

Findings Report

Demographic Planning
Commission

December 2008



Executive Summary

Alberta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the next few decades, the average age of Alberta's population is expected to increase. This is due to a number of factors, including lower birth rates, longer life expectancy and, significantly, the increasing age of baby boomers. Alberta has over 370,000 seniors – residents who are 65 years of age or older – or roughly, one in 10 Albertans. In less than 20 years the number of seniors in Alberta will double. Population projections estimate that by 2031, one in five Albertans will be a senior.

This change will create opportunities and challenges for Alberta. Although today's seniors have higher levels of education and longer life expectancies than past seniors, there are some trends that raise questions about the quality of life that future seniors will have. For instance, Alberta's population is experiencing rising rates of obesity, chronic illness and mental health problems. Significant in-migration and immigration to Alberta is creating a more diverse population, and many new Albertans face language barriers or under-employment. Many Albertans face barriers to greater participation in the labour force and mainstream society, including those with disabilities and Aboriginal Albertans. These additional demographic factors will influence the characteristics of Alberta's future seniors population.

The Government of Alberta will be developing an Aging Population Policy Framework to help Alberta government ministries plan programs, services and capital investments to meet the changing needs of Alberta's aging population. The Alberta Government established the Demographic Planning Commission (the Commission) to help guide the development of this framework by consulting with Albertans about their views and adding its own expert advice and insight into issues.

Throughout the summer of 2008, the Commission gathered input from Albertans about the issues facing current and future seniors, and their perspectives regarding the shared roles and responsibilities of individuals, families, communities and governments in addressing these issues. To obtain a large volume and range of input, the Commission held full-day dialogue sessions across Alberta with stakeholders involved in seniors issues, and conducted a widely-advertised internet-based survey. Over 100 stakeholders participated in the dialogue sessions and over 10,000 Albertans completed the internet survey. The Commission heard from people in their senior years as well as younger Albertans, including baby boomers looking ahead to their 60s and beyond.

Albertans who participated in the Commission's input process identified a number of important issues facing Alberta's seniors, and the ways they believe these issues should be addressed. Albertans told the Commission that the Alberta government has primary responsibility for ensuring programs and services are available for seniors, especially in

health care. Participants identified major roles for the Alberta government such as ensuring quality in health care, setting standards for senior care, creating long-term care facilities and building the health workforce.

The Commission used its expertise and background to examine the variety of issues raised by Albertans. From this process, the Commission developed a number of policy themes that the Alberta government should address as it develops an Aging Population Policy Framework:

Enabling seniors to remain in their own homes

Albertans said that as seniors, they will want to live in their own homes for as long as possible. Individual seniors, in consultation with their families, decide where they live – or, age in the right place – based on factors such as cost, access, proximity to services and personal preferences. To successfully remain in their homes, seniors need affordable housing and services, access to adequate supports and more choice in housing. The Alberta and municipal governments, not-for-profit agencies and the private sector need to work together to improve the affordability and choice in housing for seniors.

Providing services to seniors in the community

The availability and accessibility of services is a critical issue for seniors. Home care, home support (such as yard work and house cleaning), and personal care services will be in higher demand. The private sector can meet much of this demand, but some seniors will not be able to obtain services from the private sector. The Alberta government, municipal governments and not-for-profit agencies must ensure subsidized and low-cost services are available for seniors in need. Policy makers also need to ensure the continued strength of not-for-profit agencies and reasonable access to services in both urban and rural areas. Programs and services must be available to seniors when they need them, and designed in ways that address their needs.

Better connecting seniors with services

Alberta government departments and agencies need to work together in more integrated ways to better connect seniors with services. The government should examine factors such as eligibility criteria, mobile service delivery and system navigation. The Alberta government must also develop an interdepartmental coordinating committee or other mechanism that ensures policies, programs and services for seniors are planned and implemented in a coordinated fashion. The Alberta government also needs to examine how provincial, federal and municipal programs can work together in more seamless ways. The new Aging Population Policy Framework should also establish criteria to assess the development of policies, programs and services for seniors.

Building the workforce

The growing senior population will result in increased demand for senior-related services from both the private sector and community-based service providers. Labour shortages currently threaten the availability of services throughout the province. Policy makers need to consider ongoing labour needs in fields of senior care, and ways to increase the levels of accreditation, respect and remuneration of these jobs. The Alberta and federal governments, and the private sector, also need to encourage the continued participation of seniors in the labour force. A majority of seniors will likely want or need to continue working past the age of 65 and they must be able to do so.

Undertaking appropriate transportation and capital planning

Retaining mobility and having accessibility to public places goes to the core of seniors' independence. Seniors must be able to get around. Communities and governments need to consider the accessibility and mobility needs of seniors when planning and coordinating transportation, infrastructure and land use, including the walk-ability of streets and neighbourhoods. Policy makers must encourage barrier-free design and construction. The roles of governments, communities and the private sector need to be considered in planning and addressing capital requirements, such as long-term care facilities, supportive living, lodges and affordable housing.

Meeting the health needs of seniors

Albertans are concerned about health care access, particularly as they age and anticipate needing more health services. They expressed special concern about the shortage of health care workers, rising out-of-pocket costs and the organization of the health system. Many rural seniors do not have access to basic health services in their communities, and disabled Albertans have trouble accessing barrier-free health services. The Alberta government and public health bodies must continue to expand the health workforce, ensure it has enhanced training for senior care, and ensure it delivers senior-friendly care. There is also a need to encourage individuals to practise healthy living. Policy makers will need to consider how government can encourage fitness, recreation and healthy behaviour and in preventing illness and injury.

Determining how to provide government support

Albertans have varying degrees of financial literacy, expectations about the resources they will need, and beliefs about what assets they expect to use. Many Albertans are concerned about the sustainability of Alberta government programs and services due to a larger senior population. Although they believe that certain government assistance should be targeted to seniors in need, they also believe that publicly-funded health care services should be universally provided to all seniors. It is absolutely critical for policy makers to clearly establish and communicate the roles and expectations of the individual, the family, the private sector and the Alberta government in financing senior years. Further research and study must inform this work.

Supporting the role of the family

Families, friends and neighbours provide vital support to seniors. Informal caregivers face growing demands on their time and resources from the realities of modern life. Many are under strain financially and emotionally. Friends, families and neighbours play increasingly important roles as the population ages. The Alberta government must support care givers that face the rigours of caring for senior friends and family members.

Fostering respect and dignity toward seniors

Alberta communities need to provide safe, open and inclusive environments for seniors, and help break down ageist attitudes. Wider adoption of senior-friendliness is needed to foster better connections between seniors and their communities, to help prevent social isolation and to ensure seniors are part of mainstream society. Better connections between seniors and other age groups, including young people, should be encouraged. Policy makers also need to address the unique needs of senior health care, including end-of-life care, to ensure seniors are treated with respect and dignity.

Raising awareness among future seniors

There is widespread concern that future seniors may not be planning sufficiently for their senior years. They may not fully appreciate how long they will live, what services they will require and what age-related health issues they will face. Future seniors also may not have thought about how they will spend their time, where they will live and who will care for them. Policy makers need to encourage and support individuals and families in making such preparations.

Principles

The Commission also suggests that policy makers adopt the following principles to underlie the design and funding of programs and services for seniors:

- The individual, their family, the local community and the provincial and municipal governments share responsibility for ensuring Albertans have adequate resources and access to services for their senior years.
- The government should base taxpayer-funded programs and services for seniors funded on evidence to ensure the effective use of taxpayer resources.
- The government should establish and maintain standards for support and care of seniors.
- The government should regularly evaluate programs and services for seniors funded by Alberta taxpayers to ensure they are achieving their stated objectives.
- Mechanisms should continue to be in place to ensure public accountability for the expenditure and use of tax dollars.
- The Alberta government should consider current and future needs from an increasing senior population in the development of its policies and programs.
- Alberta government policies, programs and services should not result in an unequal inter-generational distribution of tax obligations.
- Programs and services for seniors funded by Alberta taxpayers should be sustainable over the long-term.

As with past generations, future seniors will bring evolving attitudes and life experiences that will contribute to new trends in senior living. Future seniors will live longer, work longer and engage in a wider range of activities and pursuits. Seniors increasingly refuse to be defined by age – the very definition of a “senior” is rapidly losing meaning.

With the benefit of Albertan’s input, expert advice and further study, Alberta will be prepared for the complex and challenging realities of its current and future seniors.

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