

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Senior Care

By Chris Ballard, MPP

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One of the issues that concerns me most, and always has, is the care we take of our seniors. Whether it be my mother who lives locally in the same house she purchased with my father in 1954, or her senior friends who still live at home ? they all want to live independent and safe lives for as long as they possibly can. We need to honour that wish and ensure they can do so.

The budget underscored for me what I have heard so emphatically from you?that is we need to do more to care for our seniors and to support them in practical ways.

An element of the budget that will make a real difference is the self-directed funding program that seniors will be eligible for to assist with the costs of living independently. If you are a senior and own or rent your house, you will be eligible for support in paying costs related to snow plowing/shoveling, lawn cutting, housekeeping and other routine chores.

I think this is a tremendous support for those who want to and are able to stay independent in maintaining their home, whether that home be a house, an apartment or a condominium.

The Healthy Home Program will allow up to \$750 annually for any eligible seniors led home for maintenance.

There has been a lot of coverage of our previous OHIP+ announcement for those under 25. I hope as much or more attention is paid to the OHIP+ for seniors' initiative.

In his budget, Minister Sousa committed to eliminating the annual deductible and the copay for drugs under the Ontario drug program. This means that every person 65 and above will receive free pharmacare.

These two small, but significant programs will make a difference to the everyday lives of seniors in Newmarket and Aurora. They also build on the previous funding announcements to build more capacity in home and community care programs that deliver nursing and therapy services.

There are over two million seniors in Ontario and that number is expected to grow to 4.5 million over the next 20 years.

Overwhelmingly, seniors who are able have indicated they want to stay in their homes for as long as possible. Isolation is one of the issues that is of grave- concern for those of us who have an elder living independently. That is why we have decided to invest more in the seniors' active living centres.

We have two tremendous facilities locally ? the Aurora and the Newmarket Seniors' Centres. They are both at capacity for programs now and I look forward to any opportunities to help expand these services. There is an increasing demand for additional services. For example, I recently spoke with a group working to establish a Chinese seniors active living centre in Newmarket. For many seniors in this community, language is a barrier and isolation is a concern. The town is working with them and it is encouraging that these groups are continuing to conduct programs such as Tai Chi and walking on a volunteer basis. I support their efforts to grow and offer more.

We have heard a lot about those who need home and community care. While not everyone needing service is a senior, a significant portion of them are. We know that in many cases, just a little supportive care can make the difference in maintaining an independent lifestyle. For those who need nursing services and/or therapy this is good news indeed.

Everyone should be concerned though about those who are too frail to continue living independently. While not everyone needing, or in, long-term care is a senior, the population is primarily seniors and their level of medical need is getting more severe every year. Minister Sousa specifically emphasized in the budget a commitment to developing 5,000 more beds in the next four years and a total of 30,000 beds over the next 10 years. This is what the sector has been asking for and what is needed. However, we now need to encourage those long-term care operators to come on board and bring forward their plans for accessing these new beds.

My family and I have some serious discussions ahead of us on how we continue to support my mother and keep her safe. I'm sure these are discussions and decisions a lot of you have already had, or are planning to do so soon. I'd like to see us turn our attention to transit challenges that face seniors, dental programs and how we can build more community support.

Did you know that over 10 per cent of the population of Newmarket is over the age of 65? More recent figures for Aurora tell us that over 15 per cent of the population is over 65 years old? This is the generation that built Ontario and our towns. I am pleased to be part of a government that recognizes, and is committed, to support them as much as possible.

As always, I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. My email is: cballard.mpp.co@liberal.ola.org. I look forward to hearing from you.