

Brief on the impact of COVID-19 on seniors

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

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The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) represents the largest bargaining unit at Canada Post and a total of over 61,000 proud members who care about the future of the Crown Corporation.

CUPW has developed a bold and inspiring vision for the future of the public postal service, making it a source of inspiration, pride, and confidence for everyone. Our *Delivering Community Power* campaign fits perfectly into a just, green, and inclusive post-COVID recovery.

In addition to our vision to achieve net zero-emission targets and expand Canada Post's services to increase federal visibility across its network of more than 6,100 post offices, CUPW is proposing that letter carriers take part in a check-in program for seniors and vulnerable people who wish to remain safely in their own homes.

Along with other major industrialized nations, Canada's population will age in the years to come. By 2030, Statistics Canada points out that almost a quarter of the population will be over age 65, compared with 15.3% in 2013. [1] Throughout the decades to come, what might be termed "older seniors", the population aged 80 and above, will explode to reach nearly 5 million by 2063, compared to only 1.4 million in 2013. [2]

As the population ages, and given the pressure faced by long-term care homes during the pandemic and their subsequent shortfalls, the profile of seniors is likely to change: in the future, as is the case today, seniors are likely to want to remain in their own home as long as possible, and they are also likely to have had fewer children than previous generations. Moreover, compared to previous generations, fewer children may be able to care for their aging parents due to a variety of changing conditions.

To help seniors stay in their own homes as long as possible, CUPW believes that Canada Post can leverage its expansive network of about 26,500 letter carriers to provide services to seniors in rural, urban and suburban areas.

Currently, letter carriers intuitively keep an eye on the vulnerable by leveraging their knowledge of their customer base, but in most cases, it remains an informal process. Letter carriers tend to know their customers. Consequently, knowing for instance that someone lives alone, they may knock on the door if the mail has not been picked up for a number of days.

However, Canada used to have its own formal letter carrier check-in program. Launched in the 1980s by the Letter Carriers Union of Canada (now merged with CUPW) in collaboration with the Canadian Labour Congress and the United Way of Canada, the Letter Carrier Alert program aimed to identify seniors or others in need of assistance in their home. The program is still functional today in at least one community, through a partnership with community organizations.

In the United States, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) and the United States Postal Service (USPS) cooperate on the Carrier Alert program. The letter carriers keep an eye out for issues with pre-registered customers, and if they notice something, they report it to a local community sponsoring organization.

Some postal operators are taking this role a few steps further. Many countries have begun to implement various forms of senior check-in programs through their postal service, such as France, Japan, India, Germany, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Though all unique, these initiatives tend to go further than merely “keeping an eye out” for warning signs on the route, and engage in the active contacting of registered customers in order to verify their well-being. Broadly, these various initiatives appear to share three aims:

1. They support aging populations and help them remain in their home through basic contact with the letter carrier. They are designed as a detection tool to identify emerging problems;
2. They allow for the optimization of social services—by having letter carriers play a supporting or “first step” type role for service providers who are the ones providing specialized services;
3. They create a new revenue stream for postal operators at a time of falling letter mail volumes.

Particularly noteworthy is the *Cohesio* service offered by La Poste. This service makes use of the versatile smartphone that every French letter carrier now carries. Once someone is signed up for a check-in service, the letter carrier (during their daily round) uses the smartphone to go through, with the registered individual, a series of “yes/no” self-assessment questions on the person’s state. The letter carrier inputs the results, which are then sent to the ordering party through the Internet when the carrier returns to their depot. Questions are established by the ordering party, with the letter carrier simply serving as the intermediary. They are not responsible for providing care or conducting any sort of needs assessment—however, they do have an emergency contact listed in their smartphone for each recipient.

La Poste offers this contract through partnerships with pension authorities, and can adapt it to the needs of other entities requiring individualized visits to their customers.

Canada Post could develop such a service, which would enable social service providers to order a weekly or even daily contact with those needing check-in visits. Another potential option for the service would be an “individualized” system, where, for example, children who normally visit their elderly parents but are unable to could have the letter carrier check in on their loved ones.

Canada Post is ideally suited to provide such a service as recent research has found that letter carrier is one of the most trusted professions in the country. [3]

Canada Post also has a unique strength to leverage as it is already the trusted, neutral intermediary between two parties conducting a digital transaction. In the same way that Canada Post is the physical link for delivering digitally ordered parcels, it could also be the physical link in the provision of (increasingly) digital social services.

Another of Canada Post's advantages in providing such services is that it already bundles numerous disparate items and sequences them into a line of delivery and collection. The visit of a senior would be just another step in that line of delivery, which includes parcels, mail items and other new services discussed in this submission. CPC's expertise in bundling is a key strength because a senior needing check-in is also very likely to require other home services. The letter carrier could also, while checking on a senior, deliver specialized telemedicine items, groceries, medication as well as parcels and mail. Canada Post already equips letter carriers with electronic scanning devices connected to a 4G network. These could easily be adapted to send information directly to family members or stakeholders in the community. Imagine how reassuring it could be to know via text or email that a loved one is safe and doing well!

A check-in program is a key part of a just post-COVID recovery

In conclusion, the 61,000 proud members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers are eager to play a role in a just recovery. Our governments should learn from the crisis, which, at least, highlighted the shortcomings of our society. The most vulnerable among us should be able to hope to remain in their homes and retain their independence, and the government should spare no efforts to help them do so.

As part of its *Delivering Community Power* campaign [4], CUPW meets with elected officials at all levels as well as various community organizations working with seniors and people with disabilities. The results of these meetings are striking. The people we meet unanimously welcome this initiative, and many wonder why it is not already a reality. A vision that rallies all federal political parties is always a win-win for Canadians.

It is now up to the members of the House to bring this initiative to life. Otherwise, we fear that our vision, as unifying as it is, will never be implemented by the management of the Corporation, which, we must remember, belongs to all Canadians.

Recommendation: That Canada Post identify a community and extensively consult with seniors and health and social service providers to design and test new services to be offered by letter carriers, with a focus on check-in services for seniors and the disabled.

[1] Population Projections for Canada (2013 to 2063), Provinces and Territories (2013 to 2038), Statistics Canada <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-520-x/91-520-x2014001-eng.htm> Visited on June 7, 2016.

[2] Ibid.

[3] According to a Leger survey conducted in March 2021, 86% of Canadians trust letter carriers. <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2021/03/15/le-barometre-des-professions-qui-inspirent-le-plus-confiance> [in French only]

2015. https://www.uspsoig.gov/sites/default/files/document-library-files/2015/rarc-ib-15-004_the_postal_services_role_in_delivering_wellness_services_and_supplies_0.pdf Visited on May 25, 2016.

[4] https://www.sttp.ca/sites/default/files/DeCoPo_2019_en.pdf