



Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC

Representing seniors in British Columbia since 1950

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COSCO input to BC Budget Consultation 2024

The Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of BC represents 80,000 members of 70 affiliated organizations located in all parts of the province. Our members include diverse seniors groups including seniors centres. Our motto: "plan with seniors, not for them". COSCO conducts advocacy, education, and campaigns to promote healthy ageing in older adults by addressing key social determinants of health: social connectedness, housing, health care, income security, transportation and elder abuse. We keep our members informed of policies and programs (including from government) that affect our lives to ensure BC seniors stay healthy and can age in the right place as long as possible.

Recommendation #1:

Develop a Seniors' Strategy to harmonize programs and policies affecting older adults. With the goal of healthy ageing for all, the strategy will incorporate key social determinants of health and provide sustained core funding to support the key role seniors centres play to coordinate access to these programs by seniors.

Explanation:

Our seniors population is increasing, as seniors live longer, with increasingly diverse backgrounds and needs. Many live at or near the poverty level and food insecurity is increasing. Recent events such as the heat dome, fire and flooding have disproportionately impacted older adults. Seniors centres play key roles in our communities to keep seniors out of the hospital. They combat social isolation through educational programs about relevant issues and programs, identifying problems seniors face and helping older adults navigate through the myriad of programs and services available.

Funding for seniors centres is insecure and sporadic, with paid staff devoting many hours to secure grant funding, while costs continue to rise for wages, technology, insurance, security and maintenance. With increasing reports of food insecurity, the meal programs offered by many centres provide crucial nutrition. COSCO calls for Budget 2024 needs to provide core sustainable funding for seniors centres to ensure our seniors remain healthy and able to contribute to their communities.

Planning for Age-Friendly Communities must include community planning for affordable, accessible housing with integrated public transportation systems so that seniors may access services and businesses. For seniors to age in their homes, publicly funded transportation is key in all parts of the province – not just in urban but particularly in the rural and remote areas of the province. Funding must be provided to ensure new housing developments

include sufficient numbers of accessible units. HandyDART funding must be increased and its management brought back into the public system.

Planning for the strategy must value and respect the voices and contributions of seniors by involving organizations representing diverse older adults across British Columbia who wish to age in their own homes. COSCO strongly supports the proposed UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, which will provide a framework to ensure human rights are respected in our society.

Recommendation #2:

As part of the Seniors Strategy, that the Government of British Columbia needs to improve the economic security of low-income seniors living on less than minimum wage by increasing the BC Seniors' Supplement, revamping the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters program (SAFER) and increasing the supply of subsidized housing units.

Explanation:

Of the one million seniors in BC, half live on \$31,000 or less per year or between \$1,700 to \$2,500 per month. As we age, our ability to earn extra money through work declines. Pensions may not be indexed, with little flexibility for income growth.

COSCO's key role is to address poverty issues for low income seniors: 45% of seniors make less than the minimum wage and 25% (or about 250,000) live on less than \$21,000. We welcomed the one-time increases to the BC Seniors Supplement during COVID, yet the recent permanent increase from \$49.30 to \$99.30 per month leaves BC with one the lowest rates for in Canada. COSCO asks that Budget 2024 fund increases to the Seniors Supplement so that it is among the top three in Canada and that this increase be indexed to the rate of inflation in line with increases to the minimum wage and other government pensions.

Rent is the main budget item for many low-income seniors. We hear from our members that the SAFER program does not work for many older persons. Over the last 10 years increases of 50% in market rents and of 34% in allowable rent increases for continuing tenancies eclipse the rise of just 24% in pension incomes. Budget 2024 needs to provide funds so that the rent ceilings for SAFER, currently just \$803 for Metro Vancouver, be increased to more closely reflect actual market rents, and that the income ceilings for SAFER be adjusted each year for inflation. . The current average subsidy of just \$195 per month is insufficient to meet the challenges faced by many low income seniors whose rents should be about \$500 to \$700 per month, based on 30% of income.

Ongoing funding to increase the supply of Seniors Subsidized Housing Units is needed to reduce the wait list for those aged 55 and over. Subsidized housing controls housing costs better than SAFER as rents are based on 30% of income. With an average wait time of three years or longer, and just under 800 persons placed each year from a waitlist of close to 10,000, the need is clear to increase supply, including in under-served rural areas.

Recommendation #3:

A seniors strategy must address continuous improvement of publicly-funded health care in our communities, to keep seniors out of expensive acute care and long term care facilities. Funding is needed for well-managed primary health care through community health centres, coordinated home support, and inspection and enforcement of LTC regulations.

Explanation:

Increased funding for community health centres along with expanded Primary Care Networks will support the role of community non-profits and seniors centres to address the social determinants of health. These team-based models provide longitudinal publicly funded primary care and draw upon interdisciplinary expertise to enable seniors to manage multiple chronic conditions.

Home support services play a key role. Many opinion polls show most seniors do not want to be forced into long term care because of unaffordable home support services, but that is what is happening. BC needs to do much better. The high rates for home support paid by seniors with incomes above \$28,000 can push those with modest incomes out of their homes and into expensive long-term care – one hour of care daily is close to \$9,000 per year. COSCO supports the recent Seniors Advocate’s report which recommends that the BC government: “Eliminate the daily rate for publicly funded home support services”. Budget 2024 needs to fund this gap.

COSCO asks for clear budget allocations to ensure improved provision of publicly-funded long-term care services in British Columbia including for the province to collaborate with the federal government on a plan to ensure implementation of the new long-term care standards. The COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the vulnerabilities of long-term care services in Canada which highlighted the need for standards and accountability measures to enable the delivery of quality, safe, and resident-centered care. As a response, the Health Standards Organization has developed new national standards for long-term care to address the delivery of safe, reliable, and high-quality care; and the Canadian Standards Association has developed new national standards for long-term care to address the design, operation, and infection prevention and control practices. We support the Association for Reform of Residential Care (ARRC) for the provincial government to set up and fund an Advisory Forum to plan for system change.

Thank you for considering these proposals.

Submitted by

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