



Office of the  
**SENIORS' ADVOCATE**  
Newfoundland and Labrador

**Submission to the Government  
of Newfoundland and Labrador  
on Budget 2023**

**February 10, 2023**

## INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate is pleased to offer a submission for consideration for the Budget 2023 public consultation process.

Recent demographics show that 247,790 (47.1%) of Newfoundland and Labrador's population is aged 50 and older; and 123,939 (23.6%) are aged 65 and older.<sup>1</sup> Seniors represent the largest cohort of NL's population and have the largest range of ages potentially spanning up to 50 years.

Beginning in 1946, Canada was one country where the number of births increased significantly. This growth continued every year through 1964 when the number of births began to decrease, and the so-called "baby boom" ended. The first of this baby boomer generation turned 65 in 2011, which means many began the transition from the labour force to retirement.

Canada's aged 85 and older population is one of the fastest-growing age groups, with a 12 per cent increase from Census 2016 to Census 2021. Over the next 25 years, Canada's population aged 85 and older could triple to almost 2.5 million people.<sup>2</sup>

Per capita, Newfoundland and Labrador has the fastest pace in population aging than any other Canadian province or territory. Given this demographic, it is extremely important, and necessary, for the province to plan for our aging demographic.

The baby boomers will turn 85 in 2031.<sup>3</sup> As people age, many will develop health issues and potential challenges with regard to preventing loss of independence. Given that people are living longer into old age, there will be increased pressure on the health care system. Seniors are very clear about the supports they need in order to continue to age in place for as long as they are able to do so safely. As a consequence, all levels of government will be expected to ensure that significant supports are available to seniors for their health care needs as well as housing, home care and transportation.

In the 2022 Speech from the Throne, Government committed to support "seniors and the most vulnerable; ensuring a healthy, educated, growing population; building stronger communities and investing in infrastructure and roads which contributes to our pride of place; addressing climate change and encouraging economic growth and job creation."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. Government of Canada. *Table 17-10-0005-01 Population estimates on July 1st, by age and sex* <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1710000501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.2&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2018&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2022&referencePeriods=20180101%2C20220101>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. Government of Canada. *A portrait of Canada's growing population aged 85 and older from the 2021 Census. Release date: April 27, 2022* <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021004/98-200-x2021004-eng.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. *Change Is In the Air*, April 2022. <https://www.gov.nl.ca/budget/2022/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2022/04/Budget-2022-Speech.pdf>.

Therefore, policy makers and financial stewards of the public purse must make every effort to help people age in the healthiest way possible. Healthy aging enhances quality of life which in turn encourages independence and physical, social, mental, emotional, cultural and spiritual well-being. But aging well does not necessarily mean living without challenges; it means coping well in spite of challenges. Appropriate and affordable supports must be available for all seniors. We must be proactive and plan ahead for the demographic impacts which we know are coming.

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate is an independent statutory office of the Legislature and the Seniors' Advocate carries significant authorities in this role as outlined in the **Seniors' Advocate Act**. This Office provides public oversight of government programs and services for seniors and helps seniors by being their voice for changes to improve seniors' services.

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate appreciates the opportunity to provide input into budget planning and initiatives. As seniors are such a diverse population, the services and programs offered by providers often cannot be standardized; the requirements of older seniors can be very different from those of younger seniors, and as the current baby boomers age, we know that their needs will be quite different from those of today's seniors of the same age therefore, thoughtful planning is needed to ensure that programs and services for seniors are affordable, available, inclusive, diverse, respectful and responsive.

This submission is informed by:

- The 25 recommendations to improve seniors programs and services outlined in the report Long May Your Big Jib Draw;
- The learnings from the 2022 Engagement Process which saw 15 in-person public engagement sessions and two virtual sessions with more than 400 participants; an online survey which received 1,087 responses of which more than 900 were from seniors resulting in a strong sample size with a margin of error at the 95% confidence interval; and
- National and international research, participation in national committees and reviews, and significant consultation with relevant community organizations.

## HEALTHCARE

### Medical Transportation Assistance Program

Seniors describe lengthy wait times or unavailable medical services. Travel for services and specialized appointments may be deemed medically necessary but the physical travel plus the costs are major deterrents especially for seniors in rural and remote regions. Seniors report that the Province's Medical Transportation Assistance Program (MTAP) takes too long for reimbursements and the reimbursement amounts are insufficient; low income seniors cannot afford the upfront expense, ineligible costs, nor the wait time.

In 2019 the Seniors' Advocate recommended a review of the MTAP. The Department of Health and Community Services has informed the Office of the Seniors' Advocate that this review is underway. Given the delayed timelines in completing this review, and the significant travel costs individuals must incur to access medical services in the province, the Office of the Seniors' Advocate is recommending that while the review of the MTAP program is ongoing, immediate changes be implemented to assist seniors now.

### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

Implement the following changes the MTAP Program:

1. Change the per kilometer allowance making it in line with the travel policy offered to government employees, volunteers sitting on government committees/working groups/councils. Presently that reimbursement rate is 40.89 ¢/km.
2. While the MTAP is under review, immediately reduce the \$400 deductible for island residents to \$200; a 50% reduction.
3. Wave the two week notification period to be eligible for pre-paid economy airfare when the medical appointment is urgently required with short notice.
4. The Department of Finance finalize the MTAP review and ensure implementation of the appropriate changes to eligible expenses.

In addition to the budget considerations noted above, the administrative burden on seniors could be significantly reduced if alternative processes were considered. For example, allowing airline tickets – one of the largest expenses for patients and challenging for people with no access to credit – to be charged directly to government. Another consideration would be to require MTAP clients to give signed consent permitting relevant departments or agencies to share information specifically about client travel so as to expedite the reimbursement process and reduce the need for seniors to collect multiple letters from medical personnel.

### Vaccines

Seniors are aware of the importance of receiving the flu vaccine and more are availing of NL's vaccination program. As well, perhaps to a lesser extent, seniors recognize the importance of receiving the herpes zoster (shingles) vaccine.

Over two-thirds of all Canadian shingles cases occur in individuals over 50 years of age. The severity of the illness and its associated complications also increases markedly with age and up to 10 per cent of people over 65 years of age will be admitted to hospital.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, *Herpes zoster (shingles) vaccine: Canadian Immunization Guide*.  
[https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-4-active-vaccines/page-8-herpes-zoster-\(shingles\)-vaccine.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/canadian-immunization-guide-part-4-active-vaccines/page-8-herpes-zoster-(shingles)-vaccine.html)

NL's death rate from flu is higher than the national average. The enhanced flu vaccine is offered free-of-charge to people living in care facilities but seniors who do not live in congregate living environments must pay for the enhanced flu vaccine. In fact, NL is one of only five Canadian provinces/ territories not offering the enhanced influenza vaccine to all aged 65 and older, free-of- charge. To date, the shingles vaccine is not publically funded in Canadian jurisdictions except for Ontario, which has expanded its publicly funded immunization program to include the shingles vaccine for seniors between ages 65-70.

With Government's adoption of a "Home First" model for elder-care, it is reasonable to expect that in future more seniors with complex care needs are/will live in community; in their homes. While cost is most certainly a component of the rationale for not offering the enhanced flu and shingles vaccines to more people free of charge, the potential cost-savings of fewer influenza-related emergency room visits and billings from family physicians must be a fiscal consideration when making decisions.

#### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. Provide the enhanced flu vaccine free-of-charge for seniors aged 65 and older regardless of their living arrangement.
2. Publically fund the shingles vaccine for individuals aged 65 and older and people severely immunocompromised.

The Canadian hard of Hearing Society estimates that in Canada more than 60 per cent of seniors over the age of 65 have some type of hearing loss.<sup>6</sup> Yet, only about one in five seeks help for the impairment.

Age-related hearing loss can be managed but it cannot be cured. Left undiagnosed or untreated, a number of related challenges can arise. Some of these challenges can be far more serious than the initial hearing problem, including depression, social isolation, mobility issues, falls and cognitive decline. Given the consequences of hearing loss, early recognition and intervention are important.

Government has advised that it has established a Working Group to review the Provincial Hearing Aid Program (PHAP), including the financial eligibility component, to develop a streamlined and more efficient process for clients and staff. Currently the PHAP offers some financial assistance for eligible adults. For a seniors aged 65 or older to qualify for PHAP, a financial assessment is conducted by the Department of Children, Seniors, and Social Development (CSSD). Eligible recipients of the PHAP can receive \$1,500 for one device or \$3,000 for two, providing there are no medical or audiologic adverse effects. Hearing tests for the PHAP are conducted by audiology departments

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<sup>6</sup> <https://chha-nl.ca/your-hearing/reasons-to-improve-your-hearing/hearing-loss-and-seniors/>

within the regional health authorities (RHAs), who determines what technology is needed as well as when replacements are needed.

Unfortunately, there is a backlog in these assessments. The Department of Health and Community Services recognizes the importance of addressing lengthy waitlists. It has taken steps to address the significant cataract surgery waitlist by expanding MCP-covered cataract surgeries to take place within private clinics. This approach could be utilized to address the backlog in audiology assessments. Accepting hearing assessments from accredited Audiologists from outside the RHAs would go far in addressing the high number of patients currently on lengthy waitlists to be tested by an RHA Audiologist.

Further, additional resources to increase the allowable number of cataract surgeries completed by private clinics would assist in addressing the significant waitlist/backlog.

### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. Change the financial assessment for PHAP to income-based; similarly to other Department of Health and Community financial assessment processes.
2. Increase the allowable number of cataract surgeries completed by private clinics.
3. Provide additional resources to enable audiologists in private practice to preform audiology assessments and bill MCP.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

### Driver's Medicals

Seniors have raised concerns about driver's medicals, specifically the fee (which can vary from \$0 - \$100+) and the challenge of accessing a Family Physician to complete the medical assessment and medical form. In this province at age 75, 80 and every two years thereafter (as per the Government Medical Standards), seniors are required to have a medical completed by a Family Physician in order to maintain their driver's license.

Having a valid driver's license allows for more freedom and independence for seniors. Tasks such as attending medical appointments, social events, grocery shopping, all require access to transportation. Public transportation is limited in this province, primarily to larger urban centres. When seniors have their own car, but are unable to drive it due to a barrier beyond their control, it causes a considerable amount of undue stress. Further, prolonged periods of not driving may result in reducing the senior's confidence to drive.

In my Offices' 2019 report, **Long May Your Big Jib Draw**, the recommendation was made to Government that the cost of driving medicals for people over age 75 years be integrated into the Medical Care Plan (MCP). This has not been implemented, however in the most recent response to this recommendation the Department of Health and

Community Services noted that it “recognizes having a driver’s license supports independence, using a Health in All Policies lens, the department will explore the feasibility of including this under MCP.”

According to the Department of Digital Government and Service NL website, NL has adopted the medical standards for drivers as developed by the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators. Chapter 3 of that document speaks to the roles of “Health Professionals”, “Medical Specialists” and “other Allied Health Professionals” in identifying and assessing drivers in jurisdictions without mandatory reporting by physicians.<sup>7</sup> NL could consider authorizing alternate health professionals to complete this function and thereby creating more opportunities for seniors to access professionals who can complete the form. Further, as a “routine medical form”, the service provider should be able to bill MCP for this service.

In our current fiscal environment with many seniors struggling to meet the increased cost of living on fixed incomes, to surrender their driving privileges because they cannot afford to pay a fee or do not have access to a Family Physician to complete the form is counterintuitive. Addressing this issue, as we suggest, would be an approach consistent with the province’s Aging in Place, Home First and Age Friendly Communities philosophies.

### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. Make driver medicals free-of-charge for seniors.

### Physician Services

Seniors who have access to a Family Physician are fortunate. However, some have expressed concern that their Physician will only allow treatment of one or maybe two medical issues per visit due to the current billing system. Most people have no argument that Physicians should be paid for their time, it seems unreasonable that the current billing system only allows Physicians to bill MCP once per visit. Seniors have expressed frustration about having to book multiple appointments simply because of the billing system and are worried that their health care needs are not being addressed from a holistic perspective. Further, booking multiple appointments that might otherwise be dealt with during one visit, means delays in care/treatment, additional travel costs and stress due to mobility and transportation challenges.

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<sup>7</sup> Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators, *National Safety Code Standard 6: Determining Driver Fitness in Canada* <https://www.ccmta.ca/web/default/files/PDF/National%20Safety%20Code%20Standard%206%20-%20Determining%20Fitness%20to%20Drive%20in%20Canada%20-%20February%202021%20-%20Final.pdf>

### Considerations for Budget 2023

1. In the interim while finalizing the new physician billing system, implement the necessary changes to the current physician billing system of MCP to enable physicians to treat multiple health issues per visit and bill MCP appropriately.

### INCOME AND COST-OF-LIVING

Data provided in Government's Community Accounts reveals that the median income for persons aged 55 and over in Newfoundland and Labrador was \$30,400, while persons aged 65 and over had a median income of \$24,300. These numbers are significant and even more so when you remember that these are "median" figures; so half of the people in this province who are aged 55 and older earn *less than* \$30,400 and half of the aged 65 and older earn *less than* \$24,300.

Benefits, pensions and cost-of-living relief initiatives are not keeping pace with the rising cost of living and seniors are struggling. Based on a family's net income, NL's Seniors' Benefit offers eligible seniors up to \$1444. per annum. The amount of the benefit phases out at a rate of 11.66 per cent as the family's net income increases between \$29,402 and \$41,786. Budget 2022 increased this benefit by 10 per cent per annum. Seniors have expressed gratitude for this benefit and the recent increase, but the benefit could have a greater impact if it was indexed for inflation. Further, the phase-out formula of more than 11 per cent is a significant decrease which quickly reaches \$0.00.

For seniors in receipt of Old Age Security and/or the Guaranteed Income Supplement, budgeting for an entire month while balancing bills and trying to deal with unplanned expenses is extremely challenging. These seniors have asked that federal and provincial benefits like the Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement be issued bi-weekly to assist them with budgeting.

The concept of a basic income or universal income is a concept that has been discussed for a number of years and is gaining momentum. NL has established an All-Party Committee on Basic Income tasked with reviewing basic income models/ approaches and to assess the viability for this province. It is the opinion of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate that seniors are one of the groups for which a basic income model would be beneficial.



### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. The NL Seniors' Benefit be indexed annually.
2. The NL Seniors' Benefit's phase-out percentage rate of 11.66 per cent be reduced so that seniors up to the maximum eligibility (income up to \$41,786) receive increased benefit.
3. Support a Basic Income policy approach which includes seniors.
4. Work with the Federal Government to move toward a payout model which pays seniors' benefits twice a month.

The rising cost of home heating, groceries and rent is affecting all citizens, particularly seniors on fixed incomes and very tight budgets. Some seniors are interested in programs that help them lower their electricity use such as energy efficient lights and heat pumps; however purchasing up front (even with a plan to pay off over time) is a burden for an older adult on a fixed income and the payback on the initial cost may not be realized within their lifetime.

Recent efforts to assist people with the rising cost-of-living and increased oil costs were welcome but the policy rationale behind the set income thresholds should be reconsidered to ensure that the people in the lowest income brackets received more assistance than those in higher income-brackets.

### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. Income thresholds for any cost-of-living benefits should be set at a maximum family income of \$40,000 to \$50,000 annually.

## **HOUSING**

Seniors are concerned about where they will live as they get older and their care needs change. They are concerned about how to live independently on fixed incomes in the face of rising costs and increased taxes.

With more than 80 per cent of NL seniors owning their own homes, seniors have expressed a strong desire to have control over where they live in the future and if it is not in their current home, they want a say in where their next home will be.

Downsizing is an option for some regions of the province but for the most part, these homes are hard to find. Accessibility is essential to living independently regardless of age, yet construction and renovations continue to take place without considering the principles of universal housing design. People who wish to continue to live at home often require funding assistance to make renovations to their homes. They have expressed concern about eligibility and long waitlists. In addition, seniors report that the

wait time between an initial application for repairs and a subsequent approval can be lengthy; too long for any person but more so for older homeowners. If successful in receiving a grant, a person must wait seven years to be eligible again. These programs are critical components to support aging in place and age friendly philosophies.

#### **Considerations for Budget 2023**

1. Address homelessness through increases to affordable, accessible, safe, low-cost housing for seniors.
2. Expand/Continue to expand the budgets for the Provincial Home Repair Program and Home Modification Program.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate will continue to advocate for systemic changes by identifying gaps in programs and services impacting seniors.

Seniors represent a significant portion of Newfoundland and Labrador's population and as such their needs must be afforded due diligence in all budgetary and policy considerations.

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate welcomes future opportunities for collaboration and discussion to assist the Provincial Government in addressing the needs of seniors.

## REFERENCES

- Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators, *National Safety Code Standard 6: Determining Driver Fitness in Canada* <https://www.ccmta.ca/web/default/files/PDF/National%20Safety%20Code%20Standard%206%20-%20Determining%20Fitness%20to%20Drive%20in%20Canada%20-%20February%202021%20-%20Final.pdf>
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