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Priorities for Alberta Seniors

VISION

Develop an integrated and comprehensive system of high-quality care across the entire continuum of seniors' changing needs that is publicly funded and publicly operated, and that ensures all seniors have access to care that meets their health and social needs within their home communities.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

All Albertans should expect to experience a high quality of life at any age. However, as our seniors age, their health care needs increase in both severity and diversity. All seniors must be able to count on fully accessible, high quality health care, including pharmaceutical coverage, without creating financial hardship for themselves or their families.

Over the past 35 years, numerous public reviews and multiple independent research reports have highlighted significant failures and inadequacies within the province's continuing care system. There is a remarkable consistency in the problems identified in these various reports including:

- inadequate staff-to-patient ratios
- inappropriate alignment of caregiver qualifications with patient needs
- incidents of neglect and abuse
- overuse/abuse of pharmaceutical treatments
- lack of medical and personal supplies
- inappropriate physical structures, including size and location,
- failure to prepare for disaster circumstances
- inappropriate safety resources for staff, residents and informal caregivers, and
- failure to respect and embrace informal caregiving

Despite the abundance of research to support improvements in services, the care available to senior Albertans continues to deteriorate as successive governments have downloaded costs from health care budgets to seniors and their families, and contracted with private, for-profit corporations to operate congregate care facilities and home care services. As a result, oversight of and accountability for the public funds provided to these private corporations and not-for profit operators is not available for public scrutiny.

In addition, various initiatives and restructuring of services over the past several decades, has resulted in a system that is increasingly difficult for Albertans to navigate: changes in terminology alone creating confusion for most seniors and their advocates. The current model of three streams of continuing care with a majority being provided by private corporations and contracted organizations results in the offloading of costs for pharmaceuticals and medical/personal equipment to the individual or family.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the numerous gaps and deficiencies of the current system in Alberta and other parts of Canada. The very problems identified in the numerous public reviews and research reports resulted in a disproportionate number of deaths of seniors in congregate care facilities. Within Alberta alone, the vast majority of the total deaths attributed to COVID-19 occurred within seniors' care facilities.

The universality and accessibility of the Alberta Seniors' Drug Plan has also been restricted by legislation to eliminate coverage for dependents of eligible seniors. There have also been indications that the government is considering introducing income-testing to limit universal access although it has not been implemented as yet. These actions are an attack on seniors during a time of increased vulnerability and medical need.

It is eminently clear that the health care needs of senior Albertans are considered a very low priority in the current context and a new path must be forged.

Learn more at abseniors.ca



The Government of Alberta should take the following actions to ensure all Alberta seniors can live in dignity and comfort:

1. Address seniors' needs across all streams of continuing care, including all continuing care community services:

- Participate with the federal government to ensure independent development and implementation of national legislation and regulations governing long term care across the country, and conditional federal funding, including establishing enforceable rights of older persons,
- Establish and confirm the rights of residents and their families to pursue civil remedies beyond the consequences and penalties included in regulation and standards enforcement,
- Increase the general public's awareness of how the Alberta continuing care system functions,
- Establish, through legislation, an independent Office of the Seniors' Advocate including the guarantee of unfettered authority to intervene in unsatisfactory situations on behalf of the public, and residents,
- Ensure that the entire post-acute care system better meets the needs of specific demographic groups including Indigenous peoples, Immigrant Canadians, LGBTQ* seniors, English language learners as well as patients with dementia,
- Ensure that services are adequately resourced, monitored and evaluated on a regular basis so that all seniors have access to the highest standards of care, including social and emotional support and emergency preparation
- Ensure that any changes and their impacts within the system are transparent and service providers are fully accountable to citizens of Alberta

2. Improve the quality of all residential seniors' care:

- Enhance monitoring and reporting of all residential seniors' accommodation and care with priority to health, safety and quality of life outcomes,
- Strengthen facility inspection requirements and ensure independent oversight through unannounced inspections and enforceable directives for compliance,
- Increase the public reporting of financial information, contract terms, service quality and compliance in congregate care facilities to ensure funding is being spent appropriately in all facilities regardless of ownership status,
- Amend the measures of hours of care per resident in long term care facilities to ensure 4.9 hours worked directly with each resident per day by full-time, full-benefit workers who are employed in only one facility,

- Allow for quicker adjustments to individual care plans based on the medical, rehabilitative, social and overall health needs of individual residents,
- Support and encourage the involvement of informal caregivers and supplemental private care providers in appropriate roles with necessary oversight.
- Ensure that all congregate living settings each have activated the elements of an approved plan for responding to infectious outbreaks, and other emergency/disaster situations,
- Manage procurement so that all congregate living settings are equipped for infection control,
- Ensure effective Resident and Family Councils are present in every residential care facility in the province of Alberta,
- Eliminate shared personal spaces, including bedrooms and bathrooms, in all residential facilities except for couples,
- Maintain adequate shared social spaces to enhance resident's well-being and mental health,
- Ensure that facilities and residences employ an appropriate number of registered social workers and recreation coordinators to ensure adequate psychosocial services.

3. Restructure and Improve home care services and other community care resources and programs

- Through consultation with seniors' families and directly-involved medical staff, develop and implement a model for the expansion of funded, publicly operated home care services,
- Ensure all Albertans receive home care services to meet the respective health care needs without charge to the patient.

4. Strengthen Pharmaceutical Coverage

- Ensure safe and universal access to necessary pharmaceuticals,
- Fully integrate pharmaceutical coverage into the public health care system ensuring access to prescription drugs is not based on a patient's ability to pay or the care setting,
- Expand the list of pharmaceuticals to include all appropriate medications prescribed by a physician or other approved prescriber,
- Encourage the federal government to develop and implement a National Pharmacare program to ensure universal access to necessary pharmaceuticals.