



Seniors' Advocate: Addressing the Complex Interconnected Needs of Seniors in Saskatchewan

Executive Summary

The government of Saskatchewan is not addressing the needs of 20% of our population; the 200,000 seniors whose hard work and commitment to their fellow citizens and communities made this province a great place to live and work. Now, in their time of need, the Saskatchewan government is not providing them with the support they need.

While the government may have some information on some specific needs, it does not have an understanding of these needs and how they are interrelated because there is no one specific ministry to identify and articulate them. Consequently, the government is not able to develop the cross-ministry strategies to address these needs.

The first step towards developing the capacity to address these needs is to establish an office that can:

- Research and articulate the full range of the needs of our seniors,
- Identify the steps needed to address these needs, and
- Assist seniors to connect with the services they need.

Specifically, we must have a **Seniors Advocate Office** in Saskatchewan.

The Solution

The establishment of a **Seniors Advocate Office** that is capable of conducting the research necessary to build a co-ordinated action plan that addresses the interconnected current and projected needs of Saskatchewan seniors is vital.

The Seniors Advocate Office must:

- Be enshrined in legislation through an ***Office of Seniors Advocate Act***.
- Be an **Independent Officer of the Legislature** reporting to the legislative assembly rather than the government. This would be similar to the role of the Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth.
- Have a terms of reference, developed in consultation with community-based groups, that includes a mandate for individual and family advocacy and system navigation, policy advocacy, research, community outreach, and public education.
- Be accountable to the legislature and Saskatchewan people through the annual monitoring and reporting of actions taken and services provided for older adults in our province.

- Address issues with equity-based lens (Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQ+, and persons with disabilities).
- Focus on **issues of older adults** living both in-care and in the community.
- Focus on issues of older adults living in both **urban and rural communities**.

The Office of the Seniors Advocate would address key issues including:

1. Affordable and secure housing, including services for unhoused older adults.
2. Access to timely health care services.
3. Aging in place services.
4. Financial and food security.
5. Accessible transportation.
6. Long- and short-term care supports.
7. Wellness and fitness programs.
8. Safety from isolation and elder abuse.
9. Culturally appropriate services.

The Issues

It is widely accepted that the number and complexity of health issues increase as we age and that there will be a great need for long-term care as our population ages, seniors are the fastest growing demographic in Canada. However, the issues faced by our seniors are much broader than healthcare and long-term care.

The range of issues faced by seniors includes the following:

- **Immunizations** - Due to a lack of immunization many seniors experience ill health, pain and early death because they do not have access to the vaccines that could prevent them from getting sick.
Saskatchewan Health has recognized the benefit to the province and to seniors of providing high dose flu vaccines to seniors. The result was not only the reduction of suffering and early death of seniors. It also resulted in major savings in health costs.
 - The government must **fully fund** and ensure that seniors have **easy access** to best-in-class and most effective vaccinations for:
 - Shingles,
 - Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), and
 - Pneumonia.
 - These serious illnesses are **preventable through vaccination**. Vaccines are powerful tools that prevent disease, hospitalizations and deaths.
- **Financial insecurity** is an increasing concern affecting seniors' wellbeing.
 - 45% of seniors have at least one financial concern, 25% fear that they will run out of money before they die and 25% fear not being able to pay for long-term care.
 - The income of 10,000 Saskatchewan seniors is below the poverty line – 60% of these are single women and 20% are single men.

- **Housing needs** - Saskatchewan has the highest provincial proportion of senior households requiring core housing needs (good repair, appropriate for current situation and maximum 30% of income).
 - Seniors need access to a range of **housing options** as they age – from aging in place, to supported living, to long-term care.
 - 25% of seniors housing is below standard – 19% due to affordability, 5% due to adequacy and 3% due to suitability.
 - For single adults, 43% have core housing needs with 39% due to affordability issues.
- **Elder Abuse** - One in ten seniors experience some form of elder abuse each year.
 - This number has doubled in the past decade.
 - It is estimated that 1 in 5 cases are not reported.
 - Elder abuse can be psychological/emotional (88%), financial (14%), physical (13%) and neglect.
 - Functional impairment, poor physical health, poor mental health, behavioral problems, cognitive impairment, and shared living increase the risk of elder abuse.
 - High social support and solid social networks decrease the risk of elder abuse.
- **Violence** against seniors increased 22% between 2010 and 2020.
 - 64% of the incidents were by a non-family member,
 - 28% were by acquaintances, and
 - 24% of senior victims were victimized by a stranger.
 - 60% of violence against seniors involved the use of physical force and an additional 19% involved a weapon.
 - 35% of seniors suffered a physical injury as a result of the violence they experienced.
- **Transportation** - Access to public transportation is essential for the wellbeing of seniors.
 - Mobility, the ability to move around freely, is a basic human need for healthy aging.
 - It is associated with independence, health, and well-being. Older adults need to remain mobile to meet their daily needs and to participate in social life.
 - Older adults often experience loss of a driver's licence and must rely on public transportation, which must:
 - Be readily accessible,
 - Safely accessible – e.g., no icy sidewalks, no or few steps,
 - Able to meet the changing mobility needs of seniors.
- **Social Isolation** - 41 % of seniors are at risk of social isolation and up to 58% have experienced loneliness, with 20% being “very lonely”.
 - The risk factors for social isolation include living alone, being 80 years or older, compromised health (including multiple chronic conditions), no children or family contact, poor access to transportation, low income and family migrating for work.
 - Social isolation increases the risk of elder abuse, can result in negative health behaviours such as drinking, smoking, being sedentary, not eating well, increased likelihood of falls.

- Socially isolated individuals have more mental health issues, have a four-to-five times greater risk of hospitalization and greater likelihood of death from coronary heart disease/stroke.

From the above discussion, it is evident that we have a web of interrelated issues. Concern about finances results in cutting back on living, food, and choices. Housing affordability leads to food insecurity and increased use of the food bank. Medical conditions and disabilities can result in social isolation, which in turn exacerbates one's mental and physical health issues.

It is evident that a co-ordinated multi-system approach is required to address these issues today and as they evolve in the future with our aging population.

Seniors and their families need a voice in government that understands their needs and advises the government to ensure its policies are senior friendly. They also need someone to provide guidance and support in dealing with government officials.

Seniors and their families need a **Saskatchewan Seniors Advocate** now.

The Establishment

The **Seniors Advocate Office** can be accomplished by transferring the resources devoted to the seniors in the Ministries of Health and Social Services. Seniors' issues are not one size fits all. They range from affordable, appropriate housing to income security and violence, fraud, and theft.

We are calling upon the Saskatchewan Provincial leaders of the Saskatchewan Party, the Saskatchewan New Democratic Party, and other provincial party leaders to demonstrate their commitment to establishment an Office of the Seniors Advocate.

CARP Saskatchewan

This briefing paper was prepared by CARP Saskatchewan.

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