

Budget "a major disappointment" for British Columbia's seniors

THIS YEAR'S BUDGET represents a major disappointment for B.C. seniors – especially in light of the Ombudsperson's recommendations to strengthen home support, and increase care hours in long-term care facilities," says Art Kube, President of the 80,000 member Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of B.C. (COSCO).

"The \$15 million for non-medical home support is an insult to seniors. Not only is it insufficient, it completely ignores the criteria laid down by the Ombudsperson. The Ombudsperson called for standards, and guidelines, none of which are present in this program," he said.

"What's really needed – as has been proposed by COSCO for years – is a comprehensive home care and home support program designed to help seniors live with dignity and independence in their own homes. Not only is this good for seniors' quality of life, but it reduces the intake into residential care and acute care. Improving seniors' lives in this way would actually reduce overall health care costs, and especially capital costs.

"The Ombudsperson's recommendations on home support go a long way towards meeting these objectives. It is sad that the B.C. government has again proved itself to be penny wise and dollar foolish. The \$1000 tax credit for seniors' home



The B.C. Liberal budget ignored the need for a comprehensive home care and home support program.

renovations sounded good until we read the fine print. Seniors would have to spend \$10,000 on permanent renovations to get the full allowance. That means no new furnace. No new refrigerator. Thousands of seniors don't have that kind of money. Some people can't even afford their medications!

"We were concerned that the

premier's talk of a seniors' agenda would have little action to back up the warm and fuzzy platitudes. Unfortunately, that concern has proven to be well-founded. In the budget, where it really counts, we have \$15 million for a program that does not meet the needs of seniors. There is nothing else in the budget to address the many important recommendations contained in the Ombudsperson's report," said Kube.

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THE BC BUDGET

As credible as a Tory robocall

YOUR POLLING STATION has not changed. And the real deficit in the provincial budget is one-tenth of what the B.C. Liberals claim it is. Their excuse for doing nothing for vulnerable seniors and children living in poverty, and failing to address growing income inequality, is as believable as a mechanized call from "Pierre Poutine's" disposable cell phone.

The finance minister tabled a budget that projects a budget deficit of \$2.5 billion. Achieving this figure required applying, in reverse, a level of wizardry that is reminiscent of the mindset that caused the collapse of Enron, Nortel and global financial institutions.

As an analysis by Iglia Ivanova of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives makes clear, "Pretending that the budget shortfall is actually \$2.5 billion is dishonest and deliberately misleading to B.C. families."

Just over half of the deficit is what Ivanova calls "an accounting artifact." Christy Clark's government has chosen to record the entire \$1.6 billion in HST transition funding as though it's being paid to Ottawa this year. The amount to be paid this year is one-fifth of that, \$320 million.

The government's growth forecast is 1.8 percent, well below the private sector forecast of 2.2 percent. This creates a half billion dollar cushion in revenue estimates.

A total of \$653 million is set aside as a contingency and forecast allowance. Quite curiously, there's also a \$603 million contingency for the 2011/12 fiscal year which ends March 31. Could they really have unexpected expenditures of that amount during the last six weeks of the fiscal year?

"The actual budgeted shortfall – the amount that budgeted expenditures exceed the projected revenues – is only \$245 million," says Ivanova.

"Making the current year budget look more stretched than it actually is... helps the government drive home the politically convenient message that we can't afford salary increases in the public services, that we can't afford to increase supports for the most vulnerable citizens: children and seniors living in poverty.

"This can't be any further from the truth."

Harper times are tough times for Canadian democracy

By Art Kube
President

DURING A RECENT lobby by the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens' Federation (NPSCF), I came face to face with the stark reality of a Harper Parliamentary majority government. It is a top down directed machine, which does not allow any minister to deviate from Harper's script.

It became obvious when Finance Minister Flaherty changed his support of increasing the CPP before the federal election to now opposing any increase.

The toe-the-line rule holds true both when it concerns legislation, and when the prime minister puts up trial balloons.

Take Harper's outright deception that the retirement age must be increased to 67 because the OAS is no longer sustainable – a position that was completely refuted by the independent Parliamentary Budget Officer, who reported that the OAS was not only sustainable but had wiggle room to improve this vital public pension.

We met with Dianne Finlay, Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development.

She graciously gave us half an hour of her time and then went on for 15 minutes to lecture us how *good* they were to seniors and that the OAS was no longer sustainable.

By that time I blew my fuse and told her for ten minutes that she should check her own ministry's statistics which are proving her wrong. I told her that only upper income

seniors benefited from the Tory largesse, because increased tax credits don't help seniors living on GIS.

She got a piece of my mind about her own inactivity to force the provinces to live up to the federal-provincial agreement on providing geared-to-income seniors housing, something which is flouted by the provinces. I asked her if her government had no shame about seeing that the fastest growing segment of homeless was among seniors.

She then cited government support for independent living facilities, at which time I had to ask her if she knew that the monthly cost to live in these was between \$2,200 and \$5,000 a month and there were not too many seniors who can afford that kind of money.

Not only is the Harper Regime socially regressive, it is economically inept.

Their enthusiasm to accelerate the development of the tarsands, and build pipelines to Texas and Kitimat, tends to sell our children's birthright for a mess of porridge.

Even former Alberta premier Peter Lougheed is telling Harper to slow down the tarsands development and not to build the pipelines, because this amounts to selling out our resources and jobs. But to the Harper government, any one opposing the tarsands and the pipelines is now called an Eco Terrorist. Folks, I'm now an Eco Terrorist.

The Harper Government is also mean spirited. The gun registry is a case in point. Not only did they close down the registry, they ordered the destruction of all records and pro-



grams so a future government would find it very difficult and expensive to restore the registry.

This reminds me of a previous Tory Government which not only stopped the development of the Avro-Arrow but destroyed the aircrafts and all records of the developed technology, setting Canada back at least 25 years in aerospace technology. They are also mean spirited by stopping grants to reputable social organizations that promote family planning or are at odds with Harper's foreign policy.

What we have is government representing 40 percent of the voting public forcing onto the other 60 percent values which are in stark contrast with their values. Folks, over the next three years, we have to get our act together, stop the dictatorship by the minority, and restore real democracy.

Massive 400 page report calls for action on home and community care for seniors

After a three year study, Ombudsperson Kim Carter calls for “consistent, province-wide standards and processes that treat seniors across B.C. in a fair and equitable manner.”

**By Alice Edge
Chair,
COSCO Health Committee**

FEBRUARY 14, 2012 the B.C. Ombudsperson Kim Carter delivered the best Valentine seniors and health advocates have had in years. The second part of her report, *The Best of Care: Getting it Right for Seniors in BC*, contains all the ingredients to prepare and deliver the services and care for seniors, their families, health care providers and health authorities whether it is in their home, community or hospital.

The comprehensiveness of the long awaited report is evident in the 400 pages, 143 findings and 176 recommendations. Again Ms. Carter comments that, “Our report focuses on key areas where significant changes should be made with many recommendations that can be implemented quickly. We need to provide a renewed commitment to some of the most deserving and vulnerable members of our communities: a commitment that focuses on their needs, listens to their concerns and respects their choices.”

As with the first report the Minis-

ter of Health and the five provincial health authorities have had an opportunity to review her findings and recommendations and respond to her. Their written responses to her recommendations are included with her report, as are two investigations related to seniors’ care issues in 2008. They are: *On Short Notice: An Investigation of Vancouver Island Health Authority’s Process for Closing Cowichan Lodge and Honouring Commitments: An Investigation of Fraser Health Authority’s Transfer of Seniors from Temporarily Funded Residential Care Beds.*

It is difficult in this limited space to share all of the recommendations, however some should be highlighted:

- Support seniors and their families to navigate the home and community care system
- Assisting seniors to continue to live at home by assessing the adequacy of current home support programs and analyzing the benefits and costs of expansion
- Ensuring objective and enforceable standards of care for home support services
- Ensuring fair and equal treatment by immediately making certain that no seniors in assisted living are charged for services and benefits that are included in the assessed client rate
- Establish an active inspection, monitoring and enforcement program in assisted living residence
- Ensuring fair treatment by not charging fees to seniors involuntarily detained in residential care

under the Mental Health Act

- Ensuring objective and enforceable standards of care for seniors in residential care

Hot on the heels of this report was a response from Minister of Health Mike de Jong announcing an action plan, which included a senior’s advocate and ensuring transparency in seniors’ care. The Minister has

*We were deflated,
dismayed and
disappointed (by the
government’s response.)*

agreed to input from stakeholders in the development of the Senior’s Advocate role and COSCO will expect to participate in that discussion. Some preliminary work has already been undertaken with other health care and senior advocate groups.

So it was with high expectations that COSCO attended the budget lockup on February 21. We were anticipating that there would be funding to support the recommendations, not that all of them required funding to implement or carry out.

Sadly to say, we were deflated, dismayed and disappointed.

The devil is in the details of health authority budgets, who as always must manage within the funding provided to them by the government. Needless to say none of us are holding our breath.

Further information may be obtained from the Ombudsperson’s office at www.bcombudsperson.ca or 250-356-7740. The report is available on CD.

Will public pensions still be there when our children and grandchildren retire?

STEPHEN HARPER's turn on the stage, hoping to vow the world's corporate and political leaders at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, left many Canadians shaking their heads in disbelief.

Harper bragged to the elite gathering that Canada's economy is among the strongest in the world, and our banks are the best. He also takes pride in the fact that Canada's corporate taxes, lowered again on Jan. 1, are the lowest in the industrialized world.

Then he dropped the bombshell that left some commentators suggesting Harper should stay overseas.

With everything going so well for wealthy Canadians and corporations – lowest taxes, billions of uninvested cash reserves on the balance sheet – he announced that he intended to cut public pensions for the poorest Canadians.

Harper said that Old Age Security, the most basic safety net for seniors, was not sustainable. Too many baby boomers were near retirement.

This is no surprise. The demographic bulge has been working its way through society for decades. Surely he knew.

The real surprise is that the prime minister would propose raising the retirement age by two years without telling us about his plans during the election campaign. That is a giant HST-sized deception – but perhaps it's also business as usual for a party whose operatives would masquerade as Elections Canada



Prime minister Harper told the corporate and political elite in Davos, Switzerland, that the economy is strong so he has to cut public pensions. Huh?

officials to mislead people about where to vote.

A recent study by psychologists at the University of California and the University of Toronto found that rich people are more likely to cheat, lie, steal and cut off pedestrians. Perhaps they should run the same tests on federal Conservatives.

Harper's proposals to cut the OAS will deepen inequality and drive even more seniors into poverty, while preserving his tax giveaways to the most privileged. His argument that OAS is unsustainable also flies in the face of studies commissioned by his own government.

The government asked Edward Whitehouse, a pension policy expert who does work for the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, to prepare a report on where Canada stands on public pensions.

He concluded that, "Canada does not face major challenges of finan-

cial sustainability with its public pension schemes."

"There is no pressing financial or fiscal need to increase pension ages in the foreseeable future," said Whitehouse.

The independent parliamentary budget officer, Kevin Page, has also concluded, "There's no reason to change (the OAS program) from a fiscal sustainability perspective."

Ironically, Canada's public pension program is sustainable because it is among the least generous in the industrialized world.

The aging of the baby boomers will result in OAS and the companion Guaranteed Income Supplement payments increasing to 3.14 percent of GDP. By way of comparison, Italy spends about 14 percent of GDP on public pensions.

"We're going from 2.4 to 3.1 percent. Italy has that for breakfast," says Kevin Milligan, associate professor of economics at UBC.

Ageism could cost YOU an eye... or worse?

Don't let them tell you – and don't tell yourself – that it's all just because you're getting "older"

**By Gudrun Langolf,
COSCO First Vice President**

YOU'D EXPECT A dramatic story after such a dramatic title. Well it is a transformative one – it was for me, that's for sure.

A while back, NOT “once upon a time...” because this is no benign fairy tale, I travelled from Vancouver to Sechelt on the Sunshine Coast.

The public transit to the Horse-shoe Bay ferry is still excellent and I struck up a conversation with a fellow rider.

She was returning home to Cumberland. Had she been to visit friends or relatives, or gone shopping in the big city? No, she had a medical appointment with a cancer specialist, an oncologist.

The news was not good: she was about to lose her eye. Now you and I know you can't actually lose an eye or other body parts... Parts are either severed or taken out with surgical tools.

My seat mate told me that she had a relatively rare melanoma of the eye. Of course I was curious about how she had discovered this, did it hurt, how it affected her etc.

Her 'eye' story had started a year or so ago. Her eyesight was going a bit odd. Her vision appeared to be failing somewhat gradually.

She said that she was 64 years old, nearing retirement age and

rationalized her failing eyesight as something that happens naturally as we get older.

The conventional wisdom (right!) is that as you age, your body will fail you in various ways and failing eyesight is just one of them.

I could tell you many personal details about this delightful woman who was still working fulltime and happy to have a 'union job' with benefits, the kind of art she creates, that she lives on her own and a whole lot of interesting and fascinating facets of her life but today

I will only pass along her potentially lifesaving message: Ageism can hurt you, particularly if you too have bought into the stereotypical horse manure.

If your body, or parts, don't feel right, don't assume that it is due to the natural aging process. Get it checked out! The woman I rode the bus with wished she had sought medical advice sooner. For her it could have saved her eye!

More on ageism and its destructive impact another time.

British Columbians least able to afford prescriptions

A STUDY PUBLISHED in the Canadian Medical Association Journal Jan. 16 says of all Canadians, British Columbians are least able to afford prescription drugs.

The study asked 5,732 Canadians if the cost of prescription drugs ever led them to stop medical treatment.

It found the people who are most likely to be unable to afford prescriptions are already in poor health, have no drug insurance and live in B.C, said Michael Law of UBC, lead author of the study.

“While we found one in ten people across Canada had trouble with drug affordability, we found the number in B.C. was just under one in six – so 17 percent of people in British Columbia,” said Law.

The findings took researchers by surprise. “We weren't expecting that B.C. would be higher because we have a drug coverage program – Pharmacare,” said Law, adding that

Pharmacare's high deductible could partially be to blame.

“It might also have to do with a lot of other things in B.C.,” said Law. “[It] stands to reason if you are spending more on housing and food than other people you are going to have trouble affording the other things you have to buy, like medicines.”

NDP leader Adrian Dix said the findings are no surprise because the B.C. government has put the squeeze on the poor and middle-income earners.

“I think this is a recognition of the high deductibles in our Pharmacare plans, and a recognition of the high levels of inequality in our province. It shows just how vulnerable people are when they don't have extra or employee-related insurance.”

Dix noted that British Columbians pay 40 percent more for generic drugs than people in Ontario and Quebec.

Seniors and the Occupy Movement

By Linda Forsythe
Assistant Secretary-Treasurer

THERE IS GROWING inequality in Canada. The richest one per cent pay a lower rate of taxes than the rest of us. Canada's corporate taxes are now the lowest in the G7. Trillions have been spent to bail out greedy financial institutions, and preserve multi-million dollar bonuses, while the cost of living goes up, ordinary people lose their homes, and pension payments fall further behind. It's a simple equation. When they contribute less, more of the burden falls on the rest of us.

People across Canada, and indeed the world, have responded by saying 'enough!' They have formed Occupy Movements who have taken up residence in the downtown, business sectors of our cities. Instead of starting (and stopping) with demonstrations, marches and general noise in the streets, the Occupy Movement decided 'we're staying.' And until recently, they have.

What does the Occupy movement want? Generally they want an end to this corporate greed and they want an end to the government's complicity. They also want to do politics differently.

They believe in inclusion and welcome everyone. They have drawn on our history of struggle for social justice (the women's movement, the peace movement and anti-imperialist movements), but are also trying to do things differently. They are organized in such a way that they don't have or want the type of hierarchy that produces a leadership that loses contact with the people. They have taken advantage of the



social media to enhance their belief in equality and inclusion.

They also have held daily meetings where all voices are listened to, including the dissenting ones. Their responses prove that they are listening.

They use another technique to provide inclusivity, the human microphone. Normally at large gatherings and demonstrations, the only people to hear the speakers are those at the front. But with the human microphone, the words of the speakers get repeated by the audience so that everyone can hear and participate. This is a refreshing departure from protests of the past.

As the Occupy Movement's platform and demands continue to evolve we have to ask ourselves if this is the place for seniors to become engaged. Clearly we are part of the 99%. With retirement and old age,

we face new challenges and their attendant costs. But in recent weeks we have seen a federal government 'float' the idea of withholding Old Age Security to 67, and a provincial government that, while acknowledging the problems seniors face with health care, home care, mobility and housing, budgets a paltry amount for only some parts of the problem.

And why is this happening? The government could not give handouts to the corporate sector if it were to use our tax dollars for services and programs for the majority. And so they have had to choose – and clearly they have chosen to support their business friends.

So yes, the Occupy Movement is part of the response we all need to take to end corporate greed and the governments that support it. It is the most exciting act of resistance in Canada in the past 25 years and we need to actively participate in it.



Challenges for grandparents raising grandchildren

By Sylvia Macleay
Past President

AT A TIME WHEN they thought that they could enjoy retirement, relaxing and traveling etc., many grandparents now find themselves struggling to raise their grandchildren, even though their income may hardly be enough to support themselves. The 2006 census found that over 40,000 children in Canada were being raised by grandparents, including 10,000 in B.C. About 17 percent of these grandparents are of First Nations descent. Half of them have a total income of \$30,000 or less.

Among children raised by grandparents, 68 percent have severe disabilities while 54 percent have a clinical diagnosis. This was close to the number of children in government care at that time. The statistics of 2012, if available, would likely show a similar situation, but

involving larger numbers.

Parent Support Services working with the UVIC School of Social Work provide a legal guide and a resource booklet to support grandparents. They advocate for cross-ministry advocates to help grandparents; recognition of the foster parent equivalent role of grandparents in this situation; creation of a grandparent advisory committee; and for policies and programs to ensure that cultural competence is included for social workers working in this area.

The Extended Family Program works to deal with inconsistencies that arise around those who have guardianship and those who do not. Grandparents do not qualify for a child care subsidy if they are not going to school or work. The First Call Coalition is working to inform and seek support from the MLAs to ensure that the rules are fair for all grandparents raising grandchildren.

AFFILIATE REPORT

SONS fights for seniors

SAVE OUR NORTHERN Seniors (SONS), a COSCO affiliate based in Fort St. John, is a registered society working for safety, respect, and dignity of seniors.

"We've had a busy year," says Margaret Little, Vice-President.

At a town hall meeting held by Premier Christy Clark, the group highlighted the need for more senior housing and better transportation.

SONS' representatives on the Fort St. John Mayor's Disability Committee advocated on issues such as getting a ramp so that people can get on an airplane without having to be carried up the steps!

"We want to make our community accessible and safe," says Little.

The group also participates on the city's Affordable Housing Committee, gathering information on affordable housing and future needs in Fort St. John and area.

"Our area has the fastest growing number of seniors in the province," notes Little.

Recruitment and retention of Home Support Workers is also a big concern. The case load is huge, the distances long, and there is a real lack of trained staff, often forcing individuals into hospitals or care facilities in other communities.

SONS recently succeeded in having Handi-Dart service expanded to Saturdays, a key victory since there are no wheelchair accessible taxis.

"2012 will continue to be a busy year. Sharing information provincially as well as locally will be very important," says Little.

Does Stephen Harper speak for you?

By Gudrun Langolf
First Vice-President

PRIME MINISTER Stephen Harper's state visit to China is getting excellent but uncritical media reports. His "open for business" message seems to be very well received in Beijing where he just signed a number of trade and investment agreements about energy, agriculture, and natural resources.

No surprise here: China, as the emerging superpower, needs unconditional access to our energy, land, water and natural resources.

Head of Enbridge, Patrick Daniel travels with our Prime Minister. Enbridge is the company planning to build the Northern Gateway pipeline that would carry Alberta bitumen to ports in B.C. to be shipped by tankers to China.

This trip gives the company an unprecedented prominent role in Prime Minister Harper's state visit. It certainly feels like Harper is planning to disregard the government's own environmental assessment hearings on Gateway – it looks like he will approve the project regardless of the outcome of that review.

Also on the trip are Marcel Coutu, CEO, Canadian Oil Sands Ltd, which holds a stake in the Syncrude oil venture along with China Petroleum Corp, and the chief executive of Cameco, Tim Gitzel. Cameco is the world's largest uranium producer.

The delegation was "rounded out" by 37 other corporate executives. Canada is indeed open for business.



While Harper was in China, seniors took part in an anti-tanker, anti-pipeline, pro-environment demonstration at the Chinese Embassy in Vancouver.

Photo by Gudrun Langolf, Feb. 8, 2012

China has been an attractive base for global manufacturing and exporters because it had lots of natural resources, extremely low wages, practically non-existing environmental and labour standards. Social unrest is increasing in China and the extent of environmental degradation from their industrialization is shocking.

The newly signed investor-right deal will slow, if not stop, reforms of labour laws, human rights and democracy in China.

Threats to Canadian environmental and human rights standards are real too. New Chinese investment in the tar sands or the uranium mines would be locked in and Chinese investors would have the

same right to sue Canada over any new rules to protect the environment, local communities and/or First Nations peoples from harmful, intrusive extraction industry practices.

Stephen Harper is aggressively selling Canada's tar sands and other energy and natural resources to China and willing to give it investor rights currently unavailable to Canadian firms operating in Canada.

We should not promote corporate-friendly trade and investment deals that profit only the privileged. We should be standing with the Chinese people seeking better working conditions, improved human rights, and a clean environment in both our countries.

Two bedroom homes for sale \$5,000!

**By Maureen Spender
President, Central Fraser
Valley Manufactured Home
Owners Association**

NO, THE HEADLINE is not a misprint, or a flashback to years gone by. It is a fact from about five years ago.

I want to tell you about the disgraceful provincial laws that regulate the lives of thousands in B.C. I am referring to more than 26,000 owners of manufactured homes.

Life in a Manufactured Home Park is an affordable, enjoyable and relaxing way of life. My husband and I moved to one 10 years ago and would not live anywhere else now. It is certainly different from living in a condo with others on six sides of you or living in a townhouse where you share walls on at least two sides. We own our homes. We have gardens. Residents range from low income to millionaires.

Each Park is a community to itself and saves the government millions of dollars each year as we take care of our elderly and/or sick neighbours. We are able to use health care helpers instead of nursing homes. We have our independence instead of 24 hour care assistance. We are not trailer park boys.

Until 2002, if a Park was sold for redevelopment the home owners generally received "fair market value" for their home. In 2002, the provincial government brought in Bill 71, regulating Manufactured Homes and separating them from the residential tenancy branch.

The new law states that if a Park is sold for redevelopment the owner of the Park has to give the home



owner 1 years notice and 1 years rent (which varies, but in the lower mainland about \$6,000 to \$12,000). So we now have people who purchased their homes for \$40,000 to \$150,000, plus money spent on additions, upgrades and maintenance, receiving approx. \$10,000.

Moving the home is a slight possibility, if you can find a Park. To move a Manufactured Home from the Lower Mainland to say Merritt (closest area with space available) would be \$50,000 to \$60,000. This does not include balconies or other additions.

Some Manufactured Homes, because of their age, cannot be moved due to Provincial regulations. What do these home owners do? They have \$6,000 to \$12,000 to buy a new home! Do you know of anywhere they can do that?

Manufactured Home Owners desperately need help as redevelopment spreads. Let me give you some specific examples.

In the Fraser Valley, a Park set to be redeveloped was allowed to

get into terrible disrepair with open sewage and water pipes spewing all over the place. Because of this, even though the homes were for sale, there were no buyers. A large percentage of owners ended up walking away from their homes of many years with no compensation at all!

On the Island, an owner who had sold a Park for redevelopment offered to move the homes to the other side of the highway. No one wanted to live on "the other side." Would you like a landowner to tell you where you can live? And the offer did not include balconies, railings or sheds, just the basic unit.

Adding insult to injury, our MLA of housing has been heard to say these homes are just garbage. A fire marshal has been heard to say Manufactured Homes are a fire hazard because they are wood construction – which makes me wonder what he thinks most B.C. homes are built from.

If you would like any further information please contact me at 604 530-4345 or newbylass@aol.com.

Taking up the challenge to live on \$610 per month

By Sylvia MacLeay
Past President

IT MUST HAVE BEEN a long month for Jagrup Brar. The NDP MLA for Surrey-Fleetwood accepted the Raise the Rates challenge to live on welfare during January, and to tell the story of people who live in poverty in B.C.

For the first two weeks he lived in a Surrey rooming house.

Most rooming houses are old, poorly maintained, and illegal. They seldom have proper kitchens or bathrooms. And the rooms are tiny.

One room, reserved for a person being discharged from hospital, was three feet by seven feet, barely room for a bed, and cost \$300 a month.

The rest of the month he lived in a regulated rooming house in East Vancouver. Eleven people shared one bathroom. They lined up for as much as four hours to cook.

Brar bought a small number of transit tickets which were soon used. Then he walked since he feared he would run out of money for food. To keep within the \$610 budget he ate meals that were cheap and filling, but lacked proper nutrition. He lost a considerable amount of weight.

Nonetheless, he realized he was better off than many welfare recipients. He did not need to spend anything on clothes, prescription drugs, entertainment or other important items.

Brar spent much of each day talking with people and writing a blog about his experiences.

At a First Call meeting Feb. 8 he shared some of his findings:

- It takes months, not weeks, to get welfare. In the meantime, children and older adults are serious-

ly affected. Applicants must rely on friends or begging to survive.

- Many rely on food banks, using their meagre funds on transit. Food is heavy for old and unwell to carry.
- Affordable housing and job training are vital needs.
- Unlike other provinces, B.C. claws back any money earned by welfare recipients. Even child support is clawed back.
- Health problems are worse because people are unable to pay for medications and treatment.
- Welfare applicants are often told to go home and apply by phone. Some don't have a phone. Others are denied assistance because they don't have a home address.

The challenges are immense. Brar told us he would return to the Legislature with a renewed commitment to advocate for funding and policy changes to improve the living conditions and opportunities available to low income people in B.C.

Opportunities and challenges of our increased longevity

Planning is underway for an important national conference to be held *Oct. 1 and 2, 2012* in Richmond.

Co-sponsored by COSCO and the National Pensioners and Senior Citizens Federation, the conference will bring together leading experts and seniors to discuss the latest trends – and to plan a better future for older Canadians.

Make a note of it today!

DriveABLE sparks province-wide concern

THE SO-CALLED DriveABLE test is causing considerable concern, especially among seniors, in communities around the province.

Support Our Seniors, a COSCO affiliate in the Comox Valley, has held two meetings to discuss the issue, drawing crowds of more than 160 people in total.

"The issue is very important to seniors in our rural community for whom the loss of a driver's licence often necessitates a move of residence, and always a considerable loss of independence," says Jennifer Pass, Chair of S.O.S.

"We have written to the Superintendent of Motor Vehicles with a list of our concerns, but have not yet received a response," she says.

"No one disagrees that some sen-



Katrine Conroy, NDP critic on seniors' issues, discussed DriveABLE and other concerns with the COSCO executive on Feb. 3

iors have cognitive changes as they age which affects their driving ability. However, the process in use in B.C. has many inherent problems."

Similar meetings co-sponsored by Sunshine Coast Seniors, the COSCO branch on the Sunshine Coast, have also drawn large crowds. MLAs' offices have been receiving many calls.

COSCO is giving the issue a high priority. Lorraine Logan, chair of the transportation committee, says there is no accountability in the test, results are inconsistent.

"It's scary as hell and we've got to change it," Logan told the Feb. 10 COSCO annual general meeting.

In pursuing this issue, Logan and Secretary-Treasurer Sheila Pither are in contact with MLAs, and arranging meetings with ICBC and the organization that administers the tests. Pither has developed a workshop for mature drivers, and COSCO continues to support local groups and individuals on this issue.

Membership Application

Please mail to the address below

- ☐ I wish to join COSCO as an Associate Member. I enclose my \$25 membership fee.
- ☐ I wish to make a donation to COSCO. Please find enclosed a cheque for \$_____.

Name: _____
(PLEASE PRINT)

Address: _____

Postal Code: _____ Phone: _____ Fax: _____

E-mail: _____

Date: _____ Signature: _____

- Please make cheques payable to COSCO.
- Mail your application to Ernie Bayer, Membership Secretary,
6079 - 184 A Street, Surrey, BC V3S 7P7 604 576-9734.
- Seniors groups and organizations wishing more information about joining COSCO should write or phone Ernie Bayer and request a membership package.