

For Immediate Release
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Seniors Advocate finds one-third of B.C. caregivers are in distress

Victoria – Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie released a report today that confirms one-third of unpaid caregivers in B.C. are in distress, one of the highest rates in Canada.

“This is a wake-up call for all of us,” stated Mackenzie. “The evidence is clear that we are not connecting our unpaid caregivers, most of whom are family members, with the many supports that could bring them respite and reduce their stress. When we look at the data files for over 30,000 of our frailest seniors who are living in the community, we find their support system, which is based on having an unpaid caregiver in their life is strained, sometimes to the point of collapse.

“This small army of husbands and wives, sons and daughters and friends and neighbours, is often the last line of defence in a seniors’ battle to maintain their independence and we need to ensure we are supporting them in their paradoxically rewarding and exhausting caregiver role.” continued Mackenzie.

Evidence in the report highlights that 97% of seniors enrolled in the home support program, arguably some of B.C.’s frailest seniors, have an unpaid caregiver in their life. Data shows that over half of these seniors have the same level of complex care needs as those who live in residential care, underscoring how challenging these caregiver roles can be.

There are many ways to support caregivers. Respite is one of the most fundamental supports and is offered to B.C. caregivers through three provincially funded programs. However, when the Office of the Seniors Advocate examined the data on these programs and cross-referenced them with distressed caregivers, it became obvious there are major gaps in the way respite is offered in the province.

Findings in the Advocate’s review, which looked at adult day programs, home support and respite beds include:

- 29% of caregivers are in distress. This increases to 38% for those caring for seniors with complex care needs.
- Unpaid caregivers provide an average of 19 hours of care per week. This increases to 30 hours per week for caregivers in distress.
- 54% of caregivers are caring for persons with complex needs, and thus would benefit from respite services such as an adult day program, home support or respite bed, yet of this group, only 8% used an adult day program in the last seven days, only 49% used home support in the last seven days and only 11% used a respite bed in the last year.
- Clients with a distressed caregiver are less likely to have received a home support visit in the last seven days than clients without a distressed caregiver.

- There has been a reduction of clients and utilization in adult day programs in the last three years.
- Home support services are not keeping pace with the aging population.
- B.C. has seen a reduction in both the number of respite beds and the average length of stay in respite beds over the past three years.
- B.C. has a 45% greater rate of caregiver distress than Alberta, yet Alberta seniors appear to be accessing more respite services.
- B.C. is missing the opportunity to significantly reduce emergency department visits and in-patient hospital days by limiting its adult day programs.

Based on these findings, the Office of the Seniors Advocate is calling for increased access to adult day program spaces and respite beds as well as increases in the frequency of home support for clients with caregiver distress. The Advocate is also calling for more standardization of the assessment for respite services, increased consistency regarding respite fees and processes around waitlists, as well as standardized measurement tools for all types of respite services.

“No matter where a caregiver lives in this province, they should have access to respite services that truly fit their needs,” says Mackenzie. “Consistency is critical in maintaining optimum respite services and providing a solid foundation that enables us to track their efficacy. We need to do all that we can in this province to ensure distressed caregivers are connected to the supports available.”

The Office of the Seniors Advocate was established in 2014 and is an independent office of the provincial government with a mandate of monitoring and analyzing systemic issues that affect B.C. seniors.

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