

Issues that Concern Seniors

On May 16, 2019 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians will decide which political party will be at the helm over the next four years. This decision – a democratic privilege – will not be undertaken lightly.

Seniors are keenly aware of the importance of casting a vote. According to Elections Canada, voters aged 65 to 74 continue to have the highest participation rate of all age groups. In this province, that translates to about 68,000 people. If we consider the entire population of people aged 65 and older, the number is about 108,000. It is fair to say that the concerns voiced by seniors warrants due consideration by policymakers.

Thankfully, many older adults enjoy good living conditions, have finances to suit their needs, are healthy and socially connected through their families, friends, the workforce or as volunteers. However, there are too many seniors living in abject poverty, living unhealthy lifestyles or struggling every day just to make ends meet.

As the candidates hit the campaign trail to knock on doors and shake hands, I would like to offer a perspective on some of the many seniors' issues that have been brought to my attention.

Seniors wish to remain as independent as possible for as long as possible. For most seniors, independence means deciding where they wish to live and how they wish to live. The desire to age in the place of their choosing is a common refrain. Affordable and accessible housing and healthy aging is crucial for maintaining independence. As the need to access services, programs and supports becomes greater, not coincidentally, financial well-being becomes a very concerning core issue.

Presently, 15,000 couples in this province live on annual incomes of less than of \$41,200. About 11,000 single seniors earn between \$17,500 and \$24,300. The financial burden on these seniors is critical. The lack of disposable income can become a life-altering concern when necessities of life begin consuming more and more of the person's income. Hard choices must be made when finances are tight: Do I fill my prescription, pay my light bill or buy groceries? Either choice has serious – potentially dire – consequences.

Governments decide what programs and services to fund and how to fund them. All of the past governments have offered seniors' supports in one form or another. The challenge is access, awareness and adequacy. Existing programs, services and policies require ongoing monitoring to ensure accountability and efficiency. A person can be defined as a "senior" from age 50 upwards. Although seniors as a large population group share some qualities and concerns, within this group there are very different traits, abilities and needs; one-size does not fit all.

I hear from people who live in very real fear of worsening health conditions because of long wait times, poor access to medical professionals (especially those trained to address the complex issues related to growing older) and expensive treatments. Access to affordable pneumonia and shingles vaccinations; foot care; and oral health are beyond the reach of many seniors. Paying up to \$100 for mandatory medical assessments in order to continue to drive is a financial burden.

Some seniors need help with activities of daily living and oftentimes this help comes from family or friends, or caregivers are hired. When care needs progress, many seniors move into personal care homes or long term care homes. The issues I have heard from residents, families and staff are varied and numerous. They include lack of respect and compassion; problems with assessments, records and documentation; poor attitudes and behaviours; aggression; use of restraints; insufficient care hours; poor hygiene; and lack of oversight. The list of concerns is lengthy and simply cannot be ignored or accepted.

Systemic problems grow over time and flourish when we normalize them. But accepting the unacceptable is always wrong. Seniors want to hear from the candidates. They want to know how the candidates will make changes. Seniors want to hear concrete plans for how programs and services can be improved and what new supports will be introduced. Quite frankly, every Newfoundlander and Labradorian should be interested in the quality of the programs, policies and services in place for seniors because, if we are lucky, we will all grow old.

The importance of securing seniors' votes should not surprise any of the candidates. Older voters influence the polls and on May 16, seniors will show up and they will vote. Over the next few weeks I urge seniors to speak up and tell the candidates what they need to hear. And I encourage all candidates to listen very carefully to what seniors have to say, because they are listening very carefully to you.

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The Office of the Seniors' Advocate is an independent office created through the Seniors' Advocate Act. In November 2017, Newfoundland and Labrador appointed Dr. Suzanne Brake as its first Seniors' Advocate. The Office was established to identify, review and analyze systemic issues related to seniors; work collaboratively with seniors' organizations, service providers and others to identify and address systemic issues related to seniors; and make recommendations to government and government agencies respecting changes to improve seniors' services.