

Seniors – Your Vote Counts Candidates should earn your vote!

Senior citizens are the fastest-growing population in Ontario. Elections Canada reports that across Canada, we get out and cast our ballots at a higher rate than any other age group. As seniors continue to make up an increasing proportion of the population, our votes will make up an increasing proportion of the total votes cast.

Ontario Elections

On June 7th, Ontario elected a new provincial government, and we don't yet know the longer-term impact of this election on services to seniors.

The next election – for **municipal governments** – is scheduled for **Monday, October 22nd, 2018**. Municipal elections, although sometimes given less profile than federal and provincial ones, directly affect our ability as seniors to live independently in our own homes.

What role do municipalities play in providing supports to seniors?

Municipalities control or strongly influence a wide range of services needed to support seniors in our homes and communities, including:

- Public and community health, healthy ageing, and wellbeing;
- Emergency health services (for example, ambulance services);
- Affordable housing and safe and healthy neighbourhoods;
- Community support services, such as meals (Meals on Wheels™, wheels-to-meals, communal meals), sheltered or assisted housing services, adult day services, homemaking, and home maintenance;
- Transportation and mobility, including infrastructure, such as public transit, road design, and cross-walks and sidewalks (all safety concerns), as well as walkability of neighbourhoods and access to public spaces and facilities;
- Recreation and leisure, including local libraries, community recreation centres and parks, and programmes for active living and social connectedness;
- Settlement services (for recent immigrants);
- Public information and education about, for example, access to local services, safety, ageism, and elder abuse.

Funding for some of these services (for example, public health, housing, and transportation) comes from both provincial and municipal governments. In addition, some municipalities may fund some services solely from their own resources – but only if the councillors consider them to be local priorities. We have to let politicians know what those priorities are.

What can you do?

Seniors can make a large difference in election results – ***if we let candidates know what we want. We also need to vote!***

Voting is a concrete expression of citizenship and civic responsibility, and it is critical to maintaining needed services. It's not, however, the only way to participate. It's also important to speak up, ask questions, and add your voice and thoughts to public debates.



Even those who aren't eligible to cast a ballot (if, for example, they aren't Canadian citizens) can still provide input to their local election. They can attend meetings; talk with family members, friends and neighbours; and question the candidates who come to their door seeking their votes.

We all need to know and understand exactly what candidates are prepared to do to improve local services for Ontario's seniors. Candidates need our votes; they should have to earn them.

What's so special about this election?

The number of senior citizens in Ontario is growing, and growing rapidly. In 2016, there were 2.3 million seniors age 65+; by 2041 the projected number will be 4.6 million.¹ The proportion of seniors in Ontario's total population is also rising. In 1996, they made up 12.4%; by 2016, the proportion had risen to 16.7%; and by 2041, they are projected to make up 25% of the total^{2,3}

As seniors, we are living longer, but as we age, we increasingly experience more complex health conditions and needs. Unfortunately, many seniors lack family and friends to support them in their homes and communities. Such supports need to be replaced or supplemented by community programming.

Community support services are the preventive, first line of in-home care services in Ontario. Care Watch defines these services as a range of supportive social and health services aimed at helping people who need assistance with everyday activities so they can continue to live as independently as possible in the community. Examples include assistance with daily activities, Meals on Wheels™, and homemaking. Together, these services work to provide the care, safety, and security that frail and even less frail seniors need. When seniors don't have the services they need, they end up in emergency rooms, hospitals, and long-term care homes – or worse.

When all seniors have access to a comprehensive range of supportive home care services, everyone benefits. Ontario's seniors have a safe, supported, and protected environment, and our already stressed health care system makes better and more efficient use of its resources.

Every municipality will likely experience significant growth in this age group by 2025. Are municipalities ready to address seniors' needs?

What are Care Watch's priorities?

Care Watch is a senior citizen-led organization that advocates for high quality, affordable, and equitable home care and community supports for Ontario's elderly - from the consumer's perspective. We provide feedback on government policies to achieve a home care and community support system that fosters dignified ageing.

For the upcoming municipal elections, Care Watch has chosen to highlight three areas of municipal influence or control: affordable, safe housing; supportive community services; and accessible transportation.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Finance. Ontario Population Projections Update 2016-2041.

² Ontario Ministry of Finance. Ontario Population Projections Update 2016-2041.

³ Statistics Canada, 2017. *Focus on Geography Series, 2016 Census*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-404-X2016001., Ontario.

1. Affordable, safe housing –

Almost every community is experiencing a shortage of affordable housing. Seniors, especially single people and older women, are particularly vulnerable to housing insecurity.

There are several reasons for this shortage.

- An increasing proportion of seniors lack sufficient income to meet basic living needs. Single seniors and women are particularly vulnerable to poverty, despite government pension benefits such as CPP, OAS, and GIS.
- As communities redevelop and replace existing housing stocks, housing costs increase and there is a shortage of affordable rental units. Many seniors cannot afford the new housing costs and lack alternatives.
- As we age, many of us experience increasing difficulty living safely in the homes we have occupied for many years. Some of us need supportive services.

Generally, housing is considered affordable when households do not pay more than 30% of gross annual income (i.e., income before taxes) on accommodation. Unfortunately, housing costs across Ontario are among the highest in the country and many, especially those on fixed incomes, find housing increasingly unaffordable.

Municipal governments control the types, number, and location of housing units built in their communities. They have several tools to do so, including their land-use plans and by-laws, which determine how and where growth will occur.

A particularly useful planning by-law is called “inclusionary zoning”, which allows municipalities to require affordable housing units to be included in residential developments of 10 units or more, as well as the length of time that the unit costs charged by the developer must remain affordable. They can also waive some development restrictions and costs in exchange for inclusion of affordable housing and community services and infrastructure (such as parks).

Municipalities may also financially support and collaborate with community agencies to provide supportive housing, which aligns and coordinates community support services necessary to maintain health and safety (such as, personal care, housekeeping, social activities, crisis intervention, case management) with accommodation.

Citizens such as Hannah, Joseph, and Maria need housing that they can afford and supportive services that allow them to remain independent and safe while managing their limitations.

Questions for candidates:

- *What will you do to ensure that Council gives priority to meeting the needs of seniors for accessible, affordable, and safe housing?*
- *Across Ontario, many municipalities are dealing with housing shortages. If elected, will you ensure that builders are required to include affordable, accessible housing when the municipality is considering development plans?*

Lived Experience ...

Hannah has lived alone in the same two-story home for the past 40 years. At age 91, she is living with osteoporosis, diabetes, and a heart condition.

Hannah prides herself on her independence, but is finding it more difficult to get up and down the stairs and to maintain her property. She has slipped on the ice before, and with steep front steps that get icy in the winter, it is very hard for her to get out in colder weather.

Hannah would like to stay living in the same neighbourhood where she is close to friends, but housing and rental prices have increased. She is not sure she can afford to move.

Joseph, age 85, and Maria, age 83, are a married couple living in a one-bedroom unit on the 6th floor of an apartment building.

Two years ago, Joseph suffered a stroke, and now his mobility is limited. He struggles to get in and out of the bathtub, but they rent their apartment and cannot easily renovate their bathroom. Maria helps Joseph and in and out of the bathtub, but it is very hard on her back and she suffers from chronic pain.

With only one elevator in the building, Maria and Joseph’s children worry that paramedics would be unable to respond quickly in an emergency.

2. Supportive services in the community –

Ontario's seniors generally have access to a wide variety of community services that can allow them to remain at home and in their community, which is what most seniors say they prefer.

Community support services range from intensive in-home personal care to assistance with meals, meal delivery or communal meals, medication assistance, personal hygiene, light housekeeping and home maintenance, transportation services, counselling and assistance, and adult day programmes that offer activities such as art, gentle exercise, and various social events, and respite for caregivers.

Some agencies also provide supportive housing services, which include 24-hour on-site staffing in multi-unit buildings and crisis and emergency intervention, as well as behavioural supports for seniors, their families, and caregivers, who live and cope with dementia, mental illness, addictions, and other neurological conditions.

Specialized case management services also help clients navigate the health care and social services systems so that they have access to all the services they need.

These community support services are delivered by a variety of agencies, and while some also charge only nominal user fees, sustainable financial support from both provincial and municipal governments is essential.

Not all seniors in Ontario, however, have access to the same service; access to supportive services is highly dependent on where we live.

Neighbourhoods outside the downtown core of cities and also communities in rural and northern Ontario, which tend to have smaller populations, tend to have fewer and less comprehensive community support services. These municipalities may also have more difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified workers because of smaller economies of scale.

Citizens such as Kenny and Selma need access to primary care, dental services, mental health support, social support, and homemaking services such as laundry and meal preparation.

Does your municipality currently have programmes to meet these and similar needs? If not, which ones are missing? If so, what more needs to be done to connect people who need some assistance to supportive programmes?

Questions for candidates:

- *If elected, how will you promote provision of a comprehensive range of community support services for seniors?*
- *If elected, will you support funding to develop or expand local community support services?*

Lived Experience ...

Kenny is 56, single, and a former musician. He lives on the 2nd floor of a rooming house in a small city. English is not his first language. He had difficulty maintaining employment when he worked, and his jobs did not include employer benefits. He now subsists on limited government pensions and occasional public charity.

He has mental health issues and a history of evictions because of hoarding. He is overweight and experiences incontinence. He shares a bathroom and kitchen, and the other residents complain that he is dirty and smells. He is unable to prepare meals properly, and his teeth are deteriorating. His adult family is no longer a part of his life. He is socially isolated. He is not well connected to primary care and calls 911 when he falls ill.

Selma is in her 80s and has heart failure. She can generally manage her daily activities on her own, but standing for long periods to cook is increasingly difficult. Her hands shake when she lifts dishes from the oven, so she now prepares her meals in a toaster oven, which is not very satisfying. She had to give up driving and so cannot visit friends and family as much as she would like. She admits that she is lonely. She must also rely on neighbours for things like shopping and medical visits, which makes her feel like a nuisance to them.

Selma also admits that she is getting "a bit forgetful," and she sometimes misses taking her pills. Just last week, she couldn't find her way home after a short walk around the neighbourhood; frightened, she tried to call a neighbour to come to get her, but couldn't remember how to use her cell phone. Fortunately, a stranger helped her get home. She worries about what will happen to her.

3. Affordable, accessible transportation –

For most people, mobility – the ability to physically get around their home and community – is linked to personal freedom, self-image, and well-being. It is a key determinant of independence. Since most of us live in neighbourhoods designed around cars, we need to drive or be driven in order to conduct our daily lives and activities, such as food shopping, attending medical appointments, banking, and recreation and leisure, including visiting with friends and family. When mobility decreases – due to declining health, reduced physical or mental capacity, low or decreasing income, increasing expenses, or other reasons— individuals’ health and overall quality of life also often suffer. Equally important, our ability to continue to age in our homes and communities, to participate and contribute, becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Accessible transportation is crucial for minimizing social isolation, maintaining connections with the community, increasing access to health promotion and social programmes, and improving access to medical services. However, it continues to be a significant challenge for an increasing number of Ontario’s older adults, especially those who lack access to private cars; need to use mobility aids, such as wheelchairs or walkers; or travel with a companion or attendant. Many seeking transportation alternatives find that they are often scarce, inaccessible, inconvenient, and, for some, unaffordable.

Municipal governments provide for and facilitate mobility – from walking to public transit – via their land use and transportation plans and their neighbourhood design. They also have legislated responsibilities to provide accessible transportation, whether by conventional transportation services, such as busses provided by local transit agencies (e.g., Toronto Transit Commission, North Bay Transit, London Transit Commission) or licensed taxi or minibus shuttle systems.

In rural and northern communities, inter-city transportation is also crucial, to allow residents to access services that are not offered locally. Municipalities can play a significant role in ensuring inter-city transit.

For people who have difficulty using conventional transportation, some municipalities have services that offer rides to medical and dental appointments, rehabilitation and day programmes, or the grocery store, the bank, and social activities (e.g., Toronto’s Wheel Trans and Toronto Rides, or North Bay’s Para Bus.)

Accessible, transportation alternatives that support the mobility needs of people like Susan, Glen and Fatima would ensure their quality of life, and save downstream health and social costs by keeping them healthy while living at home.

Lived Experience ...

Susan is 74. She is a retired high school teacher and lives with her husband, 75, on a farm off the county road. The local town (population of 7,000) is 20 minutes away by car; the hospital is 60 minutes away. Her two adult children are no longer within driving distance.

Susan has early onset dementia and recently experienced a severe hip fracture as a result of a fall. She has not fully regained her ability to walk, toilet, or dress herself on her own.

Susan’s husband Glen has Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and failing eyesight. He no longer drives at night or in bad weather. Neighbours are currently helping them by doing grocery shopping and taking them to medical appointments.

Fatima, age 67, is a former midwife who arrived in Canada after 10 years in refugee camps, where she experienced many deprivations that eroded her health. She now lives with her granddaughter and her husband in Toronto’s north-east corner.

Since the family lacks a car and work long hours, Fatima travels alone on public transit to attend twice-weekly health promotion and ESL classes offered by her community association or to visit the nearest hospital clinic. These trips are difficult; the route requires almost half a mile of walking and then catching a bus to the subway. In winter, the 45-minute trip is especially hard because she no longer sees that well and is not as steady on her feet as she used to be. She worries about falling when she gets short of breath and dizzy.

Questions for candidates:

- *What will you do to ensure the municipality plans for accessible and affordable transportation services to assist seniors and others with mobility needs? What strategies will you seek to ensure affordability for everyone, including seniors?*