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NEWS RELEASE

Seniors Advocate reports B.C. Seniors have the lowest incomes and are struggling financially

VICTORIA, B.C. – The Office of the Seniors Advocate today released *BC Seniors: Falling Further Behind*, a review of the financial challenges facing B.C. seniors. The report highlights the impact of rising costs on B.C. seniors who depend on government pensions and ranks B.C. as the lowest in its financial support for seniors compared to other provinces and territories.

“Seniors I speak with tell me their pension incomes are not keeping up with rising costs and they are paying too much for rent, groceries, dental care, homecare, house repairs and other essentials,” said BC Seniors Advocate Isobel Mackenzie. “Currently 45% of seniors in British Columbia are living on less than minimum wage and 25% of seniors are living on less than \$21,000 a year. These are the lowest incomes we find by a wide margin and it speaks to the significance of the financial hardship seniors are experiencing.”

The report also notes the minimum wage has increased 40% over the past five years while pension incomes have only risen 14% during the same period.

The report also highlights that most seniors do not have a private benefits plan and must pay out-of-pocket for the total cost of dental care, hearing aids, eyeglasses, walkers, wheelchairs, and any other necessary medical equipment because the provincial government does not fund them.

The report outlines the challenges with a number of government subsidies including the BC Housing Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) and the Seniors Subsidized Housing (SSH) programs that offer some assistance to nearly 30% of the seniors who rent.

The report includes the results of a province wide survey of low-income seniors and a province-wide consultation with over 80 community agencies who work with seniors.

Highlights include:

- The 2019 median income for B.C. seniors was \$30,750 a year, compared to \$51,170 for the prime working age population and 25% of seniors earn an income less than \$21,000.
- 90% of seniors receive pension income from Old Age Security (OAS) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) and 28% receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) top up for low-income seniors. On average, these pensions provide an annual income of \$22,649

- BC Seniors Supplement, a financial support provided by the Province for the lowest income seniors was doubled last year to a maximum of \$99 per month but is the fourth lowest in the country and not indexed to inflation.
- In the last 10 years, market rents have increased by 50%, the allowable rent increase jumped 34% while pension incomes have risen just 25%, in the same period.
- The SAFER program is failing in its goal of 30% of income to be spent on rent. Currently, SAFER recipients paying the average rent for a 1 bedroom in Vancouver will spend over 60% of their income on rent and 80% of SAFER recipients have incomes of less than \$25,000.
- The wait list for SSH has increased by 50% in the last 5 years and only 8% of applicants on the wait list were placed in a unit last year.
- The average wait time for a SSH unit is three years, with 17% of applicants waiting over five years.
- 49% of low-income senior homeowners report they cannot afford needed major repairs for safety or accessibility.
- An estimated 16% of seniors access the Property Tax Deferral Program
- Seniors with an annual income of \$28,000 will be charged \$8,800 a year for a 45-minute daily visit of publicly subsidized home support.
- There is no program to fund extended health benefits such as dental, eyeglasses, hearing aids or medical equipment leaving most seniors to pay the total cost.
- 1 in 2 low-income seniors reports they are concerned, or very concerned, about being able to stay in their own home as they age.
- 84% of low-income seniors report running out of money to buy food some of the time.
- There was a 78% increase in use of food banks by B.C. seniors in the last five years.

The report compares B.C. to other provinces and territories in the provision of nine key services and finds B.C. offers the lowest support.

“When we look, at exactly what is provided to support seniors living in the community and how much it is costing them, a picture clearly emerges that many seniors are struggling and if we do not begin to address the gaps now, things will only get worse,” concluded Mackenzie.

The report makes ten recommendations.

1. Index the BC Seniors Supplement to inflation consistent with other income supports such as GIS/OAS and CPP.
2. Redesign the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) program to reflect the current reality of the B.C. rental market and ensure yearly rent increases are recognized.
3. Increase the number of Seniors Subsidized Housing Units with a particular focus on rural B.C. where the overall supply of rental accommodation for seniors is most challenging.



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4. Increase awareness of the Property Tax Deferral Program and examine an expansion of the program for low- and modest-income seniors to defer other costs such as strata fees, hydro costs and other municipal charges. Examine how seniors living in co-operative housing might be able to take advantage of the program.
5. Develop a program to assist low- and modest-income seniors with major home repairs.
6. Eliminate the daily rate for publicly funded home support services.
7. Provide an extended health benefit for seniors that includes eyeglasses, hearing aids, mobility aids and necessary medical equipment. The cost of the plan could be covered by premiums based on income, ensuring it is an affordable option for all B.C. seniors.
8. Work with the federal government to ensure dental coverage for seniors with co-payments and deductibles based on income or include in an overall extended benefit plan.
9. Provide an annual province-wide bus pass for all seniors that includes handyDART. The fee for the pass could be based on a sliding scale matched to income.
10. Develop a comprehensive plan to build the capacity of seniors' centres across B.C. to better support social engagement and help support older people access the supports and services they need to continue to live independently.

The report is available online at: <https://www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/osa-reports/falling-further-behind-income-and-affordability-gaps-of-b-c-seniors/>

The Office of the Seniors Advocate is an independent office of the provincial government with a mandate of monitoring seniors' services and reporting on systemic issues affecting seniors. The office also provides information and referral to seniors and their caregivers by calling toll-free 1 877 952-3181, BC211, via email at info@seniorsadvocatebc.ca, Canada Post and the OSA web site <https://www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/>.

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