

Radical change needed to help seniors

Growing population could strain Ottawa health care system, major study warns

BY CHRIS COBB, OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 16, 2011

Radical, far-reaching changes are needed for Ottawa to cope with the health demands of its growing population of seniors, says a major new study released Friday.

Ottawa's Council on Aging says the number of seniors living in Ottawa - currently 100,000 - will more than double in the next 20 years and unless sweeping changes are made, the strain on an already overloaded health care system will become increasingly onerous and the quality of life for ailing seniors will worsen.

"When families and caregivers are taken into consideration, the number of people affected by this problem increases to between 500,000 and 700,000. The time to find and implement solutions is now."

The report, which is drawn from a health care forum held last October, addresses the overarching question: "How do we support seniors to manage their own health in their own homes and to age successfully in the community?"

Leaving the aged in hospital beds for want of alternative suitable accommodation is resulting in "hospital bed gridlock" that contributes to the spread of superbugs and enhancing the stereotype of seniors as "bed blockers," it says.

The fundamental problems the Council wants addressed are:

- The lack of support available to seniors in their homes.
- Lack of services available to families to support their parents.
- Challenges seniors have in finding primary health care.
- Shortage of community, rehabilitation and long-term care resources for seniors no longer in need of hospital care.
- More "senior friendly" hospital care.

The report is also recommending more emphasis on prevention, such as helping seniors keep fit and providing subsidized accommodation at existing retirement homes.

Council of Aging executive director Bernard Bouchard acknowledged Friday that theirs was not the first report calling for a new strategy and a re-direction of health care dollars.

"It's been years and years of the same story," he said. "What we need now are realistic choices for people to stay independent.

"The key is to focus on results not more reports. We are looking for significant changes in the way we do business."

The council is arguing for a shift in resources to the community where they can be accessed 24/7, he said.

"That would be a revolution," he said. "We have to do what we can to keep seniors at home, but we can't do that without realistic options."

The council will be issuing an update on its report in the late fall and is pledging to push hard to get its recommendations implemented.

This is the second major report on the elderly in the past month.

A study commissioned by the Champlain health authority overseeing local senior care urged the region's 20 hospitals to adopt "counter-ageism" strategies and promote more positive attitudes toward the elderly by monitoring how well they are looking after seniors.

Like Friday's Council on Aging report, the Eastern Ontario health authority's study also urged more emphasis on getting seniors back into their homes with community support and away from the current culture of long hospital stays.

Eastern Ontario has the longest nursing-home wait lists and the fastest-growing population of seniors in the province.

More than half the acute care hospital beds in the region are occupied by people over the age of 65.

Earlier this year, Eastern Ontario's first health care chief, Robert Cushman, said the province should shrink its health care bureaucracy and channel part of the money into improved outpatient and home care treatment for seniors.

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