in numerous recreational activities.

These stereotypes contribute to an unfortunate neglect of the valuable resource represented by older persons. If we can change public views to understand the value of this age group we can bring about positive change demographically and socially.

Implementing this change will require a collective effort amongst public and private sectors. It will require us to develop educational material and Public Service advertisements to portray a more positive vision of older people. It will also require focused campaigns to educate employers, consumers and older adults themselves. Accordingly,

we call on the Ontario Government to create a responsibility centre to raise public awareness of older adults as an asset to Ontario society.

2. **Health Care**

Seniors want timely access to affordable health care, including access to physicians who understand and value older patients. At present, medical training programs in the province only provide one week of training on geriatric medicine in the four-year undergraduate program. Most adults receive their basic care from family physicians who have little training in geriatrics. Family physicians faced with complex needs of older persons cannot readily turn to geriatric specialists for advice since there is a serious shortage of geriatricians in Ontario. Since a growing portion of physicians' patient loads will be older people, general practitioners need to be better trained.

We call on the Ontario Government to see to it that the amount of time devoted to the medical needs of older people be increased in the training of medical students in Ontario.

There is also a need to increase the number of geriatricians to support our aging population. This will require improved payment incentives and a focused campaign to raise the stature of geriatricians within the medical profession.

Seniors also want access to all approved drugs. At present, those who rely on the Seniors Drug program do not have such access. Expensive proprietary drugs often cost

more than some seniors can afford. This is inequitable and inconsistent with universality and therefore needs to be changed.

We call on the Ontario Government to expand the coverage provided by the Seniors Drug Plan to reflect up to date and timely assessment of drugs.

Health care costs continue to increase. Consequently, preventative measures are clearly required. We know that older people who exercise are generally healthier and better able to avoid illnesses. There is also a growing body of evidence that people who exercise are less likely to experience falls or suffer from dementias such as Alzheimer's.

Therefore, we propose that, among other initiatives to improve activity levels, a \$500 tax credit be provided to seniors who exercise regularly.

This would encourage seniors to exercise on a regular basis and have their exercise documented, for example, at the local recreation centre. We have seen the impact of modest cost initiatives such as charging five cents for plastic bags and we suggest that this similar type of initiative would be more than paid for by the savings in health care.

Under this same priority there are concerns about the affordability of Long Term Care facilities for seniors with limited income, as well as about the cost and accessibility of support that would make it possible for people to remain in their own homes. Frequently what is required to allow people to remain in their homes is low cost assistance such as cutting the lawn or helping with shopping. Finding these services is often difficult for seniors. Arranging for the availability of such services could help people remain at home in their later years. For those who must move into Long Term Care facilities, the transition should be made as easy as possible.

We call on the Ontario Government to provide for appropriate levels of care during times of transition, such as access to appropriate home care solutions and, beyond that, assistance with costs associated with retirement residence living. Retirement residence living acts as a transition point between aging at home and living in a long-term care facility. It enables elders to remain at least semi-independent longer, thereby reducing wait lists for long-term care bed occupancy. Furthermore, tax incentives would make moving from a private home a more attractive alternative for seniors.

3. Economic Well-Being

This priority includes access to employment and to adequate pensions.

Older people often find that age is a huge barrier to employment. Despite years of experience, they are often turned down by employers because of myths about limited capacity, frequent ill-health and similar prejudices. These need to be dispelled, perhaps by a ***campaign featuring employers expressing satisfaction with older workers.***

Structural barriers to older persons remaining in the work force include pension attribution rules and a lack of programs to effectively engage older workers. It should be recognized that we are entering into a period where labour shortages in Ontario will increase and threaten our economic growth. Older workers can be part of the solution to addressing these shortages.

Impediments to working past age 65, such as pension claw-backs, must be removed in order to allow qualified older people who want to work to be able to do so without disincentives.

At the moment many older workers leave work rather than contribute to pension plans without any future gain.

For those who are retired, the adequacy of pensions is a huge issue. This issue has been receiving increased public attention but little action. Canadians are rightfully proud that previous efforts to bring incomes of retired persons up to adequate levels did raise many seniors out of poverty and desperation. It now seems, however, that there is an increasing number of older persons falling back into poverty. It is imperative that we begin to address the inadequacies of the pension system. All people over 65 are entitled to Old Age Security benefits. These are subject to claw-backs even for people with very limited incomes. Those with low incomes are eligible for the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

The levels of these payments need to be updated in accordance with contemporary costs. We call upon the Ontario Government to bring together the appropriate parties to seek a solution to this problem.

Transitions from work to retirement need to be greatly improved and older workers who want to continue to work should be utilized **as mentors to newcomers lacking Canadian work experience and to young people entering the workforce.**

4. **Supportive Infrastructure**

The aging of Ontario's population increasingly affects a number of areas within the provincial Government: Housing, Health, Transportation, Social Services, among others. Yet the only organizational structure to deal with age related issues is the small and modestly resourced Ontario Seniors Secretariat. With the continued growth of the older population, this is simply not adequate, notwithstanding the dedication of the Ontario Seniors Secretariat staff. There are priority issues related especially to Housing and Transportation that need attention.

We, therefore, call on the Ontario Government to establish a Cabinet Committee on Aging with an adequately resourced public service agency to support it.

One early task for the new Cabinet Committee should be

the development of an Aging Strategy for Ontario that involves all relevant Ministries and includes other levels of government and the private sector.

This Strategy should be a comprehensive set of strategies that create an Ontario that capitalizes on the strengths of our changing age structure and provides support for those requiring assistance.

Another aspect of the need for changes in infrastructure relates to the financial constraints so frequently found among health and social service agencies. Many small organizations which provide valuable services struggle to remain vibrant. Combining a number of these organizations into community hubs has made a significant difference in several cases.

We therefore call on the Ontario Government to provide financial incentives for developing hubs of services where required.

CONCLUSION

We reiterate that these priorities have been developed by organizations representing more than one million older voters. The Seniors Advocacy Consortium invites your Party to review the priorities outlined here. The Consortium will be pleased to provide more information and to assist you in developing policy proposals to meet these priorities.