



"It should be the right of each Canadian to age with dignity and in security."
« Chaque Canadien devrait pouvoir vieillir avec dignité et en sécurité »

July 31, 2009

The Honourable Sharon Carstairs, P.C., Chair
The Senate of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A4

The Honourable Wilbert Joseph Keon, Deputy Chair
The Senate of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A4

Dear Senators Carstairs and Keon:

Congratulations on the Special Senate Committee on Aging's final report titled, Canada's Aging Population: Seizing the Opportunity, April 2009 and the recommendations to the Senate and federal government therein. It truly is a landmark report recognizing the growing population of seniors, the gaps in programs and services and the thoughtful comments, suggestions and recommendations to meet the changing needs of seniors in Canada.

The Congress of National Seniors Organizations (CNSO) is made up of 11 seniors' organizations and its mission is to influence and shape policies and programs on aging through efficient and effective dialogue between seniors' organizations and all levels of government. As the population of Canada ages the voice of seniors becomes stronger. It is the mandate of the CNSO to ensure that our more than 1.5 million members' voices are heard at the federal government level to influence the development of positive and age-friendly policies and legislation and to improve the quality of life for seniors today and tomorrow.

It is within this context that CNSO presents its comments with respect to the Committee's final report. Thank you for the extensive consultation undertaken by the Special Senate Committee on Aging for it allowed the CNSO to submit their comments on June 2, 2008 which focused on long term care, home care, home support and integrated care. Although these areas fall within the health care sector and are therefore regulated provincially and territorially, we are grateful that the Special Senate Committee on Aging has recognized that in order to respond to the needs and demands of an unprecedented growing senior population, multi-jurisdictional collaboration will be the way forward.

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Respecting CNSO's Submission:

The first portion of our comments will address the issues specific to our June 2, 2008 submission, namely long term care, home care, home support and integrated care.

Long Term Care:

CNSO recommended to the Special Senate Committee on Aging that a minimum standard of assessment, care and training be enforced in all long term care facilities in Canada. As such, we recognize the Committee's statements that urge the federal government to work closely with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that the levels of care in long term care facilities are appropriate.

However, the only formal recommendation in the report with respect to long term care is within the recommended integrated model of care (Chapter 2, Recommendation 7). Although CNSO strongly supports the recommendation to incorporate home and community services and residential care services into an integrated model of care, it does not believe the recommendation goes far enough to address the lack of consistent standards in long term care facilities across the country. As the population ages and the 85+ age group increases, so too do the demands for care in long term care facilities. Currently in Canada there is a range of approaches to funding and regulating long term care facilities. This variation results in differences in the types of services provided, the number of spaces available, the out-of-pocket costs to residents and the assessments used to determine eligibility.

CNSO recommends that the federal, provincial and territorial governments collaborate and develop a national long term care policy including standards that considers access, cost and quality of care.

CNSO also recommended cultural and sensitivity training for staff and volunteers as part of the standard for care in long term care facilities. Therefore, we support the statement in the Committee's final report that urges the federal government to take a proactive role in communicating information and best practices about adapting long term care facilities to address the needs of a multicultural society.

Home Care and Home Support:

CNSO recommended to the Special Senate Committee on Aging that collaboration is necessary with provincial and territorial governments to develop and implement a comprehensive national home care program integrated within the continuum of care.

We are pleased that the Committee recognized the important role of home care and home support services in helping seniors maintain their independence and remain in their homes for as long as possible often allowing individuals to postpone or avoid institutional care.

Furthermore, CNSO strongly believes that the Committee's recommendation to model a Seniors Independence Program after the Veterans Independence Program (VIP) as a component of a national integrated care initiative, if implemented, will go a very long way in addressing the needs of seniors as well as potentially reduce health care costs. The VIP is an excellent model to emulate and will result in a pan-Canadian program meeting the 5 principles of the Canada Health Act: universality, portability, public administration, comprehensiveness and accessibility.

In its submission the CNSO raised its concern regarding the omission of home and community support services from the pan-Canadian Health Human Resource Strategy. Therefore, we applaud the recommendation by the Committee to the federal government to work with the provinces and territories to address the training, recruitment and retention of home care and home support workers as part of the Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Health Human Resource Strategy.

Integrated Care:

The CNSO recommended continued funding for increased discussion, knowledge sharing, promotion and implementation of improved primary health care initiatives in provinces and territories.

We agree with the Committee that Canada's health care system is primarily designed to deal with episodic illness and is not adequately prepared to deal with the rise in chronic illness associated with an aging population. A shift in focus is required toward an individual-centered collaboration with a network of health care providers, patients, families and caregivers. Integrated models of care for the elderly, as explained in the final report, promises to meet the changing needs of seniors in Canada by delivering the right programs and services at the right time by the right individual(s).

Respecting CNSO's Priority Issues:

The second portion of our comments will address the three priority advocacy issues of the CNSO that were not included in our June 2, 2008 submission to the Committee but were addressed in the Committee's final report: elder abuse, aging in place and pharmacare.

Elder abuse:

Elder abuse will unfortunately be an ongoing social issue as the population ages. Public awareness, education, training, and supports will continue to be required to ensure that individuals know where to get help and communities can identify, respond and prevent elder abuse across Canada. Although there are some good initiatives being undertaken across the country, more effort is required to fully support the most vulnerable. CNSO recognizes the approved projects for elder abuse awareness for 2008-2009 by the New Horizons for Seniors program of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. These projects are extremely valuable and must continue into the future.

We applaud the Special Senate Committee on Aging for their recommendation for more research into abuse and neglect of seniors as well as working with community organizations to meet identified needs. A firm grasp of the issue is required in order to tailor programs and supports to combat elder abuse.

CNSO recommends further supports, education and training in the future targeted towards those individuals that interact with seniors most in their day to day activities: i.e. staff at banks and clinics, lawyers, community care providers, pharmacists, and doctors.

Members of organizations within the CNSO have confirmed that a successful public awareness strategy on elder abuse must include television as it is the communications vehicle utilized most by seniors. The recent launch of the Government of Canada elder abuse awareness campaign is timely and will reach many seniors through its television advertisements.

Aging in place:

There is no doubt that more and more seniors prefer to age in the comfort of their own homes as active participants in their communities. The concept of aging in place, including home adaptation, affordable housing, supportive housing and assisted living arrangements, meets the needs and demands of today's seniors. CNSO fully supports the recommendation to the federal government, in consultation with the provincial and territorial ministers responsible for housing, to develop a long term national affordable housing plan.

We further support the statement that the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation increase efforts to publicize the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program and the Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence Program allowing more seniors and their families to take advantage of the supports available.

With more seniors remaining in their homes it is very important to ensure age-friendly cities and rural communities. Although the initial projects involved British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Quebec, the program should be implemented in all Canadian provinces and territories.

CNSO recommends that the age-friendly cities and rural communities initiative be rolled out across Canada to enable all seniors to go where they want to go, participate in social and community events and access the types of services and programs they need.

Pharmacare:

CNSO believes that the recommendation in the Committee's final report to develop a common list of drugs used by seniors is a good first step towards a common national formulary for seniors but does not go far enough in addressing the safety and affordability of prescription medications in Canada.

The rising cost of pharmaceuticals continues its upward trend in every province and territory in Canada and therefore threatens the sustainability of private and public drug plans. One of the actions in the National Pharmaceuticals Strategy (NPS), of which F/P/T Ministers of Health committed, is the pursuit of purchasing strategies to obtain best prices for Canadians for drugs and vaccines. If implemented, this country-wide initiative could harness the purchasing power of provinces and territories and greatly reduce the cost of prescription drugs.

CNSO urges the federal government to provide the necessary leadership to break down the barriers to moving forward on a national pricing and purchasing strategy for pharmaceuticals.

While attempting to reduce the costs of prescription drugs, issues such as drug safety and effectiveness cannot be overlooked. According to Statistics Canada (2007), 40% of seniors take four or more prescription drugs. Consequently, the senior population is at a particularly high risk of experiencing adverse drug reactions. The Health Council of Canada's January 2009 Status Report on The National Pharmaceuticals Strategy: A Prescription Unfilled states that the main causes of problems have been shown to be inappropriate prescribing, the under use or incorrect use of medications by patients and the lack of continuous and adequate tracking of problems.

The NPS sets out to influence the prescribing behaviour of health care professionals so that drugs are used when needed and the right drug is used for the right problem. Individual governments have programs to improve the safety and effectiveness of prescription medications but there are limits to what they can achieve alone.

CNSO strongly recommends that the federal government collaborate with the provincial and territorial governments to establish best practices in educating and informing prescribers and patients about the most appropriate and safe prescription drugs.

Moving ahead quickly with the development and deployment of e-prescribing through the electronic health record will also help to reduce medication errors, improve the time it takes to dispense a patient's prescription and help identify drug-to-drug interactions and warn of potential dangers. CNSO recognizes that many jurisdictions have moved forward with implementing individual drug information systems and believes more seniors can benefit from a nation-wide approach.

CNSO recommends further investments be made across all provinces and territories to expand the practice of e-prescribing for the benefit of all Canadians.

In 2004, Premiers made a commitment that no one should suffer financial hardship to pay for medication that they need to care for their health. Although some jurisdictions have moved forward independently, coverage for seniors is not consistent across the country.

CNSO recommends further discussion and collaboration between the federal government and the provinces and territories with respect to shared financial responsibility for catastrophic drug coverage.

Conclusion:

CNSO is pleased with the overall Final Report of the Special Senate Committee on Aging, Canada's Aging Population: Seizing the Opportunity. As the CNSO represents 11 seniors' organizations across Canada, we are well aware of the issues and concerns facing seniors today and we believe that the final report maps out the issues clearly and makes good recommendations that will support the growing senior population in Canada into the future.

The Committee's recommendations and statements for change in the final report along with CNSO's recommendations mentioned above, if implemented, will fill the current gaps in seniors care and services and will signal a new vision for responding to the needs of seniors in Canada. CNSO looks forward to the future and offers its support in any way necessary to help governments in Canada improve the lives of seniors from coast to coast to coast.

Thank you,



Francis Bowkett
President

cc: Minister of Health
Senator Marjory LeBreton
National Seniors Council
Provincial Ministers of Health
Provincial Ministers for Seniors