Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for the Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Seniors

Submitted by:

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PURPOSE

AGE-WELL, Canada's Technology and Aging Network, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities' study on the impact of COVID-19 on seniors. The purpose of this brief is to highlight the valuable role that technology can play in helping to improve the lives of older adults and how it can work to address the repercussions of COVID-19, now and in a post-pandemic world. As the Canadian organization driving forward Canada's AgeTech sector, AGE-WELL continues to work with key partners in industry, government, and community groups to guide and increase the impact of homegrown technological innovations that seek to support quality aging. Most significantly, AGE-WELL works directly with seniors and caregivers, whose involvement is essential to ensuring that emerging technologies are practical, accessible, and meet the needs of the diverse older adult population living throughout Canada.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. We recommend that the timeline to ensure **equitable access to broadband internet across the country be accelerated**, especially in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities—as without it, we risk leaving large segments of the population behind as we address challenges through the use of technology. First and foremost, internet access needs to be considered a basic right. This includes access to reliable internet in long-term care and seniors' residences.

2. We recommend that the federal government **increase investment in Canada's AgeTech** sector including implementation programs and start-ups so that products get into people's hands sooner. Canada's gross domestic expenditures on research and development as a percentage of gross domestic product has declined 15.8% over the past ten years, while other OECD countries grew by 9.7%.[1] If Canada wishes to continue being an international leader in this space, we must change the storyline and properly invest in these priorities through existing funding envelopes.

3. We recommend that the federal government begin to **earmark funds for assistive technologies** that help with low vision, hearing, cognition, and social inclusion—technologies that are critically important for seniors and their quality of life. This would help support clinicians in integrating apps and other new technology into their clinical practices and is a key piece in transforming Canada's healthcare systems.

BACKGROUND

At AGE-WELL, the backbone of Canada's AgeTech sector, research teams and start-ups have over 120 technology-based solutions in the pipeline or already making a difference in people's lives—even throughout the past year and a half as we have navigated through the pandemic. When we talk about AgeTech, we mean anything from the glasses on your face to smart-home systems to support aging-in-place, to mobile health apps and platforms designed to enhance safety and quality of life for residents in long-term care. A common question is about whether older adults are receptive to technology as a tool to help them age—and the answer is yes. A poll commissioned in July 2020 by AGE-WELL shows that COVID-19 has significantly increased the use of many technologies among older Canadians.

The poll surveyed over 2000 Canadians aged 50 plus that are representative of our country's provinces and territories and used a mix of online and telephone surveys.[2] The majority agree that technology can help them maintain relationships, reduce social isolation, pursue hobbies, manage all aspects of health—and stay safe, independent, and active as they age. These trends are what is driving a multi-trillion-dollar AgeTech market internationally, and Canadians are no different. The majority of those aged 50 plus, which includes the future generation of seniors, are willing to pay out-of-pocket for technology that allows them to stay at home as they age.[3]

TECHNOLOGY TO HELP ADDRESS IMPACT OF COVID-19

Many cutting-edge technologies that benefit older adults are currently in development and some are already on the market. With many of us are wondering what the world will look like post-pandemic, we can say with certainty that technology will play a much larger role in the lives of older adults and caregivers—with over two-thirds (66%) of Canadians aged 65 plus agreeing that technological advancements can help to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on daily life.[4] The increase in the use of telehealth provides us with a perfect example and demonstrates that it is not an exaggeration to say that technology is going to help fundamentally transform the care older Canadians receive. We anticipate this across all settings—hospital, community, home and long-term care, where the pandemic has resulted in devastating consequences. What we have been hearing throughout our country-wide consultation process, is that people are focused primarily on technologies that help people age in place; stay connected to friends and loved ones; and improve the delivery of health care services—areas that are intrinsically linked to the impact of the pandemic. The following are examples of projects and initiatives, funded through AGE-WELL's Core Research Program, that are working within these three areas and that are related to enhancing the lives of older adults in a way that can help mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic.

1. **Supportive Homes & Communities**
   The desire among older adults to age in place has been amplified by COVID-19 and there are numerous existing and emerging technologies that can help facilitate this. A project based out of Quebec is working on developing smart home technologies to support aging in place and is implementing them in two collective seniors' residences. This project will produce a guide to effective implementation of smart homes; commercialized assistive technologies that have been developed in partnership with and tested by older adults in their own homes; and results associated with the technologies regarding autonomy, quality of life, and costs. Additionally, our National Innovation Hub in Ottawa focuses on Sensors and Analytics for Monitoring Mobility and Memory (SAM3) and is creating smart home solutions that help with getting in and out of bed, wandering detection for dementia and safely using the fridge and stove.

2. **Staying Connected**
   Social isolation among older adults has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and technologies that enable people to maintain meaningful connections with their loved ones and communities can greatly improve quality of life and decrease loneliness. Based out of the University of Toronto, this project concentrates on addressing

social isolation among seniors using inclusive and interactive apps. Technologies developed in this project utilize a variety of emerging platforms such as voice first, mobile, VR, and tabletop to facilitate a senior-centered design.

3. **Health Care & Health Service Delivery**
   The pandemic has demonstrated the power of virtual tools in enabling greater access to health care and the delivery of health services. The *Indigenous Methodologies: Building Capacity for Telediabetes Care in Urban Indigenous Communities* project, based out of BC, is using Indigenous participatory research methods to develop a diabetes/weight management telehealth service that includes virtual home visits. The impact that this type of model has on access, and consequently on health and wellness outcomes, will be examined and the potential for expansion of this telehealth service model for use with other chronic disease management will be investigated. Further, our National Innovation Hub in northern BC, the Centre for Technology Adoption for Aging in the North (CTAAN), is focused on ensuring the process for adopting technology is streamlined so that all older Canadians can benefit.

ABOUT AGE-WELL

AGE-WELL is a pan-Canadian network that brings together researchers, older adults, caregivers, partner organizations, and future leaders to accelerate the delivery of technology-based solutions that make a meaningful difference in the lives of Canadians. AGE-WELL researchers are producing technologies, services, policies, and practices that improve quality of life for older adults and caregivers and generate social and economic benefits for Canada.

Currently, AGE-WELL includes more than 250 funded and affiliated researchers from 45 universities and research centres across Canada; 420 industry, government, and non-profit partners who work closely with us on solutions for healthy aging; and 750 trainees who are the next generation of leaders in the field of technology and aging.

NOTES

[1] OECD (2021), Gross domestic spending on R&D (indicator). doi: 10.1787/d8b068b4-en (Accessed on 07 June 2021)

[2] AGE-WELL. (2020). COVID-19 has significantly increased the use of many technologies among older Canadians: poll. https://agewell-nce.ca/archives/10884

[3] AGE-WELL. (2020). Tech Use by Older Canadians for Health, Wellness, and Independence in the Time of COVID-19 [PDF]. https://agewell-nce.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/OATechSurvey-SEP2020-FINAL.pdf

[4] AGE-WELL. (2020). COVID-19 has significantly increased the use of many technologies among older Canadians: poll. https://agewell-nce.ca/archives/10884