

Seniors and Social Isolation

As our volunteers and I knock on doors within our riding, we meet many seniors. This is not surprising as the population of our country is aging rapidly. In 2014, 15.6% of *Canadians* were aged 65 or older. [In Vancouver Granville the percentage of people over 65 was approximately 16% according to census data.](#) By 2030—in less than two decades—it is estimated that seniors will make up 23% of *Canadians*. Vancouver, with its seniors' friendly climate, there will be a 79% increase in population of local residents aged 65-74 and a 105% increase in those aged 75+ over the next 25 years. Clearly this will bring its own set of challenges that we must meet.

There are many issues facing seniors that we are told about. These issues include pensions and the cost of living on a fixed income; the challenges of affordability in general and of housing in particular. The unique challenges of those choosing to "age in place" and stay in their homes. How difficult it is to find rental housing and the fear many seniors face of eviction and the associated loss of security and long-established relationships. And above all else we hear about access to quality and timely healthcare and a need for pharmacare. Just how difficult it can be to access appropriate health care and supported living and what happens to individuals once in this system.

As your Independent Member of Parliament, I see my role as listening to these concerns and facilitating communication and action among the various local, provincial and federal agencies, not-for-profit organizations and academic institutions. I specifically address issues of [affordable housing](#) and [healthcare, including pharmacare](#), in other posts.

In this post, though, I want to focus on an issue for aging Canadians that I have become more familiar since becoming a Member of Parliament. That is the issue of isolation and loneliness. In my own culture the role of the 'elder' is venerated, and there is a central place and a role elders play as knowledge keepers and leaders. The elders are always looked after. What I did not realize is that outside of my own culture just how lonely and isolated some older adults feel. And particularly for seniors that live in big cities like ours. This is something I feel we need to talk much more about as a society and to do more to address. There has already been some very significant work done on identifying and addressing the issue of social isolation and loneliness that I would like to highlight in order to raise awareness.

A recent report by Vancouver Coastal Health found that over half of residents aged 65 or over have only three or fewer people in their social network they can confide in. Of all Metro Vancouver residents 25% report feeling alone more often than they would like with 14% report feeling lonely often or almost always. One in five don't know any neighbours well enough to ask for help. This is very sad and not acceptable.

In 2018, the City of Vancouver Seniors' Advisory Committee initiated a special project to investigate the causes and consequences of social isolation and loneliness among older adults, and to develop recommendations to help the City and other stakeholders reduce and, ideally, prevent these problems.

I had the honour of attending a presentation of that report at an event organized by the [Quadra-Granville Seniors Group](#) at the South Granville Seniors' Centre. The report, authored by Eddy M. Elmer, MA, can be found [here](#). If you want a quick overview, a slide show of the report can be downloaded [here](#).

It's important to read the whole report and see its conclusions in the context of that report, but for the purpose of this post, I will summarize some of the conclusions Mr. Elmer reached:

- Identifying lonely, and at risk seniors is a challenge but public data and non-traditional "gatekeepers" such as fire and policemen, homecare nurses and Canada Post employees may provide useful information that can be shared among services and service providers.
- Outreach can be improved by promoting knowledge sharing among services, developing neighbourhood teams, working with people who may be wary of social interaction, and finding seniors where they are through the development of programs in multi-tenant residential buildings.
- Services can be improved by focusing on isolation and loneliness and how organizational practices hinder or facilitate social connection. Share knowledge and collaborate among service providers by holding regular summits and using on-line discussion tools.
- Identify barrier solutions. Improve safety and walkability of streets. Improve the attractiveness and usability of parks, build "social design

features" into neighbourhoods and developments, reduce barriers to seniors use of transit, reduce barriers for ethnic minority seniors by preserving ethnic neighbourhoods and encouraging intergenerational living arrangements, promote the use of appropriate technology for seniors and caregivers, and work with the business community to show the mutual benefit to both business and community.

- Educate the public about isolation and loneliness and the importance of social networks, risk factors, warning signs and the impact on health. Use websites to facilitate easy location of relevant resources and research material.
- Build in an efficient feedback loop. Encourage basic research, collect good data, evaluate programs and share that information among service providers, academics and the general public.

My apologies to Mr. Elmer as I am sure my summary of his important work leaves out much and I do encourage you to look more deeply into his report.

While there a number of important issues for seniors that we must address, clearly, loneliness and isolation is very significant and it is time to have these conversations. As your Independent MP for Vancouver Granville, and in deep respect for those whom we owe so much, this is an issue I will embrace as we look to improve the quality of life for all our elders.