

Challenges Faced by Senior Women with a Focus on the Factors Contributing to Their Poverty and Vulnerability

Thank you for this opportunity to submit to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women about the challenges faced by senior women in the Hamilton community.

YWCA Hamilton is one of 32 member associations in 9 provinces, 2 territories and more than 300 communities across the country that serve women, girls and families. We are committed to improving the physical and emotional well-being of all Canadians via an intersectional approach that is inclusive of women, non-binary, gender fluid and trans individuals. We operate as a large multi-service organization that provides services for seniors, children and youth, employment and training, health and wellness, transitional and second stage housing and much more.

There were more than 92,000 people aged 65 and over living in Hamilton in 2016, slightly more than half of whom are women. In fact, 51,805 women over 65 and 41,100 men resided in Hamilton, according to the 2016 Census.

At YWCA Hamilton, we serve senior women in several different ways. Our Active Living Centre 55+ offers classes that encourage social connections and improved physical and mental wellbeing. We also fundraise to provide programs to newcomer women. And through our Seniors Peer Connector Program, we have partnered with six other local agencies to address the issue of seniors isolation under the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan (HSIIP), which is funded by Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program.

Through our work with HSIIP, we know that of the 92,000 seniors in Hamilton, nearly 12,000 of them are considered isolated. That's 13%. Thirteen per cent of seniors in our community don't have adequate access to the basic necessities of life like food, medication, transportation to and from health and social services. This alone puts a tremendous strain on emergency and social services across the city.

The City of Hamilton expects the number of seniors in our community to double by 2031, making it the fastest growing segment of the population. And women are living longer than men.

Statistic Canada reports that "senior women living alone reported fewer people whom they felt close to than their counterparts living in couples." People with a lack of supportive social networks have a 60% increase in the risk of cognitive decline and a greater risk of depression. We've also learned that more women than men are isolated due to an intersection of several different factors listed below.

Affordable Housing:

- Hamilton is experiencing a critical lack of affordable housing and homelessness rates in the city are at unprecedented levels.
- An estimated 300-400 women are currently homeless in our community and for the first time ever we are seeing visibly homeless women on the street.
- We are also seeing an increase in the numbers of homeless senior women accessing our Transitional Living Program.



- Violence in the home, poverty and widowhood all contribute to why a woman might leave her home. If she can't afford to secure affordable housing, she might end up living on the street.

Transportation:

- According to Statistics Canada, 67% of senior men living in high-density cities reported that they had driven their vehicle in the previous month, compared with 36% of senior women.
- Many women who do not drive rely on services like Darts, which is not always convenient.
- Not having easy access to transportation is a barrier to accessing food, health care, social services, social connections.

Caregiver:

- According to Statistics Canada women made up just over half (57%) of people aged 45 or older who were providing care to a senior, a quarter of whom were seniors themselves. Ten per cent were over the age of 75.
- A woman who is the sole caregiver for a loved one is more likely to become isolated, to become physically inactive, to engage in unhealthy habits like smoking, and to eat an unhealthy diet.
- Women who are isolated due to becoming the sole caregiver lack meaningful social connections which can also contribute to depression and cognitive decline.

Income:

- Women make less money than men: 79 cents for every dollar a man makes. If she's a woman of colour, she'll earn 60 cents.
- Many senior women worked inside the home and did not collect a paycheque, which means they are eligible to collect less money than their male counterparts through the Canadian Pension Plan.
- If a woman is not collecting enough money to cover food and living expenses, her living situation becomes precarious, she will not eat regularly or properly, her health will decline.

Newcomers:

- Newcomer senior women face additional challenges accessing transportation, health and social services, social connection, due to language and cultural barriers. In our community we've had no ongoing investments in women's-only programs and this needs to change.

The City of Hamilton is addressing seniors issues through Hamilton's Plan for an Age-Friendly City, as well as through the Seniors Advisory Committee, which is led by three city councillors: two men and one woman. The Committee itself is comprised of 19 people, 11 of whom are women. But nowhere do we see a gender-based solution to any issues facing seniors, even though those issues can be disparately different for men and women.

In fact, in researching this brief, I could not find any statistics that speak to many of the issues we know are specific to senior women. We know it because we work with them every day, help them access those basic life necessities like food and medicine and eventually help to create bridges to social services and



community. But we have neither the staff nor the funding to launch a full-scale study that will support what we know anecdotally. To put it simply, specific issues facing senior women have not been adequately researched or recorded.

Funding dollars tend to pour into hospitals and healthcare to treat women after they've developed chronic illnesses or require short and long-term care. But where are the investments in prevention programs that would keep women healthy? We're not providing them with services and supports they need to stay healthy and in their own homes.

Funding for senior women programming is piecemeal: we receive funding for projects and individual programs. But we lack consistent, long-term, solution-based funding that will allow us to make real, sustainable change. We require long-term, consistent funding to study and record how women age differently from men and what programs and services are necessary to help them live meaningful lives.

Solutions to the problem include implementing prevention programs that address isolation, access to food, medication, transportation, social services and social networks, as well as financial literacy. We need to address the lack of affordable housing for seniors, provide support for caregivers and continue investments in liveable, accessible neighbourhoods.

This is a complex issue with many different aspects to consider. We've chosen to focus only on a few, knowing our partners would focus on others.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important and necessary conversation.

Respectfully,



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CEO, YWCA Hamilton

