



Advocating for a Seniors' Care Strategy

By the Canadian Health Coalition



The Saskatoon Community Clinic has long prioritized the importance of high-quality health care for older adults. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light serious problems with the current system and the need for health system improvements for this group. CHSA supports the work of the Canadian Health Coalition in advocating for improvements in publicly funded health care. This background piece is a timely reminder of the work that still needs to be done.

Overview

Most Canadians will rely on seniors' care at some point in their lives. Seniors' care includes home care, long-term care, palliative care and pharmacare. Canada's health care system isn't prepared to meet the needs of the aging population. Access to seniors' care varies greatly across the country. Wait times, eligibility criteria and out-of-pocket expenses are different in each of the provinces and territories.

Seniors' care often falls outside the scope of the Canada Health Act, which only covers services provided by doctors and hospitals. A lot

of seniors' care has been privatized, and not everyone can afford it.

There are less beds available in hospitals and long-term care facilities now due to funding cuts. In some regions, people are waiting several years for a long-term care bed. At the same time, many seniors admitted to long-term care facilities could likely remain at home if they had access to adequate home care.

Canada needs a National Seniors' Care Strategy to ensure that all seniors can access quality care, regardless of where they live. We must take action now to ensure consistent funding, standards of care and staffing levels across the country. All Canadians deserve to age with dignity and respect.

The issue in detail

Seniors face many out-of-pocket expenses and receive very different levels of government funding for seniors' care depending on where they live. For example, co-payments for long-term care range from \$1,000 to \$3,400 per month. Affordability is therefore a big concern in both public and private facilities.

There is a significant shortage in long-term care beds. Canada will need to nearly double the number of beds to meet the demand by 2035. Tens of thousands of seniors are currently on waitlists for long-term care. They're often taking up hospital beds while they wait. This causes



backlogs and increased wait times in other parts of the health care system. Seniors are often expected to take the first available long-term care bed, which could be hours away from their families and communities.

The commonly cited benchmark for quality long-term care is 4.1 hours of direct care per resident per day. However, many provincial and territorial guidelines fall below that standard or they lack specific standards.

The majority of home care is provided by informal caregivers, most of whom are women. While roughly a quarter of seniors receive some form of home care, only 6% receive formal, publicly-funded care. On average, informal caregivers provide 20 hours of care per week. They often lack adequate training and supports.

Funding cuts, contracting-out, privatization and inadequate staffing levels negatively impact the quality of care people receive. It also affects caregivers' working conditions. Seniors' care is often provided by part-time, casual and temporary workers. This affects the continuity of the care provided and prevents people from forming relationships with their caregivers.

Accessing quality seniors' care is particularly difficult for low-income, racialized, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ seniors due to financial barriers and discrimination. Access to seniors' care should be equitable. Like other health care services, it should be based on need, not on people's ability to pay.

Updates

- December 2018: The federal government adopted a Framework on Palliative Care, which

called for the creation of a federal Office of Palliative Care.

- June 2019: The federal government adopted a National Dementia Strategy.

The CHC is calling for:

A national seniors care strategy that sets consistent standards of care and staffing levels across the country. This strategy should include:

- Dedicated federal funding to the provinces and territories as part of the Canada Health Transfer

- National standards as a condition of federal funding that are similar to the criteria in the Canada Health Act. Seniors' care should be universal, public, comprehensive, accessible and portable

- A human resources strategy to guarantee a skilled seniors' care workforce and decent working conditions for care workers

Take action

All seniors should have access to quality care,

- Sign our petition, healthcoalition.ca
- Take part in our on-line story booth by sharing your experience with seniors' care.

Further reading

- Canadian Health Coalition,
- Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, 2015

Source: Saskatoon Community Clinic Focus newsletter, Summer 2020.