

# **Summary Report on the One-Page Survey and Written Submissions: Major Themes and Ideas**

## **Government-Wide Study on the Impact of the Aging Population**

### **Introduction**

This report provides a summary of the written feedback received by the Steering Committee for the Government-Wide Study on the Impact of the Aging Population in the Fall of 1999. It includes summaries of the results from the one-page survey and written submissions.

The one-page survey was included in the Steering Committee's "Aging Together – Planning for the Future: Discussion Guide," which was distributed across the province in September 1999. It was also available for completion on-line at the Steering Committee's website.

The survey asked Albertans for their views in three key areas: 1) impact of the aging population, 2) healthy aging, and 3) supportive communities. It provided space for Albertans to write their comments on each of these three key areas. This open-ended approach to the survey was taken to ensure that Albertans had a broad scope in which to provide their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions for the future.

A number of individuals and organizations chose to send written submissions to the Steering Committee. These submissions provided more in-depth perspectives on issues related to healthy aging and active wellness, substance abuse prevention, palliative care, diabetes, volunteerism, and aging adults with developmental disabilities.

About 250 individuals, of all ages, and from across the province, took the time to complete the Steering Committee's one-page survey or prepare written submissions. 65% of the respondents were under the age of 65 years of age. Approximately 1 in 3 of the respondents were baby boomers between the ages of 33 to 53 years.

Individuals and groups representing many communities provided written feedback, including: Olds, Edmonton, St. Albert, Sherwood Park, Lloydminster, Calgary, Drayton Valley, High Prairie, Red Deer, Sexsmith, Strathmore, Thorhild, Bonnyville, Lac La Biche, Caroline, Breton, Wainwright, Hanna, Camrose, Empress, Cardston, Vermilion, Onoway, Canmore, Banff, Coleman, Lethbridge, Hinton, Nisku, Leduc, Edson, Sundre, Westaskiwin, Grande Prairie, and Drumheller. Some respondents identified themselves as living in "rural" Alberta.

The Steering Committee is appreciative of the time and effort that Albertans devoted to answering the survey and preparing written submissions. The many varied ideas, thoughts, and suggestions were all noted and considered by the Steering Committee in preparing its June 2000 report titled *ALBERTA FOR ALL AGES: Directions for the Future*.

The written feedback from Albertans has been summarized in this report under the following major themes or headings:

- Health Care Services
- Healthy Aging and Wellness Promotion
- Caregivers and Volunteers
- Housing for Seniors
- Integrated and Supportive Communities
- Government Planning and Research
- Income Support, Pensions, and Financial Planning
- Public Education and Awareness
- Workplace and Retirement.

### **Health Care Services**

- Ensure “affordable” and “accessible” health care services, which are supportive of older adults. This idea was recognized by some to be both a federal and provincial responsibility. Some respondents described the need to “revitalize” the health care system in Alberta, following the cuts that have been made in the past.
- Improve access to hospitals and specialists. Reduce wait lists for surgeries that impact on the quality of life such as cataract surgery and hip replacements.
- Provide more affordable and accessible long-term care beds for seniors, including those who live outside major urban centres. Develop community-based alternatives to nursing homes. Provide information on the types of care facilities available and their costs. Improve the care seniors receive in nursing homes. Get families more involved with seniors living in these facilities.
- Focus on supporting seniors in their homes. Make home-care a priority. Improve access to qualified home-care workers for all seniors, including those who live in rural or remote areas. Increase community health care resources.
- Educate and monitor seniors who are taking prescription drugs. The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission in its written submission noted that only 1% of its clients are seniors; most of these clients sought assistance for alcohol and drug problems, particularly prescription drugs.
- Increase the number of health professionals who specialize in geriatrics and gerontology. Train all workers who work with seniors about the aging process and care of the elderly.

- Promote better cooperation between health care providers who are caring for seniors. Recognize the roles that all health professionals can and do play in caring for the elderly, including physicians, nurses, social workers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, dieticians, home-care workers, and so on.
- Study the aging process. Study palliative care needs.
- A few individuals also made specific suggestions, such as:
  - reconsider the payment of health care premiums for middle and upper income seniors;
  - revisit drug benefits for seniors under Alberta Blue Cross;
  - look at drug costs for seniors released from hospital;
  - look at how decisions are made regarding drugs for patients in long-term care facilities;
  - look at the amount of assistance for eyeglasses and dental care provided to seniors under the Extended Health Benefits program;
  - look at the assistance provided under the Alberta Aids to Daily Living program, including assistance for hearing aids;
  - consider the issues surrounding privatization in the health care system (some respondents supported private hospitals, while others opposed this idea);
  - increase long-term care charges to better reflect the actual costs of this care;
  - ensure there are special care facilities for seniors with dementia;
  - establish a clinical database on the elderly by age to help develop “best practices” in gerontology for physicians and nurses;
  - screen and train caregivers working in facilities and pay them accordingly,
  - consider specialized geriatric assessment centres in major cities, with satellites in small communities;
  - consider elder abuse prevention for seniors not living in care facilities;
  - consider family and seniors’ wishes regarding death and dying and compassionate care; and,
  - improve and expand palliative care for dying patients.

### **Healthy Aging & Wellness Promotion**

- Recognize that individuals have the primary responsibility for their own healthy aging. Provide more health promotion and prevention programs, including nutrition and exercise programs, for all ages but particularly for baby boomers. Encourage healthy living through counseling, education and incentives (e.g., positive reinforcement such as rewards). Inform individuals about the possible future consequences of unhealthy living. Set children’s healthy aging goals early in life.
- Focus on health promotion instead of illness. Place emphasis on the prevention and management of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and arthritis. The Canadian Diabetes Association, Alberta and NWT Division predicted in its submission that there will be more seniors in the future with one or more chronic diseases. It expects that the number of seniors with diabetes will double in Canada by 2016.

- Encourage regular health check-ups and early screening programs.
- Ensure that seniors maintain an active role in community life.
- Enable and encourage recreational and leisure activities and exercise for seniors. Motivate the older population. Individuals and families have a responsibility to increase physical activities.
- The Lindsay Park Sports Centre in Calgary in its submission provided an example of what community groups can and are doing to promote health and wellness in the aging population. The Centre is currently developing an innovative, preventive, lifelong health strategy for seniors and other age groups that promotes the benefits of active wellness. The strategy is to increase the number of people who actively and effectively manage their personal health through proper diet, exercise, and lifestyle choices.
- A few respondents noted their support for holistic and alternative approaches such as vitamin supplements, herbal remedies and therapeutic massage. Others mentioned ideas to promote better nutrition through the maintenance of productive farmland, and improved food production, processing and distribution. One respondent suggested the idea of community kitchens.

### **Caregivers and Volunteers**

- Encourage and help families to care for their senior members. Provide more support for families and other informal caregivers. A variety of ideas were suggested by individuals, such as:
  - provide relief workers and home care regularly;
  - provide relief through improved availability of day care programs and respite beds;
  - provide training, support groups and resources for families caring for elderly family members;
  - provide more flexibility in the workplace (i.e. supportive human resource policies) to give workers time to care for family members; and,
  - provide financial assistance or incentives to families (e.g., tax breaks, paid vacations or other sabbatical programs, “eternity benefits” to allow time off work).
- Recognize that family caregivers may not be available or able to care for senior family members and ensure community-based supports are in place.
- A number of respondents presented specific ideas about volunteerism as a strategy for the future. Generally, respondents recognized the importance of families caring for one another, and of seniors helping themselves and others in their communities. A number of respondents suggested that programs be developed that give healthy elderly an opportunity to use their knowledge and skills for the betterment of their communities.

- Several respondents recognized the importance of seniors and youth interacting, and suggested that programs should help to connect seniors to schools in their communities and promote intergenerational assistance. It was also suggested that promotional programs be developed now to encourage youth and young adults to begin volunteering. One respondent wanted better recognition for volunteers and their efforts.
- The Volunteer Centre of Edmonton in its submission predicted that “the trend from institutional to community-based care will likely increase the system’s reliance on voluntary service as families and communities take increased responsibility for care. Community based organizations, in partnership with local, provincial and federal governments must work together to ensure the volunteer capacity to meet service needs.” The Centre would like to see work begin now to increase the capacity of the volunteer sector for the future “by increasing skills, resources, and funding for agencies that provide the infrastructure for volunteerism.”

### **Housing for Seniors**

- Focus on supporting seniors in their homes for as long as possible. A few respondents noted the need for reliable help to maintain and repair seniors’ homes. Two respondents recommended services to help seniors find reliable businesses for home maintenance.
- Provide more “appropriate,” “affordable,” “economical” housing for seniors in their home communities, including housing for seniors living in rural areas. Develop a range of housing options that provide varying levels of care, and maintain the independence and dignity of senior residents. Each should provide a stimulating environment with opportunities for social interaction and extracurricular activities.
- Base housing costs on the senior’s ability to pay. Everyone must be able to access services at a price they can afford. Governments were seen to have a role in assisting those with limited incomes with their housing costs.
- Ensure all facilities are accessible by seniors using walkers or wheelchairs.
- Encourage alliances, partnerships, alternative care/housing models, and pilot projects. Put money into facilities for all stages of the aging process, from seniors’ homes and lodges to nursing homes and extended care facilities. Provide government support for community-based housing initiatives. Some respondents supported housing projects that are initiated by the non-profit sector, others saw government partnering with the private sector. Look at options for families who wish to care for seniors in their homes.
- Ensure safe and secure living environments.
- Acknowledge the interrelationship/overlap between housing and care for seniors. Several respondents to the survey suggested that there needs to be better coordination, communication, and linkages between different groups that care for seniors.

## **Integrated and Supportive Communities**

- Involve and consult all ages in community activities and planning. Talk to seniors and their families.
- Promote and support the development of initiatives at the local level (e.g., provide incentives or funding; celebrate successful communities; provide rewards for innovative ideas). Several different ideas were proposed as to who should fund and staff community-based programs and services.
- Ensure resources for seniors (e.g., information, education, referral services, and support groups) are available in communities and easily accessed. Several respondents promoted the idea of opening more seniors' centres in communities to provide a range of supports and activities. Other ideas involved local churches, schools and community leagues. One respondent pointed to the need for "one point of entry in each community."
- Provide accessible, affordable transportation. Address the transportation needs of seniors who are "frail" or have functional limitations. Transportation was seen by some respondents as necessary for seniors to get out of their homes and actively participate in their community and recreational activities, get to medical appointments, and shop for essentials such as food and drugs. Individuals had different ideas in this area such as subsidized taxis or taxi passes for seniors, more accessible DATs services, and volunteer drivers provided by unemployed individuals or other seniors. Several respondents saw a need to address the problem of elderly drivers who should not be driving any longer.
- Address transportation issues in rural areas, to increase access to services and programs in all areas.
- Do more to provide wheel chair accessibility and senior/disabled friendly services in communities. Communities need to "cater to the elderly" by ensuring sidewalks are safe (e.g., skateboards and bicycles prohibited; snow and ice removed). Some respondents felt that lottery funds could be used for initiatives in this area. One respondent to the survey suggested "infrastructure grants for improvements geared to older persons' issues." Another respondent thought that municipal planning should focus on redeveloping central areas in cities, so that seniors are close to amenities and services.

## **Government Planning and Research**

- Make the aging population a priority. Start now to plan and prepare for it. Involve all age groups in this process.
- Respond to the report of the Government-Wide Study on the Impact of the Aging Population. Develop a business plan or aging population strategy.
- Remember the diversity in the aging population, including cultural and language differences.

- Consider the aging of persons with mental, physical and developmental disabilities, and the aging of their parents and guardians. The Skills, Training & Support Service Association emphasized in its submission the importance of lifelong planning to ensure plans are in place for the aging population of persons with developmental disabilities.
- Be better informed about existing problems for today's seniors, in order to plan for the future. However, mixed views were expressed as to what these problems might be. One respondent stated: "Current seniors have never had it so good in our lives and the tendency to WANT more tends to creep into our thinking. Want has taken over need. Yes, this statement IS coming from an old Geezer!" (survey respondent's emphases)
- Listen to what seniors have to say. Seniors must speak out and tell governments their concerns. Seniors need to be involved in decision-making processes. A few respondents put forward ideas as to how greater involvement of seniors could be achieved (e.g., encourage seniors to run for office; encourage each MLA to have a senior mentor; increase the representation of seniors on various agencies, advisory councils and boards such as Regional Health Authorities). One senior said that there is a need to find ways so that "ordinary seniors" have input "rather than only those with hidden agendas and do-gooders."
- Support communities and allow them to determine local needs and priorities. Involve and coordinate activities and initiatives among all groups, from families and communities to all levels of government.
- Different respondents tended to highlight different roles for government. Some of the roles identified included:
  - ensuring basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter are being met;
  - sharing responsibility and providing funding/subsidies to help in meeting these needs among lower income Albertans, including lower income seniors;
  - promoting shared responsibility, alliances, and partnerships for meeting future seniors' care and housing needs;
  - developing new savings and pension options to help all Albertans prepare for retirement, including individuals earning lower incomes;
  - managing government finances and taxation;
  - ensuring efficiency and cost effectiveness in the delivery of government programs and services;
  - promoting individual and family responsibility in a variety of areas such as retirement planning and healthy aging;
  - providing resources and information;
  - increasing public awareness and education about the aging population;
  - protecting the environment;
  - coordinating seniors' policies across the provincial government (e.g., one respondent suggested the creation of a Seniors' Ministry);
  - preventing age discrimination;
  - planning and research (e.g., research on demographics; research on what is being done elsewhere in the world to address the aging population);

- setting policy and standards; and,
- enacting legislation.
- A variety of ideas were expressed regarding fiscal management and taxation. For instance, several seniors suggested that governments not tax seniors and that the subsidy for property taxes for middle and upper income seniors be restored. Others would like to see the tax burden on working individuals and families reduced. One idea that was mentioned by a number of respondents to the survey proposed that a reserve fund for the aging population be created now. Another respondent remarked on the need to redirect tax dollars to reflect the proportionate increases in the aging population. Several respondents wanted to see sound management of the Canada Pension Plan (CPP) to ensure it is available, sustainable, and affordable for future seniors. One respondent supported investigating the possibility of replacing CPP with an Alberta Pension Plan.

### **Income Support, Pensions and Financial Planning**

- Ensure “adequate” or “sufficient” incomes for seniors to cover basic needs and to share costs of services and programs. Make it possible for all to participate in family and community life, regardless of economic status. Incomes that are too low were seen to limit seniors’ involvement in their communities. Notably, there were some differences of opinion expressed in this area. Some survey respondents felt seniors in Alberta already receive adequate income assistance; they would like to see a lessening of seniors’ dependence on government. Other respondents suggested increased income assistance for seniors. Several individuals commented on what they see as inequities in the current income support programs for seniors in Canada. For example, one senior remarked that she felt “penalized” because she had saved for her retirement and was now ineligible for government support in certain areas. Several respondents, however, stated that seniors with resources should pay for the services they receive, with assistance provided only to the less “financially able” seniors. A number of respondents suggested that the focus should be on helping the “aging poor” and the “working poor.”
- Promote financial planning, particularly among the young. Provide more incentives to encourage individuals to save for their retirement (e.g., better tax breaks).
- Several respondents remarked on the need for income support and pensions to keep up with cost of living increases, and these increases need to acknowledge seniors’ expenses in a variety of areas. Two individuals reported that they would like to see the Alberta Seniors Benefit and the Special Needs Assistance for Seniors programs reviewed and simplified.
- One respondent remarked on the need to protect seniors from financial abuse.

## **Public Education and Awareness**

- Break down the myths and stereotypes about aging and the aged (e.g., “seniors are a burden and consume too many resources”). Help people see the value of seniors. Increase public awareness about the wealth of information and experience seniors have to share; communities need to tap into this resource in the future. A variety of ideas were suggested in this area, such as teaching children about the pioneers who built Alberta, and “TV and radio spots” that regularly acknowledge older adults and their achievements.
- Promote a healthy, positive image of the aged and aging, and acceptance of the aging process in life. One respondent noted that we also need to “encourage (through publicity) realistic expectations for aging ... everyone wants to live and die in their own homes, but this isn’t always realistic. It is folly to assume full care will come into each home.”
- Promote and value autonomy and independence.
- Promote dignity and respect between generations. Encourage intergenerational support. Teach children about their personal, family and community responsibilities. Teach children to respect older persons. Families and schools should share responsibility in this area.
- Provide education and training on aging and the aged to all health professionals who work with seniors.
- Provide educational programs to seniors to stimulate and stretch their minds. Provide education and resources to seniors on the issues that affect them, such as preventive health care, telemarketing fraud and other scams, and trusteeship and guardianship.
- Several respondents suggested that public messaging should focus on each individual’s responsibility to be informed and plan for older age. As one respondent stated: “fund projects that encourage us to look after ourselves and others.”
- Other survey respondents suggested education and awareness programs on personal growth throughout life, and family relationships.

## **Workplace & Retirement**

- Make sure young people are well educated and have good jobs with benefits and pensions, so they are independent and able to save for their retirement. Young people were seen as “our hope for the future.” One respondent talked about individuals who are having difficulty preparing for their retirement years because they are currently supporting their adult children who have returned home due to family breakdown and/or employment problems.
- Challenge current ideas regarding employment and retirement. Several respondents felt early retirement should be discouraged and more flexible work options made available to older workers (e.g., job sharing, part-time work, or mentoring).

- Anticipate increased demand for health care workers such as nurses and home-care workers. Post-secondary institutions were seen to have primary responsibility in this area.
- One respondent felt that healthy living should be promoted in the workplace through, for example, employee exercise programs.