



### Member's Editorial

## **Celebrating Seniors' Contributions**

*C*anada, a society for all ages. That's our national theme for the International Year of Older Persons. The United Nations General Assembly declared 1999 the International Year of Older Persons in recognition of the world's rapidly aging population. Its goal is to foster international awareness of the important role of seniors in society and of the mutual benefits of intergenerational respect and support.



The National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA) is no stranger to this goal and is happy to honour the contributions of older Canadians by joining the national celebrations marking the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP). What's to celebrate, you ask? Plenty, we think.

Let's celebrate seniors who assure continuity and transmission of values – the family's anchor in turbulent social times.

Let's honour seniors who survived the Depression and wars and went on to forge an era of unprecedented prosperity for their children and an unparalleled health and social system for their country.

Let's applaud seniors as productive, contributing members of society, as citizens whose \$69 billion annual purchasing power is augmented by volunteer and financial help to their families and communities.

Let's salute seniors as the guardians of local history, traditions and culture, as transmitters of experience, skills and knowledge from one generation to another – including the secrets of aging well.

Let's reflect on the wisdom of many Aboriginal and ethno-cultural communities that value elders as teachers, mentors and storytellers.



In short, let's celebrate seniors' contributions to making Canada a vibrant, diverse and caring society.

The IYOP recognizes a significant demographic fact – not only in Canada but around the world. Perhaps more important, it gives us a chance to reflect on and celebrate seniors' contributions to their families, their communities and society at large.

Dispelling myths about aging, helping reduce the fear of aging, promoting a more realistic image of aging between generations – these have always been on the NACA agenda, something we aim for year in and year out, not just in 1999.

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for the International Year of Older Persons

## **It's About Time!**

**W**hy celebrate seniors' contributions? Perhaps the best reason is to help create a more balanced picture of our older population and how the aging of the population affects society in all its dimensions.

Public discussion of population aging often focuses on aging as a 'problem', a phenomenon with dire consequences for individuals and for society and its institutions. The demographic shift toward an older population raises concerns about a greater share of society's resources going to provide health care, social supports, public pensions, housing, and other programs and services. This approach has two pitfalls.

First, focusing on this aspect tends to hide the fact that seniors contribute actively to society in many ways. They've done so all their lives, and they continue to do so now. At least one study suggests that Canadian seniors provide unpaid help of a value equivalent to between one-quarter and one-third of all Old Age Pensions and Guaranteed Income Supplements paid out each year.<sup>1</sup> What's more, if society provides pensions, health and home care, and other programs for seniors, members of other age groups are relieved of these financial and time responsibilities, so that programs directed to seniors actually have much broader benefits in society.<sup>2</sup>

Second, is it really accurate to suggest that more and more social resources will have to be devoted to caring for a much older population? To begin with, it's a mistake to assume



that seniors are disproportionately high consumers of health and social services (*see box*). In addition, current demographic research suggests that in the much ‘older’ Canada of 2011 or 2021, the ratio of people not in the workforce (ages 0-17 and 65+) to the total population still won’t reach the record levels set by the baby boom.”<sup>3</sup>

**a. Myth and Reality**

*Myth:* An aging population automatically means higher health costs.

*Fact:* Only a small percentage of older Canadians are frequent users of the health care system, and these are mainly the very old, who do so in the last six months of life. (Health Canada, *Seniors info exchange*, summer 1996)

*Myth:* Seniors are frail and dependent.

*Fact:* Most seniors live active, healthy, productive lives, and the majority live independently, needing no help with daily tasks. Just 7% of those 65 and over live in institutions, and up to age 80, fewer than 20% need help with daily tasks. (Health Canada, *Canada’s Seniors...At a Glance*, 1998)

Finally, with the transition between the workforce and retirement often occurring at a younger age and becoming much less abrupt than it was in the past, does it make sense to rely on old assumptions? Across the country, Canadians are reinventing retirement through part-time and volunteer work or are continuing to work at their lifetime careers at lower rates of pay or with no pay. These changes reflect the fact that seniors are healthier, more energetic, and better educated than ever before. Retiring from paid work never meant retiring from productivity or creativity. Today, older Canadians’ choices and options highlight the folly of equating productivity with paid work or defining social roles and needs based simply on age.<sup>4</sup>

## **More to Life**

The International Year of Older Persons offers a good opportunity to gain a more balanced view of what aging involves, both for individuals and for society – rather than relying on stereotypes and one-sided accounting.

The aging of the population tends to worry people because of what they assume about the costs to society – the cost of health care, the cost of supporting a large senior population. But in fact, the overall physical and financial health of today’s seniors is better than in the past, and younger adults are much more conscious of the effect of their lifetime choices on their future well-being. Basing projections on assumptions derived from past patterns of social support use will certainly not make good policy for the future.



- a. An outstanding volunteer for many years before her retirement from nursing, Alberta's **Hazel Wilson** continues to devote time and energy to issues important to seniors – abolishing mandatory retirement, maintaining Medicare principles, pension de-indexing, assessing the needs of homebound elderly persons. She has served on the Alberta Council on Aging. Her work has contributed significantly to raising the awareness of seniors' needs

Treating older Canadians as a monolithic group would also be an error. The seniors of today are yesterday's middle-aged adults, no less diverse and valuable to society today than they were then. And tomorrow's seniors will be as diverse as the baby boomers of today.

- a. Rankin Inlet's **Rhoda Karetak** is a "Qaujimayatuqangit", an elder who teaches traditional wisdom. A well-known social healer, she is a nurturer of children and youth as well as a member of the Northwest Territories' Seniors Society and Seniors Advisory Council. She is also an exceptional seamstress and designer, who shares with youth and community her connections with the past and her knowledge of the art and tools that go into the creation of Inuit clothing

This diversity means that variety, flexibility and choice should be the hallmarks of relations, policies and programs designed to respond to the needs of the aging population. It also means envisaging completely new approaches as successive generations of seniors make their aspirations and preferences known.

## Give and Take

There is no question that an aging population demands a social response to adapt systems, institutions, programs and infrastructures to the needs and wishes of an expanding group of citizens. The effort will be comparable to that required in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, which saw the need to rapidly expand the housing stock and the education system at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary levels to accommodate returning veterans and the large number of children being born during the baby boom. The seniors of today contributed through their taxes to the cost of these infrastructures.

- a. She was a caring Canadian even before Newfoundland entered Confederation. Now it's official: 98 year-old **Margaret Giovannini** of St. John's recently received a Governor General's Caring Canadian Award for her volunteer work with her church, the Red Cross, the Girl Guides, the St. John Ambulance, the Seniors' Resource Centre and the Memorial Hospital Auxiliary. She is also an accomplished entertainer in her own right and an enthusiastic member of the *Mews Singers*.

There will certainly be costs involved in the adjustment to an aging society, but a full and appropriate social response should be based on a complete picture, not just one side of the coin. In addition to considering costs, let's look at seniors' past and current contributions and the benefits that accrue from having a large number of seniors in our society.



## The Benefits of Age

From an economic perspective, seniors are an important force. With a lifetime of work, earnings and savings behind them, their taxes, investments and purchasing power strengthen every aspect of the economy. Generosity also tends to increase with age: 80% of Canadians in the 65+ age group donate to charitable and non-profit organizations.

But seniors are more than just consumers and donors. They are also the largest group of contributors to volunteer groups and causes. In 1997, 30% of all Canadian seniors between 55 and 64 years were volunteers. Even after the age of 65, almost a quarter of all seniors are active volunteers.<sup>5</sup>

- a. Her creative mind and generosity of spirit lead her to always “find a way”. At 84, **Prue Cunningham** coordinates a very successful Victoria, B.C. shopping program she helped create 10 years ago when she became aware that many seniors couldn’t get out to shop; 100 volunteers now provide the service. Prue has also had a hand in setting up a student-senior assistance program for home repairs and a peer counselling program. She serves as a senior citizen counsellor for the Ministry of Human Resources.

## The Reciprocity Bonus

The complementarity of age groups in a society contributes to the well-being of all generations. While about half the seniors surveyed for the 1991 Survey of Ageing and Independence reported *receiving* help with chores, transport, etc., they also reported *giving* help, especially emotional support, but also help with housework, meals, groceries, transportation, babysitting, personal care, and money management – to their spouses and children, as well as to friends, neighbours and volunteer groups. Even 15% of the oldest old still reported helping someone else, usually a friend or neighbour, with housework, meals, or groceries.<sup>6</sup>

- a. Born and bred in Winnipeg, **Ron O’Donovan** has had a long career in newspapers, radio and the City’s parks and recreation department, during which he volunteered in fundraising and activities for children with mental or physical disabilities. He’s still involved, but now he’s added the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Alzheimer Society to his roster of causes. Avid gardeners, Ron and his wife Eunice originated Winnipeg’s “Grow a Row” – vegetable gardeners donating home-grown produce to the local food bank.

The General Social Survey of 1995 confirms that substantial numbers of seniors (just under 20%) engage in unpaid work activities such as looking after children at least once a week. Of these seniors, 4% looked after children for more than 15 hours a week, 8% spent 5 to 14 hours per week, and 6% watched children for less than 5 hours a week. A similar share



of seniors provide unpaid care to other seniors. In 1995, 23% of people aged 65 and over gave this kind of support or assistance to other seniors at least once a week.<sup>5</sup> The importance of this caregiving, in the case of seniors caring for a chronically ill spouse, for example, is immeasurable.

- a. If you've ever read the Ontario government newsletter "Especially for Seniors", you've seen the work of Toronto's **Lois Neely**. A mother of 4 and grandmother of 13 now in her mid-70s, Ms. Neely is the immediate past chair of the Mayor's Committee on Aging and serves on Toronto's Advisory Committee on Accessible Transportation. She has published 20 *Reader's Digest* articles on key seniors issues and launched the newsletter while a member of the Premier's Advisory Council on Seniors.

Many studies have highlighted how essential families are in providing unpaid help to their members and thus delaying the need for formal organizations to take on the responsibility of providing health care, personal care and social support. Researchers are still trying to figure out the best way of attaching a dollar value to all this volunteer and unpaid work. But they are clear that as the older population increases in numbers and proportion, it's just as important to examine their contributions to society as it is to consider their needs. Acknowledging the actual time contributions of seniors at all levels will go a long way toward alleviating the public perception that an aging population is a 'burden' on society's resources.

The facts about older Canadians and demographic change show that the aging of the population will have both benefits and costs. Presenting a full and balanced picture as the basis for developing sound policy and enhancing intergenerational understanding and support means considering both, and relying on facts instead of myths about aging.

## Ordinarily Extraordinary

Helping to create a more realistic and thoughtful picture of seniors and aging means recognizing the diversity of the senior population. We're all familiar with the exceptional accomplishments of extraordinary seniors – the Flora MacDonalds and the John Glens of this world. Their vigour and drive are examples to us all, and their contributions are inspirational.

But what about the 'ordinary' senior? In the accompanying profiles, we highlight the contributions of 'average' seniors across the country. You may not have heard their names before, but they're far from ordinary in our books. There's plenty to celebrate here – not only the individual achievements but also the contribution of a generation to building the society we enjoy today.

Canada, a society for all ages





## A Society For All Ages

The aging of the population is both a social and an individual phenomenon. Making sure that Canada is indeed a society for all ages therefore demands both social and individual responses.

- a. She might deny it, but the social commitment of Montréal's **Thérèse Darche** is an inspiration to many seniors. Through her work with seniors' committees and associations and her participation in the curriculum committee of the University of Montréal's Gerontology department, she has been a tireless advocate for seniors' dignity, rights and well-being, mental and physical. Always based on a firm understanding of reality, she offers simple, concrete solutions to real problems.
  
- a. From his apartment in "The Castle" (it's actually in a restored C.P. hotel) that he shares with his wife in Kentville, N.S., the Reverend Canon **Sid Davies** promotes the needs and issues of rural Nova Scotia seniors. Having served the Anglican church for 65 years, Rev. Davies, now in his 80s, hosts a local cable TV program, volunteers on several committees and service organizations to seniors, and still takes the pulpit regularly, as needed.

Society's response – making sure that infrastructures, institutions and programs are adapted to the change – involves a full range of social actors: architects, urban planners, transportation experts, manufacturers, retailers, policy makers and the media.

Individual responses – thinking about what a good old age means and preparing for it – involve many decisions: healthy lifestyle choices, lifelong learning, financial responsibility, in short, charting a personal course for the future.

A more realistic image of aging may well be part of that future. As more seniors age in good health, Canadians may come to understand that the part of life called "old age" is one in which people continue to actively contribute to their communities and families while sharing the values and knowledge gained through a lifetime of experience.

May we truly become "*A Society for All Ages*". Happy celebrations!

Canada, a society for all ages



## For More Information...

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## Tips List

### *Seniors – Get involved in the celebrations!*

- October 1 is the International Day for Older Persons. How about making a family time capsule, to be opened perhaps on October 1, 2009 or even 2019. You could draw a family tree. Family members from each generation – grandparents and great aunts and uncles, parents, and children – can include items that are significant to them now. By the time the capsule is opened, the ‘children’ generation may be parents or grandparents themselves.
- Make sure the seniors in your family or community receive a congratulatory message from the Prime Minister for special milestones – a wedding anniversary (25 years or more) or a birthday (65+). Be sure to submit your request at least 6 weeks before the big day to: Executive Correspondence Unit, Room 105, Langevin Block, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A2.
- Offer your own celebration by preparing a document on your family’s traditions and how they got started. Write down favourite recipes and include the traditions surrounding them – who was particularly fond of the dish, the occasions on which it was served, the time it didn’t turn out quite right because you forgot a crucial ingredient. A great gift to your family!

### *Seniors’ groups – plan your own events*

- Check out the IYOP web site (<http://iyop-aipa.ic.gc.ca>). From there you can link to other sites in Canada and around the world. You’ll also find a calendar of local events and national celebrations, message boards where you can post thoughts and stories, ideas you can use for your own events to mark IYOP.
- Organize an intergenerational event at a local seniors’ centre, child care centre or nursery school. Seniors can read to children or tell stories about what it was like when they were children. Children can plan and serve refreshments and decorate for the event.
- Get your local newspapers to publish a weekly column highlighting seniors in your town or community and to publish interesting data on the senior population. Tell them to check the IYOP website for information.

- Get the town to recognize seniors by offering a special certificate to those turning 99 and more in 1999.
- A school or troop of Scouts or Guides could make a good partner in a community garden – a vegetable garden as a source of fresh produce for the food bank, or a flower garden to beautify a park or other public space.
- Identify senior-friendly businesses, services, products and programs in your community, then distribute awards or plan an event, media story or shopping mall display to acknowledge their contribution to seniors' quality of life.
- Plan an event to highlight seniors' diversity, talents, skills, knowledge and contributions to the community: an art show on the theme of "Then and Now," a theatrical or musical event to illustrate the IYOP theme, "Canada, a society for all ages," the launch of a fundraising book of seniors' stories, recipes, craft ideas or old photographs.
- Take advantage of existing theme days and holidays – International Literacy Day, Heritage Day, International Women's Day, Black History Month, Labour Day – to plan a seniors' or intergenerational IYOP event related to that theme.

For help in planning, organizing and promoting IYOP events and activities in your community, check out the *Community Kit for the International Year of Older Persons 1999*. It's available in booklet form, on the internet and in other forms through the Canada Coordinating Committee for the IYOP (see the information section).



## Notes

1. R. Robb et al., "Valuation of unpaid help by seniors in Canada: an empirical analysis", paper prepared for the Program for Research on the Independence and Economic Security of the Older Population, McMaster University, with support from Health Canada (December 1997), pp 12-13.
2. Monica Townson, *The social contract and seniors: preparing for the 21st century* (Ottawa: National Advisory Council on Aging, 1994).
3. Frank T. Denton et al., "The future population of Canada, its age distribution and dependency relations", *Canadian Journal on Aging* 17/1 (1998), emphasis in the original.
4. See, for example, Susan A. McDaniel, *Canada's Aging Population* (Butterworths, 1988), and Phyllis Moen, "Reinventing retirement: productive aging into the 21st century", paper presented to the Canadian Association on Gerontology 27th annual scientific and educational meeting (October 1998).
5. Michael Hall et al., *Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: highlights from the 1997 National Survey of giving, volunteering and participating* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1998).
6. Betty Havens and Marcia Finlayson, *Analyses of Canada's Oldest Old - From the Survey of Ageing and Independence* (Ottawa, Health Canada, 1997).

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