

Position Statement

Nurses' Role in Promoting the Health and Well-being of Seniors

ARNBC Position:

- British Columbia's seniors founded, formed and built this province. As such, they contribute significant value and wisdom to our communities and deserve the highest quality of healthcare possible, as they age.
- Today's seniors are living longer and have much more complex health issues than previous generations. Registered nurses and nurse practitioners are key partners in supporting the seniors' population, especially the frail elderly who have unique, complicated health care needs.
- Some seniors continue to experience discrimination, unfair treatment or stereotyping based on their age. Registered nurses and nurse practitioners can play a significant role in challenging and mitigating these stereotypes.
- Nurses are usually the first, and most consistent, point of contact for patients, including seniors, whether that is in acute care, community health, residential care or home support ([Canadian Nurses Association \[CNA\], 2005](#)). As a result, registered nurses and nurse practitioners have valuable knowledge related to seniors' health, and have significant potential to use their expertise to promote, advocate and advance policy around seniors' health and healthcare.
- B.C. seniors should be a key participant in choosing where and how they would like to live.
- Safe, affordable and healthy housing is a requirement for good health ([Gaetz, 2012](#)), and the lack of affordable housing for low to moderate-income seniors in B.C is contributing to increasing issues of poverty, homelessness and premature placement into residential care ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, May 2015](#)).
- Home and community support are key areas in which nursing can promote healthy aging, reduce pressure on acute care services, and decrease care-giver burnout. As part of this, increased funding for home support is required to increase the number of health care professionals available to support older adults at home with chronic, acute and palliative needs. ([Cohen, 2012](#)).
- Health illiteracy combined with a fragmented health care system prevents a significant portion of B.C. seniors from properly navigating and accessing supports and services ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, March 2015](#)). Nurses can be a solution in addressing these issues by assisting in both health education and in serving as advocates in bringing together the health care services that a senior may need.
- Accessibility to services and supports impacts healthy aging for many seniors in B.C., particularly those who are marginalized. Registered nurses and nurse practitioners can help to mitigate some of these issues by being bold, and advocating for innovative strategies that promote patient-centered care, rather than provider-centered care.
- Our seniors who have helped to grow a wealthy, strong province do not all live in populous areas. Registered nurses and nurse practitioners can advocate to support aging in place in all contexts, recognizing the richness of the rural and remote contribution to our province.
- Registered nurses and nurse practitioners bring a wealth of expertise and leadership to discussions around seniors' health, and this vast knowledge must be tapped into by ARNBC, government and health authorities as planning moves forward.



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Background:

B.C. currently has the fastest growing rate of seniors in Canada ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, March 2015](#)). According to the B.C.'s Seniors Advocate, It is estimated that there are currently 820,000 seniors living within the province, and that number is expected to double in the next 20 years. Currently, half of B.C.'s seniors live on a median income of \$24,000 per year ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, May 2015](#)). In comparison, [Statistics Canada](#) reports that the median income in 2013 for 'all census families' was \$74,150 and \$38,490 for 'lone-parent families.'

Seniors are living longer than ever, and while this population continues to grow, there are limited options when it comes to managing their healthcare needs throughout the aging process, particularly in choosing where and how to age well. Seniors deserve the right to choose how and where they wish to age – whether at home with appropriate home and community supports, in a traditional assisted living or residential care facility, or utilizing a unique option such as shared space or renting an apartment that offers extra supports for living.

B.C.'s Health Minister recognizes that [proactive and flexible home support care helps seniors stay healthy and in their home longer](#) and there is substantial evidence about the health benefits and cost savings of early intervention and preventative home support services for seniors ([Hollander & Tessaro, 2001](#)). While seniors across B.C. universally feel that being able to age within their homes and communities is their first choice, they currently face significant individual and systemic barriers that inhibit them to do so, as community based supports as a whole, specifically home support services, have continued to decline over the years ([Cohen, 2012](#)). Less than two percent of B.C.'s senior population has access to these services - a lower rate than any other province in the country ([Cohen & Franko, 2015](#)). As a result, many seniors are placed into residential care or assisted living prematurely, despite not having the need for such intensive care. It is estimated that 5% to 15% of seniors in residential care could still be living in the community, either at home or in assisted living, if adequate home or health care supports were available ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, May 2015](#)).

According to the B.C. Seniors' Advocate, currently, 93 percent of B.C.'s seniors live independently. For the majority of seniors who are homeowners, home maintenance costs such as utilities, home insurance and repairs create significant financial hardship. Similarly, many seniors who rent are in need of more financial support to cover the increasing rental costs across the province.

While financial supports such as the Home Owner Grant, the SAFER program (Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters) and the Property Tax Deferral Program currently exist, subsidization over the years has not increased to reflect the significant rise in rents and housing costs ([CCPA, 2013](#)). As a result, current subsidy programs are not adequate in ensuring that housing is affordable for low and moderate- income seniors. More importantly, many seniors are unaware and unable to access such supports because of health illiteracy and difficulties with navigating health and social services ([Office of the Seniors Advocate, March 2015](#)). Nurses see the downstream effects of inadequate financial support every day, when seniors are forced to forgo basic needs such as housing, food, transportation and prescription drugs. From the outset of their education, through their career, it is important for nurses to have the knowledge and skills needed to support seniors in navigating through the complex health care system.



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Several innovative strategies to promote healthy aging have been noted across the country. Notably, the [introduction of primary care seniors clinics or incorporating paramedics in community care](#) are examples of innovative strategies that suggest there is potential for nursing to explore and engage in new models of care delivery to improve seniors' health through a patient-centered approach, rather than provider-centered approach.

Nurses have a long-standing history of advocating for strategies that promote healthy aging, preventative health measures for seniors, community supports that are accessible and affordable, and programs and services that speak directly to the senior population.

This was evidenced in July 2015 during a Policy Forum hosted by the BC Coalition of Nursing Associations (BCCNA) in response to the Ministry of Health's policy papers which engaged nurses from all four professional designations, along with government, and patients in a solutions-oriented approach to addressing issues such as improving seniors' health and healthcare.

Recommendations

All registered nurses and nurse practitioners working with the seniors population in both acute and community care should (or should continue to) educate themselves on the financial and social services and supports currently available in B.C to better equip themselves in helping seniors navigate the complex health care system.

ARNBC will work with the Office of the Seniors Advocate, health authorities and registered nurses and nurse practitioners to advocate for, and discuss how nursing could lead, an increase in specific seniors' programs such as gero-nutrition and increased health literacy in communities.

Working with registered nurses and nurse practitioners, ARNBC will continue to engage in advocating for promising practices by engaging in dialogue with government when given the opportunity to do so. BC RNs and NPs are encouraged to engage with ARNBC and collaborate with each other to ensure the nursing voice is unified and heard through platforms such as communities of practice, specialty groups, and engaging in ARNBC's advocacy campaigns.

ARNBC will work with the Office of the Seniors Advocate to discuss next steps for seniors' housing and how nursing can inform and engage in the planning of seniors housing programs and initiatives. This includes exploring how to support all seniors, from those who are equipped to live at home to those who are frail and living in residential care.

ARNBC will continue to work with stakeholders to identify how nursing can collaborate with other health care providers (e.g.: paramedics, pharmacists, occupational therapists, etc.) to bridge the gaps in community support for seniors.



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Conclusion

Seniors in B.C. continue to face considerable barriers to healthy aging. Such barriers include unaffordable housing, lack of accessibility in financial support, lack of awareness of existing financial and social services and inadequate home and community support. Nurses have a significant role to play in mitigating these issues, and can do so by leveraging existing resources and through exploring innovative and promising practices.

Specifically, nurses can ensure seniors and informal caregivers are equipped with knowledge regarding support and social services, be able to understand, assess and refer seniors to appropriate supports, and continue to advocate for promising practices by utilizing opportunities through several platforms.

References & Further Reading

- As a first step, ARNBC encourages all Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners to browse and explore SeniorsBC.ca in order to learn more about current existing supports and services: [Seniors Guide 2012](#)
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2013). [Seniors Fact Sheet: Affordable Housing Options for Seniors Living in BC.](#)
- Cohen, M. (2012). [Caring For BC's Aging Population: Improving Health Care For All.](#)
- Cohen, M. & Franko, J. (2015). [Living Up To the Promise: Addressing the High Cost of Underfunding and Fragmentation in BC's Home Support System.](#)
- Gaetz, S. (2012). [The Real Cost of Homelessness: Can We Save Money By Doing the Right Thing?](#) Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press.
- Hollander, M. & Tessaro, A. (2001). [Evaluation of the Maintenance and Preventive Function of Home Care.](#)
- Government of Canada. (2015). [Thinking about aging in place.](#)
- Office of the Seniors Advocate. (May 2015). [Seniors' Housing in B.C.](#)
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- Ontario Human Rights Commission. (n.d). [Ageism and age discrimination.](#)
- Statistics Canada. (2015). [Summary Tables.](#)

