

# **Aging at Home**

## *Notes from the Community*

Foreword by  
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### **The Aging at Home Strategy sets out two important goals:**

1. To increase the overall mix and quantity of services for seniors to stay healthy and live with independence and dignity.
2. To leverage change through innovation.

As an advocate for community based services Care Watch welcomes these policy initiatives because of their potential for meeting the needs of elderly persons living in the community. To ensure that our work reflected the priorities of frail elderly persons we developed a flyer campaign and distributed it widely. There was a tear-off and mail-in attachment on the flyer where we encouraged people to write what would make aging at home better for them. We encouraged them to think outside the box.

Responses are organized under two major dimensions. Both responses and dimensions use participants' own words to reflect the meaning of what was said. The first dimension is fundamental to all planning. Namely, these responses capture what aging at home means to those who are living that reality. If policy makers and service providers don't get that right, good intentions will be in vain. The second dimension focuses on statements for how the quality of respondents' lives can be supported. These suggestions include many of the services that exist today but with pleas for alternative ways of organizing and delivering them. Taking up our challenge to think outside the box, to be innovative, other dimensions of what it means to be part of and not just living in the community were underscored. We encourage policy-makers to pay close attention to these – to remember that an elderly person may be a service user but first and foremost he or she is a member of the Ontario community.

These two dimensions are supported by books ends. On one end are good stories that were shared with us. It is important to reflect on both the content and process of what went right in these situations. At the other end are policy recommendations made by respondents. Some readers will say that agencies are already providing such services, albeit they may be in short supply. We challenge you to push a bit further and think about why they are in short supply and how this can be addressed. In other cases respondents say that the service idea is good but the organization of it and the importance of continuity in caring relationships is missing in our task centered approach to services.

Finally, in *Notes from the Community*, Care Watch has preserved the voices of respondents so that these can be juxtaposed to those professional discourses that are the daily language of service providers. We share these notes so that they can provoke thinking outside the box and thus be a catalyst for change. We hope that they stimulate innovative thought and action all the way from provincial policy leaders to front line service providers. Our goal is to ensure that aging at home is never just memories.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Care Watch wants to acknowledge the group of over 90 individuals who returned the tear-off card on our '*Aging at Home should be more than just memories...*' folder, or in some other way communicated with us. The question was "What would make Aging at Home better for you?" What was said appears herein. We've used the comments we received as quotes, because we like them and because they really are the voice of the people. Although some poetic license has been exercised, the content hasn't been changed. Some quotes have been truncated, some extended and some combined, but most are exactly as they were written.


We thank those who replied and hope that some of the ideas and thoughts will influence politicians, policy makers and service providers. We hope that seniors will increasingly be a part of a community and be treated with real respect; that they will be as healthy as possible and when services are required these will be appropriate and dignified.

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."



- "CHOICES, INDEPENDENCE AND BEING ABLE TO HELP MY NEIGHBOUR A LITTLE AND MAINTAIN MY SENSE OF COMMUNITY."
- "UNDERSTANDING MY NEED TO HAVE A SENSE OF PERSONHOOD."
- "KEEPING MYSELF AS HEALTHY AS POSSIBLE, - WORK, BEING INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY, STAYING IN TOUCH WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS."
- "BEING TREATED WITH RESPECT AND DIGNITY."
- "ENCOURAGING AND MAKING IT MORE READILY POSSIBLE FOR SENIORS TO PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY IN THE COMMUNITY."
- "FREEDOM TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE."
- "HAVING ...SERVICES AND PROGRAMS THAT FIT MY AGE AND INTERESTS."
- "GOOD COMMUNICATION WITH SERVICES AS THEY ARE NEEDED"
- "HAVING ... A CHANCE TO PUT MY TWO CENTS IN."
- "BEING ... SURE THERE ARE SENIORS AT ALL LEVELS OF PLANNING."
- "HAVING A THOUGHTFUL, CARING AND RESPECTFUL WORKER WHO VISITS MY HOME TO HELP WITH EVERYDAY CHORES AND PROVIDES OTHER NON MEDICAL SERVICES ... DO NOT REQUIRE A BATH."
- "VOLUNTEERS PROVIDING A SENSE OF NORMALITY."
- "FREEDOM TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE."
- "INCREASED OLD AGE PENSION - SO WE CAN ALL LIVE COMFORTABLY"
- "BELEIVING AND TRUSTING THAT THERE ARE GOOD DOCTORS THAT KNOW ME AND WILL GIVE ME GOOD CARE."
- "THAT MAN DOES NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, BUT NO BREAD IS GOOD!"

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

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- "I have a VHA person 2 hours per week. This is good and for the time being quite adequate - it may not be in future."
  - "I have been in a wheelchair for lots of years ... not all my organs function right ... with the help of a daily visit from a nurse, I manage fairly well."
  - "I have a friend with Parkinson's. A nurse visits her once a week. She has visits from a volunteer, and me, her friend. She gets on very well."
  - "Thank you for the work you do on behalf of us seniors who live in our own homes. You encourage me to believe that it is possible. I live alone in a house jointly owned by my daughter and me."
  - Community Care East York has visited my home and suggested some improvements to make it safer, more accessible. I depend on Molly Maid for housekeeping and the VON for footcare, online grocery delivery, and an in-house hairstylist ... indispensable to me is my reliable handyman....Parkinson's affects my mobility so I can't get to meetings but I am grateful for the work you do for me and others like me."

There are, of course, many people who have successfully aged at home. Aging at Home is a group effort. The aging person is the primary group member and to the degree possible, the group leader—usually in partnership with a person skilled in case management and advocacy.

Together, they involve homemaking/personal care and other health professional skills in support of the aging individual. Clearly our respondents saw ‘Aging at Home’ as an individual responsibility as well as an entitlement.

**...COOPERATION, TEAMWORK”**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

"THANK YOU FOR GIVING ME A CHANCE TO PUT MY TWO CENTS IN."

- "New models of supportive retirement homes ... geared to income."
- "Each of us must do all we can to look after ourselves, our friends and neighbours."
- "It is my belief that there are too many groups-organizations all very well intended, but there should be one organization where all issues are addressed, one telephone number to call, to deal with all needs (transportation, medications, bathing, shopping, cleaning etc.)"
- "Organize the community, including seniors to help each other."
- "It is no longer unusual for seniors to have computers and where there are computers there are bound to be technical problems. I need the services of a 'sympathetic geek.' I love my computer but when it fails, my whole day is spoiled."
- "Open up night school free to seniors, as it used to be."
- "Some system, perhaps commercial, whereby seniors can access handymen, people to do heavy cleaning, grocers who deliver etc. As well and maybe even more important, how do we find Srs.' Clubs, exercise groups, Srs.' Centers etc."
- "Use not for profit services only."
- "easier access to rehab...."
- "keep on talking about this ... forums, focus groups etc."

There are more quotes. Some of the people who sent in their thoughts spoke to the need to be part of a community. Not only what they needed but what they could give. They spoke to the importance of staying healthy – exercise groups, seniors' centers, good nutrition etc. They talked about the importance of working together, for example snow clearing or young and old meeting the needs of both by living together. Communication was another item – no acronyms, or 'push this, push that' telephones. Quality of life was important – opportunity for education, computer use, socialization, the role of a senior-friendly city.

**...HAVING GOOD IDEAS"**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

"BE SURE THERE ARE SENIORS AT ALL LEVELS OF PLANNING."

- "How are people receiving services being heard?"
- "Educate physicians to understand and appreciate community services" ... more Dr. Nowaczynski's"
- "Get the community involved ... block by block or building by building ... churches, schools businesses etc."
- "Pay PSW's better ... my 'helper' has gone to work in a dry cleaning place."
- "The public is totally confused about availability of services and activities."
- "Have more meetings and opportunities for seniors to discover these things."
- "Encourage people to plan ahead, moving to condos & retirement homes sooner rather than later."
- " ... a social worker to visit me and advocate for me."
- " ... more money in the system."
- "How about an ombudsman for health services?"
- "more affordable housing ... within walking distance of stores."
- "Encourage neighbours helping by some kind of subsidy program, like looking in on seniors, running errands and shopping etc."

Many of the comments in this area were actually criticisms of current practice. Things like hospital discharge, emotional help for clients and families when moving into a long term care facility and access to rehab. Several quotes spoke about needing help to find services and activities (quality of life). There was a sense of overall confusion and frustration i.e. “where is the accountability?” Some people were concerned about PSW’s both that they were underpaid and that they often appeared to be under-trained or under-supervised. Affordability was another concern as in housing and local services. There was a clear desire for seniors to be involved in the planning of any and all activities which affected them.

**...HELPING TO PLAN”**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

"A THOUGHTFUL, CARING AND RESPECTFUL WORKER WHO VISITS MY HOME TO HELP WITH EVERYDAY CHORES AND PROVIDES OTHER NON MEDICAL TASKS ... DO NOT REQUIRE A BATH."

- "Having a say in my care."
- "To continue to be as healthy as possible."
- "To be a part of the community."
- "To have services and programs that fit my age and my interests."
- "Choices, independence and being able to help my neighbours a little and maintaining a sense of community."
- "Reduce dependence on professional services – emphasize good, well trained PSW's."
- "Flexible, adaptable service."
- "foster care for Seniors."
- "subsidize LifeLine or equivalent."
- "A social worker who visits me regularly and advocates for me."
- "Continuity of Agency and staff..."

Many of the quotes in this area have to do with respectful workers and the importance of being treated with dignity and having choices. In essence, they deal with the relationship between worker and senior. Some people responded by listing the existing support services which contributed most to their ability to ‘age at home.’ By far the greatest number did not want home services to be tied to the need for a bath or a medical service. Help with laundry, personal care, yard work and snow removal came next. Handyman, house-keeping, help with garbage and recycling and medication supervision were mentioned more or less in the order cited and with fewer directed quotes. Some people felt that what they needed was more hours of the same.

**...SERVICES AND PROGRAMS”**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

### "VOLUNTEERS PROVIDE A SENSE OF NORMALITY."

- "I like it when a volunteer comes. They are interested in me, not just a service to be provided."
- "telephone pals."
- "My daughter-in-law is a wonderful help and good company, but I don't want her to spend all her free time looking after me."
- "I wish there were more visitors, volunteers, friends, neighbours and family."
- "There should be more innovative, challenging opportunities for volunteers – including seniors."
- "...More structured intergenerational volunteers."
- "...Develop senior peer support counsellors."

### "FREEDOM TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE."

- "Expansion of options and resources – expansion of community buses."
- "Free transit passes for seniors."
- "Rides 7 days a week."
- "Improved public transportation for people with walkers and canes."
- "A driver's license for older people which is like that for new drivers – just allows for local driving and only driving during the day."

The largest number of quotes related to specified services were for Transportation. Within this, the largest number of people were interested in outings and recreational visits. Close behind this was shopping for both groceries and clothes. Way down the list was medical appointments. A very few quotes indicated an interest in rides for church or the library. Several noted the importance of 'escorts' in some instances.

*Note: the high number in social/recreational activity and the low number in, for instance, medical appointments, may be related to what's not available.*

**...VOLUNTEERS & VOLUNTEERING"**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."



"INCREASED OLD AGE PENSION - SO WE CAN ALL LIVE COMFORTABLY"

- "I get 1/2 my late husband's pension. I can't afford the fees from my neighbourhood agency."
- "Lower property taxes."
- "No school taxes after age 65."
- "More subsidized housing."
- "Fund individuals to manage their own care."
- "Increase tax credits for the cost of care."
- "financial advisor ... understanding how much money I can spend."

"BELIEVING AND TRUSTING THAT THERE ARE GOOD DOCTORS THAT KNOW ME AND WILL GIVE ME GOOD CARE."

- "Overnight nursing as needed."
- "Better coverage for eyes, ears and feet."
- "... a doctor that will see me in my home." "More Dr. Nowaczyński's"
- "there's a lot of depression among seniors ... what can be done?"
- "All doctors being required to accept older adults into their practices."
- "free dental care..."
- "Good health."

Some of the quotes relate to finances and medical services which are scattered throughout this document. It was fairly clear that unless otherwise specified all services were thought to be free of charge. The number of people who responded to ‘*what would make aging at home better for you?*’ with concerns about finances or medical care was small. There were several similar quotes regarding home visits by a doctor.

**...BEING ABLE TO LIVE  
COMFORTABLY”**

## "AGING AT HOME MEANS..."

"MAN DOES NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, BUT NO BREAD IS NO GOOD!"

- "Good Meals on Wheels"
- "Free grocery delivery"
- "Help with food preparation"
- "Groceries brought in every two weeks by family or who?"
- "Good food box"
- Nutrition is so important and often neglected ... fun cooking for someone ... 'community kitchens' ... "

"OT's and PT's HELP YOU TO MANAGE AND IMPROVE ACTIVITY AND SAFETY"

- Various assistive devices including hearing aids
- Affordable home changes
  - Rails on stairs
  - Stair guides, lifts etc.
  - Gates on basement stairs
  - Ramps
- "Snowbird program for seniors, so older people don't need to suffer falls in the winter (editors' note; read ice falls, isolation)

The comments received in these two areas were obviously quite concrete. There were fewer quotes in these activities than in other similar areas. However, Meals on Wheels and food preparation were the subject of a number of comments. Nutrition, particularly for older people who live alone was seen as very important, 'corrective action' was suggested. i.e. help from a nutritionist, classes and groups and 'community kitchens'." Clearly, stairs and a fear of falling were a primary safety concern.

**...FOOD & SAFETY"**

# Aging at Home

## Notes from the Community

### AFTERWORD.....Have we learned anything?

We've always known that older people, both those who are well and those who are not so well want to be involved. They want to be part of a community. They want to give as well as take. They treasure their independence and freedom. They want to take responsibility for themselves. One quote said it particularly well "...understanding my need to have a sense of personhood." It is interesting that quotes related to identity to integrity, to involvement, to validity come up in many contexts. Remember, the question was open-ended "*What would make aging at home better for you?*" Do older people fear losing their 'personhood' or do they feel that they already have lost it? We also know that very often older people are treated with condescension by people who think that they are being kindly, not listened to by people who want to help, ignored by people who care about them. Sometimes these behaviours are subtle. Sometimes they are overt, but always destructive.

Another important message; quality of life is as important to seniors as it is to everyone. As we look at the structure of our society we must ensure that opportunities for older adults to teach, to learn, to play, and to work. Education, volunteerism and various kinds of social/recreational activities must be built in. This was inferred by the number of people who when speaking of transportation most strongly emphasized trips and destinations that related to their quality of life.

As service providers we must harken to the above; really respect and hear the senior clients, remember the importance of quality of life. It is very likely that your relationship with the older client can contribute to that quality. We need to remember that we are not always right. That those who choose to respond to specific services, less than ½ did, tended to respond negatively; about what wasn't happening or what was happening badly. It is important to neither exaggerate this nor to ignore this reaction. How older persons are treated shows up in such responses. Have those of us who are service providers focused so heavily on tasks that we forget that relationships are the means for getting the work done in a respectful way, a way that promotes quality of life. This comes through in one of the quotes about volunteers: "I like it when a volunteer comes. They are interested in me, not just the service to be provided."

There were a number of people concerned about finances. We can be sure that those with fixed incomes will continue to be more and more stressed. A few people worried that medical might not be available to them when they needed it. For one person, aging at home meant: "... believing and trusting that there are good doctors that know me and will give me good care."