



## **BRIEF SUBMITTED BY THE LITTLE BROTHERS ORGANIZATION**

Presented to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

House of Commons of Canada

As part of the call for submissions to contribute to its study  
ADVANCING INCLUSION AND QUALITY OF LIFE FOR CANADIAN SENIORS

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Little Brothers organization is pleased to take the opportunity offered by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities to submit a brief summarizing its concerns and recommendations. Little Brothers would like to contribute to the Committee's study on the way the Canadian government can support vulnerable seniors today while preparing for the diverse and growing seniors' population of tomorrow.

For 55 years now, Little Brothers has been dedicated to ending the isolation of individuals aged 75 and over who are vulnerable and alone. Active in 11 regions of Quebec and supported by 2,000 dedicated volunteers, Little Brothers welcomes and supports 1,400 older seniors, regardless of their condition, until the end of their lives. With an average age of 85, including 26% over 90 years of age, these seniors are supported for about seven years, but sometimes over 10 years. Most of them live in poverty, and nearly a third suffer from complex health problems.

We therefore wish to take this opportunity to be the voice of those who have no voice.

# 1. THE PRIORITY OF LITTLE BROTHERS: BREAK THE ISOLATION OF OLDER SENIORS

## POVERTY, A PROBLEM OF SYSTEMIC FINANCIAL INSECURITY

As recently chronicled by the National Seniors Council, one of the greatest risk factors for social isolation is poverty and lack of access to resources.<sup>1</sup> Yet, nearly half of seniors live on less than \$20,000 per year, giving them an income below the poverty line. This financial insecurity is systemic since a large number of today's seniors did not have the opportunity to save for their retirement, having worked in low-wage jobs all their lives. Some even worked rarely or not at all, especially women. Therefore, even while collecting the Old Age Security (OAS) pension and the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), they do not reach the poverty line. For a large number of seniors, especially women, the Quebec Pension Plan (QPP) is not an additional source of income.

Given this situation, **it is imperative to provide a larger base income for the seniors whose isolation we seek to break by increasing the OAS or GIS pensions. Decent living conditions free from the concerns of daily survival are needed to enable seniors to participate in society. This approach would help lift them out of poverty and fight their isolation.**

## ISOLATION: DIFFERENT REALITIES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Social isolation is a complex phenomenon that affects various groups of seniors differently, even if some of the risk factors affect them all in a similar way. Although more and more research on seniors and social isolation is being done, several avenues of research are most important to deepening our knowledge of the subject, including that of gender analysis. This preventive approach gives priority to solutions that are adapted to the needs and realities of men and women, among other benefits. It provides a better picture of the different situations experienced by men and women, enabling the selection of policies, programs and interventions best suited to them.

The conditions in which men and women age are not the same. Women live longer than men, and as of age 85, 36.6% of them live alone, compared with 21.8% of men. Men in this age group continue to live predominantly in a couple (46.2%), compared with only 10.4% of women.<sup>2</sup>

Many older seniors are economically disadvantaged women. There is a significant gap between the incomes of the two sexes, partly because of their different paths in life: the majority of senior women have been in the labour market for only short or sporadic periods. These women have almost no income from private pension plans, retirement savings plans (RRSPs) or private insurance, which increases their economic insecurity.

In addition, researchers studying the situation of senior men argue that gerontology has been feminized, making that field primarily suited to the realities of women, as they are the major users of services and

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<sup>1</sup> THE NATIONAL SENIORS COUNCIL OF THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, *Who's at Risk and What Can Be Done About It? A Review of the Literature on the Social Isolation of Different Groups of Seniors*, 2013–2014, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> STATISTICS CANADA, *Living arrangements of seniors: Families, households and marital status, 2011 Census of Population*, pp. 2–3.

programs for seniors. As a result, these services tend to be designed for women and tailored to their way of thinking and behaving. Furthermore, men use and require less assistance, because they consider such help a sign of weakness. They therefore minimize their problems and their suffering.

**Consequently, it would be worthwhile to conduct a gender analysis in order to build programs tailored to seniors. Even more important would be the development of awareness programs for professionals and the public on this subject.**

## **2. HIGHLIGHTING AND SUPPORTING SENIORS' SOCIAL AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

### ACTIVE AGING OR AGING WITH DIGNITY?

Society currently values the active participation of seniors, particularly through activities, citizen involvement, volunteerism, job retention, etc. This concept of “active” aging is certainly appropriate for some cohorts of seniors, who can remain active, but implies in reality the exclusion of those who can no longer stay active. The realization of their limitations is therefore amplified by current measures aimed at active aging to which they do not or no longer have access.

The excessive value placed on “active” and “productive” seniors, and their potential or past contributions, produces discussions, policies and programs that take into consideration only their tangible contribution. To stop doing things is to no longer contribute to something and therefore to be worthless and undeserving of life. We must break away from the transactional logic in which a person's value is measured by their “contribution” or “usefulness.” We must learn or relearn to respect people for who they are, not only for what they do or have done.

By watching and listening to other things, to the spirit of solidarity with vulnerable individuals and to shared happiness, we see that moments of joy and future ambitions are still possible. Enthusiasm can be reborn and brighten the sometimes drab daily life of isolated seniors.

*For example, since Little Brothers was founded, we have organized holiday stays for the Elder Friends of the Little Brothers. These holidays take place in adapted facilities and in the company of a group of volunteers. They provide enjoyment and moments of shared togetherness, at the pace of the seniors who take part. These holidays offer an escape from the daily grind, a feeling of restored freedom and a sense of normalcy that has been lost over the years. They also offer, beforehand, opportunities to hope and to anticipate a happy event and, afterward, opportunities to remember those moments of shared happiness. The effect of these three to seven days of annual holidays therefore lasts for months.*

**Although some older seniors are no longer active or in good health, we invite stakeholders to acknowledge these people with dignity, to recognize that they have dreams and passions, that they have a future ahead of them and that they have the right to be considered full members of our society. By focusing our attention on that future, on their potential, however limited it may be, we are revitalizing seniors and creating new spaces for interacting with them, true bridges of humanity and solidarity. We want to foster this perspective, and that is why we recommend developing an awareness program or campaign.**

## ACCESS TO SERVICES BEYOND THE TELEPHONE AND THE WEB

In the context of adapting environments to the needs of seniors, we cannot ignore the increasing difficulty certain cohorts of seniors have in communicating with public services owing to existing predispositions, such as functional illiteracy, or to disabilities that arise, like vision or hearing loss, rheumatism, tremors, etc.

We cannot ignore the prevalence of technological solutions and automated systems to guide “patients” and “clients” through all the services offered to them, “to better serve them,” they are told.

These solutions may be appropriate for young seniors or active seniors. They may prefer to go to the automatic teller rather than wait in line at the counter and make their purchases or manage the services they use online rather than make time-consuming in-person appointments.

Older seniors who left the labour market before computers, the Internet and email were introduced may not be comfortable with or even able to use these technologies. If, in addition, they have few or no friends or relatives who can help them become familiar with these technologies or use them on their behalf, these platforms may be the equivalent of texts written in ancient Greek, representing further barriers to seniors’ use of those services.

Telephone systems are also obstacles at times since not all seniors have their own phone, as we see among our groups of older vulnerable seniors. Given their high rates of poverty and having no one to call, seniors sometimes see a phone as an unnecessary expense, particularly those who live in seniors’ residences. Exercising individual rights sometimes implies contacting authorities or services, which can be made difficult by the complexity of telephone systems and the inability to simply hold a handset and dial the 1, and then the 3, etc., or even to properly hear the person at the other end of the line.

Digital solutions are here for good and offer many benefits and efficiencies that people appreciate. **However, we call upon the authorities and large companies that market these solutions to design and maintain parallel access points that enable persons with disabilities to access the services intended for them and to ensure individualized, in-person access to services so that, despite advanced age and growing obstacles, vulnerable seniors can continue to exercise their rights.**

## CHANGING THE GAME: ADDRESS LIVING ENVIRONMENTS

To change attitudes about aging and to counter ageism, we must make a broad sociological assessment and create a long-term strategic action plan based on collaboration between government bodies and key civil society stakeholders. **It is important that all segments of civil society and all generations engage actively, participate and collaborate in this review process to create true intergenerational solidarity.** To do this, we must recognize the differences between all these segments of society and determine the types of bridges that can be built to facilitate various interactions between them.

Based on its experience in the field, Little Brothers believes that action should centre first on seniors’ living environments. Living environments (private homes, seniors’ residences, private or public nursing homes) are the places where seniors with access to quality services and humane care may age safely, feel at home and continue to feel like members of the community. Ignoring the realities of the very old can lead to discriminatory behaviours or ageist attitudes and may be the root cause of abuse and mistreatment.

The first step would therefore be to create a movement in society to actively mobilize people who interact with seniors: family members, relatives, volunteers, program managers, attendants in institutions, home care helpers, community partners and other stakeholders. The objective would be to raise awareness about the differences between the different cohorts of seniors, but also to encourage social and citizen involvement in order to produce tangible intergenerational solidarity.

The isolation of seniors can be eliminated only if everyone contributes: family members who lack time to visit their senior relatives, neighbours who hesitate to assist a senior neighbour, younger seniors who suffer from loneliness and who could be put into action visiting other isolated seniors, and schools or workplaces that could contribute to a movement to support seniors, all inspired by a trend similar to that of Quebec's "energy cubes."

Many are familiar with the "energy cubes" campaign launched by Pierre Lavoie that is making students, classes, entire schools and all their families get active in a race to collect energy cubes that represent a certain amount of physical activity. This campaign focuses on fun and healthy competition and has been able to spur Quebec families to pursue physical fitness through repeated daily actions that seem trivial at first glance, but when added together, make a big difference. The iconic "Grand Défi Pierre Lavoie" challenge, with its closing celebration at the Olympic Stadium attended by thousands of people, bears a positive, supportive message that entices everyone to participate.

**We recommend launching a broad social mobilization initiative in Canada based on earning "affection cubes" or "empathy cubes." This movement would promote a competition to accumulate time spent with seniors.**

Why not turn all those moments that everyone shares with older relatives, or that they could share with other seniors, into a great wave of affection and empathy toward our seniors whom we claim to support?

With a charismatic spokesperson, such as Louis Garneau, and other prominent Canadians as part of the movement, we could spark acts of kindness and new friendships.

### **3. HELPING SENIORS AGE IN PLACE**

#### COLLABORATION AND COMPLEMENTARY SERVICES FOR SENIORS

It is important for us to consider the whole person, their individuality, their full potential and their uniqueness in order to support them and ensure they can age in the home of their choice. This cannot be done without considering the emotional and relational aspects of aging in place, especially when the person does not have a family network to maintain their socialization. In the absence of such support, aging in place in fact becomes a form of confinement that can lead to depression or further mental health problems.

**It is therefore crucial that the planning and coordination of home care be systematic and formally consider seniors' emotional environment. Stakeholders involved in this planning must ensure that they have a good understanding of the local and community resources in the area. Service delivery should be supplemented with warm, supportive care such as that provided by community organizations like Little Brothers.**

## 4. SOCIAL INNOVATION

### CONCERTED NATIONAL MOBILIZATION TO FIGHT SOCIAL ISOLATION

To promote the participation, mobilization and collaboration of local, regional, provincial and national stakeholders in adapting living environments to an aging population and fighting the social isolation of seniors, **we propose the establishment on a national scale of a Canadian adaptation of the “MONALISA” (national mobilization against the social isolation of seniors) approach developed in France in 2012.** We encourage you to consult the Internet site <https://www.monalisa-asso.fr> [in French only] for additional details on this initiative. This nationwide and innovative movement is being built through unprecedented partnerships between civil society and government bodies with a common goal: to make a concrete commitment to counter the social isolation of seniors through a genuine strategy of coordinated action.

**What could this initiative look like in Canada?** This approach would involve the nationwide mobilization of local and regional movements in the fight against the social isolation of seniors in Canada through various means, including the following:

- The creation of a caring or kindness charter, signed by government bodies and national, regional and local organizations that work with seniors, in order to formalize their concrete commitment to mobilize. This initiative would enable true bridges and partnerships for coordinated action to be built, at both the local, regional and provincial, and national levels.
- The collaboration of stakeholders in the movement (government and community organizations) at the provincial and regional levels.
- The establishment of a national committee to set the direction and identify the resources needed to support this effort.
- The optimization of the current structure by integrating government bodies and community organizations already in place for a multidimensional movement.
- The creation of “citizen teams” led by associations, public institutions or a regional community in order to make a concrete commitment to the fight against loneliness and isolation.
- The integration of care into socialization (social life) as a way of evaluating this initiative.

We believe this new turn toward concerted and committed action to fight the isolation of seniors is indispensable in creating healthy, safe and welcoming environments for seniors of all ages.

## 5. FUNDING AND THE ISSUE OF CONTINUITY

The current trend in government funding is mainly to enter into service agreements for short-term projects with community organizations that work with seniors. These contractual commitments are made as part of programs governed by specific terms and conditions, such as those of the New Horizons for Seniors Program (NHSP). These agreements are signed for one-, two- or three-year terms and require community organizations to submit one or more innovative keystone projects while also being

collaborative and complementary with community partners, without ever ensuring the continuation of the activities beyond the end of the contract. This practice unfortunately has major consequences that we would like to highlight.

First of all, the burden of continuing the project submitted under these programs must be borne entirely by the applicant organizations. Community organizations are asked to ensure the continued funding of these projects by seeking out partners or other types of funding. This requirement threatens the financial stability of these community organizations and their workers, as well as initiatives that have proven themselves and had a genuine social impact on the senior population. In the long run, this withdrawal by the government results in substantial losses, both social and economic. These losses include the loss of creative and innovative forces mobilized around effective keystone projects, collaborative and complementary links created between the partners, and experienced people within organizations.

As organizations are funded for only certain activities and projects, they must search for other sources of funding to maintain the set of activities that relate to their mission and to cover general expenses. Under these conditions, the search for funding and accountability is added to the organization's administrative tasks: more time and resources are devoted to completing funding applications, assessments and reporting requirements. These reporting requirements are proliferating because they concern specific activities rather than all activities, and they must be carried out for each funder, whose requests are sometimes imprecise and modified without warning.<sup>3</sup> This administrative burden hampers Quebec community organizations that have few salaried employees and whose working conditions are generally poorer than those in the rest of Canada.<sup>4</sup>

**Consequently, it is essential that the Canadian government ensure base and long-term funding for coordinated actions involving the various partners and for successful projects so that we can continue our efforts with seniors in a sustainable way and have a greater social and economic impact.**

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<sup>3</sup> Briand, L., et al. *Une étude exploratoire de l'influence des bailleurs de fonds sur les missions de deux organismes dans le secteur du logement communautaire*, Montreal, CRISES, 2011, p. 38 [in French only].

<sup>4</sup> Didier, S., et al. *Pour que travailler dans le communautaire ne rime plus avec misère : enquête sur les avantages sociaux dans les organismes communautaires*, Montreal, 2005, p. 4 [in French only].

## **CONCLUSION (SUMMARY OF BRIEF)**

We have presented the issues that we consider to be priorities as regards the situation of vulnerable older seniors, as well as avenues for reflection and courses of action to rally the greatest number of people to counter the problem of isolation, which is unfortunately growing. We have made ourselves spokespersons for the seniors who we work with and who lack the resources to express their views and their needs.

We have shone the spotlight on the following:

- the importance of the government ensuring a more substantial base income for seniors by enhancing the OAS or GIS pensions in order to combat poverty and isolation;
- the importance of distinguishing between the different cohorts that currently make up the senior population, as well as the life path specific to each gender;
- the importance of treating seniors with dignity, regardless of their status, to reflect their past and current existence, and of considering the emotional component in care planning for aging in place; and
- the technological difficulties, or even digital exclusion, that older seniors experience and the need to adapt access methods to their needs.

We have recommended the following innovative methods for generating social action:

- a broad public call to action based on "affection cubes" and the promotion of a competition to collect time spent with seniors; and
- a broad national coordination and mobilization to fight isolation (similar to the MONALISA project).

We have asked the following:

- that project-based funding be reviewed to ensure the continuity of coordinated, meaningful actions.

We are very pleased to have been able to give a voice to the seniors whom we cherish and who will be among us for many years to come.

TO REACH US

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## **WHO ARE THE LITTLE BROTHERS?**

With an existing network in 11 administrative regions of Quebec, Little Brothers is a non-profit organization that now has 15 teams that depend on the commitment of nearly 2,000 volunteers, themselves often seniors, and many partners in the field. For more than 55 years we have been working with the most vulnerable seniors in Quebec—those who are aged 75 years and over and who are socially isolated, that is, seniors who have no family or network offering emotional support.

Our mission is to address the key health problem of social isolation by welcoming and supporting older seniors living alone in order to surround them with a committed and faithful family until the end of their lives. We carry out our mission by recognizing the unique and irreplaceable nature of every human being; by appealing to human values of dignity and respect for ideas, choices, beliefs and values; by providing free, loyal and committed care; and by leaving room for dreams.

Our 1,400 Elder Friends (isolated seniors) are on average 85 years old, and about 80% of them receive the OAS and GIS pensions as their sole source of income. Our commitment is to be with them forever, and we often support a person for 5, 10 or 15 years! We are life companions, almost “caregivers” for those who cannot count on anyone other than Little Brothers. We are well placed to understand their difficulties and their hopes and to amplify their voice.

Our work is a commitment that lasts a lifetime; it is the guiding principle of all our programs and all of our actions. The support we provide depends heavily on the lasting pairing of each isolated senior with a volunteer, which creates a meaningful relationship in the life of the Elder Friend and, yes, that of the volunteer.

We also offer specialized support to Elder Friends suffering from complex problems; pay visits at home, in residential centres, to nursing homes or in the hospital; lead outings; offer holiday stays in our properties in Oka and Lake Saint-Joseph; host parties and large celebrations; coordinate intergenerational programs; deliver the Quality of Life program and the Senior Wishes program; and provide end-of-life support.

Little Brothers benefits from the warm support and generosity of the general public. The public joined us in our first awareness campaign: “Love them for life.” This movement of solidarity with older seniors, which Little Brothers launched last May, was a resounding success. More than 7,575 people across Quebec joined in and signed the Little Brothers declaration of love for isolated and vulnerable seniors. The popularity of this campaign showed that ending the isolation of seniors is a matter of public interest.