



Strengthening Age-Friendly Communities and Seniors Services in Ontario

Response to the Provincial Consultation on Ontario's Seniors Strategy

July 18, 2019

Introduction

The planned development of a government-wide seniors strategy (the “strategy”) announced in the 2019 Ontario Budget, provides an opportunity to improve the lives of our seniors, improve their connections within their communities, and ensure that senior residents remain healthy, safe, and active members of the society.

AMO is supportive of the provincial government’s commitment to establish a strategy to address the needs of the aging residents within our communities. The conversation about Ontario’s aging population began years ago, and a range of policy frameworks, guidelines, and initiatives have been put in practice. While these have been good first steps, new challenges have emerged indicating that it is now necessary to review the overall capacity and demand for services, and address the issues facing seniors.

In this submission, AMO is offering recommendations for the government to consider in their government-wide seniors strategy. This document aims to further the dialogue on the municipal role and interest in facilitating age-friendly communities and providing services to seniors. It highlights both challenges and opportunities for improving service provision.

Context

The huge demographic shift in Ontario is by now well-known and documented. In 2016, there were 2,251,655 Ontarians aged 65 years and older, representing 16.74 per cent of the province’s overall population.¹ By 2041, it is projected that 25% of Ontario’s population will be 65 years or older, almost doubling from 3 million seniors in 2016 to 4.6 million seniors.² While the impacts will be widespread, parts of the province are affected differently. In Ontario’s rural areas, the movement of young people from rural areas to larger centres and the low rates of immigration lead to higher proportions of senior populations.

As the population is shifting towards a larger proportion of seniors, we are also living longer. The scope of seniors’ interests, needs, and expectations has expanded and become increasingly complex. Given these changing demographics, municipal governments across the province are searching for new appropriate and innovative ways to respond to their aging populations. Across Ontario, municipal governments have developed seniors’ plans and strategies, accessible streetscapes, buildings, and public spaces, seniors housing, transportation services, recreation activities, and seniors’ advisory groups or councils.

Not only are municipal governments partners in service delivery, they are also funders. They finance seniors’ services including social and recreational activities, transit subsidies for seniors, grants to non-governmental organizations providing seniors’ services, affordable housing, seniors’ housing, seniors’ drop-in centres, and more.

¹ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2016.

² Government of Ontario, *Aging with Confidence: Ontario’s Action Plan for Seniors*, 2017.

Comments and Recommendations

AMO’s comments and recommendations that follow in this document are structured along the themes identified in the provincial consultation survey. A summary of all the recommendations is found in Appendix A of this report on page 7.

Aging at Home and in Communities

Municipal governments are increasingly at the forefront of creating age-friendly communities in Ontario. Many municipal governments have formed plans for providing services to seniors, including strategies to develop accessible spaces, transportation services, community services, housing, and address workforce replacement. Municipal governments have been assisted in these plans by the provincial government in various ways including the publishing of an age-friendly communities development guide called *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning*.³

Recommendation 1

AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to update and disseminate the *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning* guide.

However, some municipal governments lack the financial and human resources to undertake a planning process to get to the highest level. The Age-Friendly Community Planning Grant Program from the Ontario government is an effective tool in leveling the playing field and helping municipal governments take the necessary steps, and ongoing availability would be of great value.

Recommendation 2

AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to provide the Age-Friendly Community Planning Grant Program.

There is also a particular need to continue to disseminate and support age-friendly community best practices that are evidence-informed so that communities can learn from each other and replicate or scale-up successful initiatives. Supporting existing age-friendly communities of practice to share best practices is a role the Province could still assume to facilitate development of age-friendly communities across Ontario. The Age Friendly Communities Planning Guide and provincial webinars are also part of this solution and should be maintained and updated as innovative and successful practices continue to develop. As the number of age-friendly communities continue to grow, it will be very important to enhance the focus on implementation and evaluation.

Recommendation 3

AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to facilitate the dissemination of best practices by supporting existing age-friendly communities of practice and updating and disseminating provincial webinar series and support materials as new strong and innovative practices develop.

Affordable housing for seniors is another key issue for municipal governments in providing community and housing services. Sufficient affordable and supportive housing for the growing population of seniors is a significant interest for municipal governments. Wait lists for social and supportive housing are already at record levels. The ability to promote aging in place for low and

³ Province of Ontario, *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning*, found at <<http://www.seniors.gov.on.ca/en/afc/guide.php>>.

moderate income seniors is contingent on an adequate supply of affordable and supportive housing.

Recommendation 4

AMO calls on the Province to build more supportive housing accessible to seniors.

Remaining Healthy, Active, and Socially Engaged

Municipal governments provide services and programs that help keep seniors engaged, active and healthy, as well as services to support seniors in their everyday lives as they require additional support while remaining in their homes. These services include fitness and recreation classes, meals on wheels programs, adult day programs, affordable housing, and transit subsidies and services, seniors’ property tax grants, and can help seniors remain living at home and receive various levels of support as their needs change. These are the ways that municipal governments help support the aging in place policies of the provincial government.

There are currently Seniors Active Living Centres in the province that provide social and recreational programs to promote wellness for seniors. Some also offer preventative, health, education and support services that help keep seniors healthy, active and independent for as long as possible. Approximately 40 per cent of the centres are municipally run while the other 60 per cent are run by non-profit operators. The *Seniors Active Living Centres Act* requires Centres to be established through funding partnerships with municipal governments. It requires a minimum 20 per cent cost share of operating funding by the municipal government. The funding is flexible and can include in-kind contributions, such as space.

Recommendation 5

AMO calls on the Province to enhance funding for the Seniors Active Living Centres program to expand the number of centres across the province, allow for capital projects, buildings, or capital renovations under the funding program.

There are severe challenges in the supply of services for residents of rural and northern areas. Given the trends of youth and working age residents moving to larger communities which offer broader employment opportunities, informal caregivers are less frequently available in rural and northern Ontario. Qualified staff attraction and retention is a particular challenge in these areas. Residents must often travel long distances to see specialists or access specialized health treatments, and very few transportation options exist. Consequently, accessing services or visiting someone in care is more challenging and costly.⁴

⁴ ROMA, *A Voice for Rural and Northern Ontario*, 2015 and Ontario Trillium Foundation, 2007.

Recommendation 6

AMO calls on the Province to ensure a minimum network of affordable, reliable community transportation service routes across rural and northern Ontario to ensure residents of remote areas can access the care they need. This should include maintaining and enhancing the Northern Health Travel Grant.

Recommendation 7

AMO calls on the Province to support virtual seniors' services and care for residents in remote areas where transportation options are limited.

Service providers throughout Ontario work collaboratively to overcome fragmentation and use available resources effectively, but in rural areas the solutions are often not scalable and time-consuming, and are based on filling gaps that are not mandated or funded.⁵ In the context of these challenges, two practices have worked particularly well: supportive housing and hub models. Because this approach can allow for services to be adapted as individuals require more services, supportive housing was consistently identified as the preferred option for high-needs older persons in one study.⁶ In addition, community hubs also are particularly effective in rural areas because they can use the resources and infrastructure of a central location to provide a range of services, allowing residents to visit one location rather than making several trips. Web-based hubs are also successful in remote areas because they permit people to access services and experts without requiring transportation.⁷

Recommendation 8

AMO calls on the Province to prioritize supporting community hubs, supportive housing, and transportation options in rural, northern, and remote areas.

Diversity of Ontario's Seniors Population

Ontario's population is diverse, including a range of aboriginal communities and immigrants from various ethno-cultural groups. 374,395 people of Aboriginal identity live in Ontario.⁸ Ontario has the largest share of people born outside of Canada of all provinces, at 29.1 per cent of Ontario's population in 2011.⁹ In 2016, 26.69 per cent of Ontario's population had a first language other than English or French.¹⁰

As individuals age, and particularly for those who develop dementia, providing good quality service means providing services in their own language, food that they recognize, and programs that are appropriate for them. Providing culturally-appropriate services also increases health outcomes. For example, for individuals who require support services and who have challenges expressing themselves, needing to communicate their needs in a foreign language can lead to misdiagnosis and prevent accessing appropriate support.

According to the Institute of Medicine's report, *Unequal Treatment Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Healthcare*, research consistently indicates that a lack of culturally-appropriate care

⁵ Williams, 2016.

⁶ Williams, 2016.

⁷ Williams, 2016.

⁸ Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples Highlight Tables*, 2016.

⁹ Statistics Canada, *Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity*, 2016.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada, *Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity*, 2015.

directly contributes to poor patient outcomes, reduced patient compliance, and increased health disparities, regardless of the quality of services and systems available.¹¹

For many service providers, training and sharing best practices would help in understanding how to approach providing culturally-appropriate service. The Province could play a role in facilitating this support. Particularly as Ontario continues to welcome individuals from elsewhere in the world, the importance of culturally-appropriate service will grow.

Recommendation 9

AMO calls on the Province to develop a strategy, in consultation with Indigenous peoples and ethno-cultural groups, to support the long-term care sector to develop culturally appropriate and responsive programming through training and development of resource toolkits.

Conclusion

Provincial and municipal governments in Ontario share the responsibility of providing community and health services to seniors. AMO hopes that the provincial solution to meet the needs of our seniors is based on a strong, respectful, and well maintained partnership with municipalities. Municipal governments are in a good position to know what their respective communities are asking for and need. With provincial supports in place, municipal governments can play a crucial role to help improve the quality of life of seniors in Ontario.

¹¹ Brian D. Smedley, Adrienne Y. Stith, and Alan R. Nelson, eds. *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*, Institute of Medicine, 2002.

Appendix A Summary of Recommendations

Aging at Home and in Communities

1. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to update and disseminate the *Finding the Right Fit: Age-Friendly Community Planning* guide.
2. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to provide the Age-Friendly Community Planning Grant Program.
3. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the provincial government to continue to facilitate the dissemination of best practices by supporting existing age-friendly communities of practice and updating and disseminating provincial webinar series and support materials as new strong and innovative practices develop.
4. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to build more supportive housing accessible to seniors.

Remaining Healthy, Active, and Socially Engaged

5. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to enhance funding for the Seniors Active Living Centres program to expand the number of centres across the province, allow for capital projects, buildings, or capital renovations under the funding program.
6. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to ensure a minimum network of affordable, reliable community transportation service routes across rural and northern Ontario to ensure residents of remote areas can access the care they need. This should include maintaining and enhancing the Northern Health Travel Grant.
7. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to support virtual seniors' services and care for residents in remote areas where transportation options are limited.
8. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to prioritize supporting community hubs, supportive housing, and transportation options in rural, northern, and remote areas.

Diversity of Ontario's Seniors Population

9. **Recommendation:** AMO calls on the Province to develop a strategy, in consultation with Indigenous peoples and ethno-cultural groups, to support the long-term care sector to develop culturally appropriate and responsive programming through training and development of resource toolkits.