

Healthy Aging through Healthy Living

Towards a comprehensive policy and planning framework for Seniors in B.C.

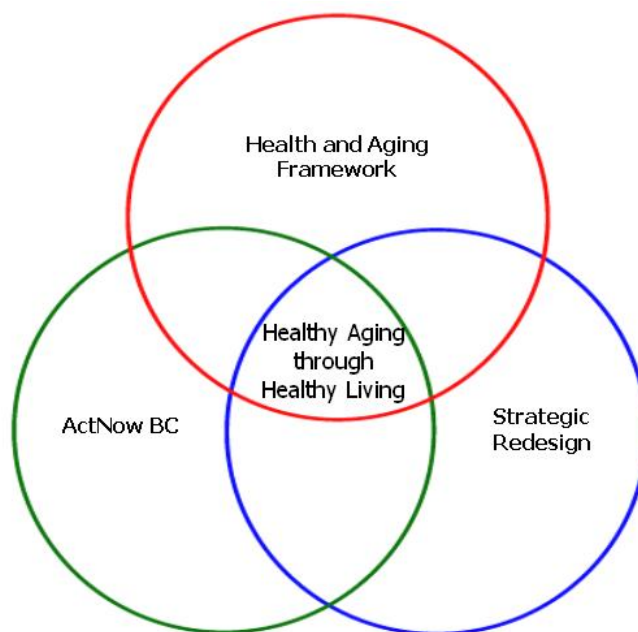
Executive Summary

British Columbia has one of the most rapidly aging populations in Canada. By 2031, 24 percent of British Columbia's population will be over the age of 65. In 2002, B.C. seniors accounted for 50 percent of PharmaCare expenditures, 37 percent of all hospitalized cases and 55 percent of hospital inpatient days (B.C. Ministry of Health Services, 2004). Encouraging healthy lifestyles can prevent, minimize or even reverse frailty and poor health in older age resulting in savings to the health care system and better quality of life for seniors.

Healthy Aging through Healthy Living provides a blueprint that promotes, supports and enables healthy aging for B.C.

seniors. It provides an evidence based framework for a comprehensive approach and establishes the Ministry of Health's strategic platform for healthy aging in the context of:

- The four domains for a continuum of health care as identified within the Ministry of Health Service Plan (B.C. Ministry of Health, 2005a).
- Health and Aging Framework as a result from "From Dialogue to Action: Summary Report of the Working Group and Framework for Change" (B.C. Ministry of Health, 2005a).
- ActNow BC, the B.C. Government's cross ministry, partnership based, community focused health promotion platform that helps British Columbians make healthier lifestyle choices to reduce tobacco use, improve nutrition, increase physical activity, and promote healthy choices during pregnancy.



The development of *Healthy Aging through Healthy Living* has the potential to reduce the demand for health care services and reduce health care costs associated with a rapidly aging population. This document provides an overview and evidence to support five key priority issues that researchers have identified as crucial to healthy aging, namely:

- **Healthy Eating** - Healthy eating is critical for seniors to remain independent, maintain their quality of life, and reduce the risk of developing chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, respiratory diseases, and some cancers.
- **Injury Prevention** - Unintentional injuries (e.g. falls) involve expensive costs to the health care system as well as serious consequences to seniors themselves. By identifying the risk factors association with unintentional injuries and implementing preventive intervention strategies, it is possible to eliminate or minimize their impact.
- **Physical Activity** - Physical activity brings multiple benefits and significantly contributes to healthy aging. Physical inactivity is associated with premature death, chronic diseases, illness and disability, as well as reduced quality of life and independence.
- **Tobacco Cessation** – Tobacco use is the number one preventable cause of death and disease in Canada. Tobacco use is very costly to the health care system, with most of the cost attributed hospital care. Since many benefits of tobacco cessation happen shortly after quitting, potential short-term economic benefits are likely to be seen with tobacco cessation strategies targeting seniors.
- **Social Connectedness** - Social support contributes to higher quality of life, increased life satisfaction and enhanced mental and physical well being, while social isolation is associated with higher levels of depression and disability associated with chronic diseases, increased rates of premature death, and decreased overall well being.

The development of *Healthy Aging through Healthy Living* is an important component to fulfill the Ministry of Health's goal *to improved health and wellness for British Columbians*. Also, to prevent overcrowded hospitals and longer waiting lists for services, it is crucial for government to change its focus from an acute care model to a "health care" model with an increased emphasis on prevention (The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2004).

Healthy Aging through Healthy Living will also help achieve two of the five "Great Goals for a Golden Decade," namely:

Goal Two *Lead the way in North America in healthy living and physical fitness.*

Goal Three *Build the best system of support in Canada for persons with disabilities, special needs, children at risk, and seniors.*

In addition to helping sustain the health care system, implementing a healthy aging strategy will result in healthier, more active and productive seniors. To achieve these results, the B.C. Government will need the sustained efforts and participation of multiple stakeholders, including the health authorities and seniors' organizations. Finally, achieving healthy aging through lifestyle changes will come from a complex, long term and meaningful process that will empower seniors to make healthy choices to improve their health in safe environments where the design and social aspects encourage participation.