

Opinion: The 'silver tsunami' is already here

Community service providers help B.C.'s government keep senior care costs down, while maintaining quality

BY DANIEL FONTAINE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 14, 2013



A recent report from B.C.'s ombudsperson shows community service providers can operate residential care for seniors cheaper than government.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PROVINCE

As we approach the coming provincial election, you can anticipate the issue of seniors care will come up for debate. As our population continues to age, we no longer need talk about the "silver tsunami" in theoretical terms — it's already here.

With government already investing 43 cents of every tax dollar on health care, the decisions Victoria makes now are guaranteed to have a profound impact on future generations.

If we want our publicly funded medical system to become economically sustainable, it is crucial that government continues to innovate and collaborate. That is in part what British Columbians confirmed when Angus Reid recently conducted a poll on behalf of the BC Care Providers Association.

Over the last decade, we have witnessed a transformation in how we deliver seniors care in B.C. By harnessing the creativity and energy of the community that exists beyond government, we have been able to do what few other provinces have been able to accomplish — deliver better care for our seniors at a reduced cost to the taxpayer.

A recent C.D. Howe Institute report singled out B.C. as the one jurisdiction bucking the trend when it comes to costs related to elder care.

Colin Busby, the report's co-author states, "British Columbia has been almost uniquely successful among Canadian provinces in mitigating the impact of aging on its health care budget."

Busby goes on to state "British Columbia provides perhaps the most striking example of a province that has changed the age-profile of health care spending in recent years. A comparison of provincial expenditures per person by age in 1998 (the first year of Canadian Institute for Health Information's data) to 2010 shows a decline in the relative costs of older age groups. This change appears, in part, to

be a consequence of per capita reductions in the public costs for nursing homes and residential facilities."

By choosing to expand seniors care using partnership opportunities with community providers, the provincial government has been able to maintain or exceed quality standards and limit costs. In fact, approximately two-thirds of all seniors living in residential care today do so in facilities contracted by government.

A recent report focusing on seniors care by B.C.'s ombudsperson helps to illustrate why the government's approach makes sense. It revealed that funding required for health authorities to operate their own residential care facilities is significantly higher than the identical beds operated by their community partners.

The ombudsperson states "these differences in the average daily per-bed funding result in significant monthly amounts. For example, given the difference in the average daily per-bed funding provided by the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA), it would be typical for a publicly owned facility (operated by VIHA) with 50 residential care beds to receive approximately \$44,000 more in funding each month than a privately owned facility with the same number of subsidized residential care beds."

If only 1,000 more-expensive residential care beds in health authority facilities were delivered by alternate service providers at an average rate of \$200 per day, the total annual savings could be almost \$11 million per year — without compromising quality of care.

In fact, when one health authority surveyed residents about the quality of care provided by community providers, they received top marks. But stand-alone surveys aren't sufficient in providing the public with a clear picture of customer satisfaction.

That is why the BC Care Providers Association has long advocated for the government to conduct standardized provincewide satisfaction surveys for residential care facilities throughout the province. If implemented, they could become a powerful tool to further empower residents as well as their family members.

Last month, Angus Reid polled over 800 British Columbians and asked "if you knew taxpayers would save money and maintain high standards of care by having regional health authorities contract more seniors care beds to the non-government sector, would you encourage or discourage government from taking this course of action?"

Sixty-two per cent said they would encourage Victoria to work more closely with non-government service providers.

The pollster also asked respondents what government should be focusing on more when it comes to the delivery of seniors care. Eighty-eight per cent replied that either the standards or outcomes of care should be a top priority. By comparison, only four per cent said government should worry about who delivers the care.

When it comes to delivering seniors care, the business case for government to increase the number of partnerships is very clear. However, it is important they also commit to choosing those service providers based on overall cost and quality, not whether they make a profit or not.

On May 14, British Columbians will be asked to choose their next government. Let's hope whomever they select is committed to putting the interests of seniors first.

Daniel Fontaine is the CEO for the BC Care Providers Association.