

## **Seniors Left Behind: Government's Failure to Act is Creating a Healthcare Catastrophe**

Let's stop pretending our seniors are a priority. The proof is out there to show they aren't.

Despite all the platitudes from politicians about "valuing elders" and "aging with dignity," the truth is glaring; Successive British Columbia governments have been abandoning their commitment to seniors and punting the issue down the road for over 30 years or more. We have long known of the coming bubble in seniors that might risk the Canada Pension Plan. How can we not have planned for the needs of seniors' care and support when we all knew this crisis was coming? The cost to us all is financial, moral, and systemic.

The crisis is no longer looming; it's here. Right now, according to Dan Levitt, Seniors Advocate for BC, over 3,000 seniors are languishing on waitlists for long-term care (LTC) beds. By 2040, that shortfall is projected to balloon to at least 20,000 beds. The government's response? Studies and painfully slow progress. Since 2020, only 380 of the promised 3,300 new LTC beds have been built. This is critical now, with ramifications to be felt for years to come!

And while the Health Ministry is "reviewing" bed planning to ensure "value for public investment," seniors are dying in hospital hallways and are also trapped in expensive Alternate Level of Care (ALC) beds with nowhere to go. And seniors are dying at home, too, lonely, isolated and lacking the support they need. This is not a system that's strained, it's a system collapsing under the weight of political inertia.

Well-meaning as they are, our elected officials are paralyzed by changing economics and the hope the systemic hurdles will just go away.

It doesn't take a policy expert to understand the math. Building LTC beds at over \$1 million each is unsustainable. The Office of the Seniors Advocate estimates it would take \$17 billion over the next decade to catch up. Yet, this massive number reflects how far we've fallen behind—not because it's an impossible investment, but because the government has delayed, deferred, and deflected for years. Action needed to be taken 15 years ago, not 5 years in the future.

Our seniors are left behind facing a decision between paying for rent, food, or home support. Having all three is a luxury most can't afford.

But there is a solution staring us in the face: radically expand free home support services.

Most seniors want to age in their own homes. By providing essential services—housekeeping, meal preparation, personal care—free of charge, we can drastically reduce demand on LTC and hospital beds.

This isn't a pipe dream; Ontario and Alberta already provide an hour of daily home support to seniors at no cost. In B.C., a senior earning \$30,000 a year could be forced to pay up to one-third of their income just to receive basic home support. It's a shameful policy that penalizes seniors for wanting to live independently and it crowds our long-term care homes with people that can be better served at home. Moving to long-term care is a personal choice that many families and individuals need to make, but it should not be a forced choice for them to make in order to save money because the cost of care at home is too high.

Investing in home care is not just compassionate—it's economically sound. Home support reduces hospital readmissions, prevents premature institutionalization, and frees up desperately needed acute care beds. BC has the highest rate of overpopulation of LTC beds by those that can be cared for at home for just a couple of hours of care daily. Yet, every year, reports from the Seniors Advocate highlight the same issues, and every year, the gap between need and availability widens. We advocate that family doctors be able to prescribe home support for seniors to reduce the burden on our overworked social workers.

The Health Ministry boasts of past "recommendations adopted" and new federal-provincial funding agreements, but where is the action plan? Where are the benchmarks, timelines, and deliverables? Families are being forced to shoulder caregiving burdens they are ill-equipped for, quitting jobs, exhausting savings, and compromising their own health—because the government has downloaded its responsibilities onto them. The toll on family caregivers is an immense burden not accounted for in traditional studies.

The failure to invest in home support and community-based care isn't a policy debate—it's a moral failure. If we continue down this path, we will soon see wards filled with seniors waiting to die, while the promised LTC beds are perpetually "under review." The backlog will grow, hospitals will become gridlocked, and the human cost will be immeasurable.

Additional study is meaningless when there is no sense of urgency, no detailed plan, and no political will to make the bold decisions needed now. The Ministry's token investments—\$354 million over three years and a \$733 million federal agreement—are a drop in the ocean compared to what's needed. And without a clear commitment and path to expanding home support immediately, every new bed built will still leave us desperately behind.

We cannot allow this crisis to deepen for another 15 years while seniors suffer as political collateral. The government must:

1. Immediately make home support services free and universally accessible.
2. Develop a transparent LTC expansion plan with real timelines beyond 2030.
3. Set measurable wait-time reduction targets for LTC placement.

4. Increase community-based respite and adult day programs to relieve families.
5. Provide public accountability with regular progress reports and public data.

Anything less is political malpractice.

British Columbians need better. Seniors deserve better. If we don't act now, the future will be one of overcrowded hospitals, overwhelmed families, and government scrambling to explain why it didn't act sooner.

The time for reports is over. It's time for action.