

Income Disparity and the Impact on Seniors

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The following is a transcript of an Alberta College of Social Workers podcast recorded January 23, 2008. [Click here](#) to hear the audio version.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways does income disparity affect seniors?

SCOTT: Income disparity with seniors is a growing problem in part because seniors have a fixed income. They have no ready means to increase their income. In the economic times that we're in now we are finding that seniors are being pushed out of their homes, are being pushed out of any form of economic contribution. They are losing their political voice. We're seeing that individuals that are over 65 and on fixed incomes are becoming more and more desperate.

They have to make some very interesting choices. Do I pay for my gas bill or do I pay for food? When they are forced to make some very desperate choices around selling their home, they are finding that they can't find an affordable place to live because of the rental conditions in the major urban centres, the lack of affordable housing throughout the province.

Even if they do find a place to live, then once again they are in a market cycle where their rents can increase dramatically over a year yet their income doesn't. They are caught and that has an impact upon them socially. It has an impact upon them economically. It has an impact upon them physically. They are entering our healthcare system more because of stress-related illnesses because they have no other place to go but an emergency room in order to receive help.

INTERVIEWER: So how does this affect other Albertans, this impact on seniors?

SCOTT: Because seniors are experiencing the stresses that they are experiencing it impacts a number of social systems, it impacts healthcare. When our seniors have no other place to go but an emergency room to receive services, to receive help, that impacts all Albertans who are trying to receive health services.

It effects us economically as a whole - as a community - because their dollars aren't going into other aspects of the economy. They are going into pharmaceuticals, they are going into the provision of healthcare and buying private housekeeping services. They are no longer able to contribute the wisdom and experience that they have. Instead they have to be focused on everyday survival.

INTERVIEWER: How does this affect your work as a social worker and your ability to help seniors and others?

SCOTT: Because I'm in continuing care, I'm often dealing with families that are undergoing significant stress. They have had a loved one who is making a major transition of life. They are moving from being independent to being more dependent on caregivers. When you are dealing with issues of economic disparity - and there's a cost to continuing care - families are constantly in a crunch. They are caught between a rock and a hard place because long-term care fees increase but seniors' incomes do not necessarily increase to the same levels.

Families believe that their loved ones deserve a certain quality of life and a certain quality of service. Unfortunately, in a system which has very limited resources, we can't necessarily always provide for them to the level that they feel their parents deserve. Instead, we have to meet the standards that we are given by the Alberta Government.

So, if a family feels that their loved one wants one more bath a week or wants companion services or wants their loved one to have their hair done every week or things of that nature - aspects of their life that they had when they were in community - that can no longer happen because families are in a financial crunch. Because of the economic situation that most Albertans are in, even their family members don't have the disposal income in order to contribute to their elders' lives and so, elders are often left to the services that they can receive in continuing care.

There are no extras. It's a very lean system. For those individuals who can't afford continuing care it creates an even more desperate situation for families. Either the families have to supplement, in order for their parents just to receive basic continuing care services, or the health regions have to supplement. This leaves our health regions in an increasing deficit which the Alberta Government is not willing to necessarily cover.

This is a situation that's only going to get worse because we have a growing seniors population. Within 20 years, most of our seniors in this province will be over the age of 85. These are individuals that will need continuing care yet we don't have spaces for them so they are sitting in hospital rooms. This of course means that people are stuck in emergency rooms.

We're in a situation that in Edmonton, in Capitol Health today, the region is announcing that they're under a very stressful situation because there are no beds. We are stacking people up in emergency rooms like cordwood and there are no continuing care beds for seniors who are quite ill, to go into transition, to receive a quality of life. Instead they are stuck. We need the Alberta Government to facilitate the lives of seniors and the quality of life of seniors. This means an investment of capital.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see the situation getting better or worse in the future?

SCOTT: I see it getting worse. We do know what the demographics look like; the famous "pig and the python". We see an increasing number of seniors entering into various social systems from homecare; supportive living; designated assisted living and then moving into continuing care. All of that impacts them directly but it impacts their families as primary caregivers and it impacts Albertans. Without an investment of capital, without a change in the way that the Alberta Government values seniors and values the system of health care, we are going to see things get incredibly worse over the next 20 years.

INTERVIEWER: What changes in social policy are needed to make things better?

SCOTT: From a general perspective, there needs to be an increase in democratization at the Alberta Government. We need people to have a voice. Not special business interests, not necessarily just the conservative ideology, we need the voice of the common people.

Seniors need to have a voice. They are an increasing part of our population yet they are being increasingly disenfranchised because they don't have the economic clout and that's a sad thing. When they have helped to build this province; when they've laid the foundations of the prosperity that we are now experiencing in this province and for them to be shut out of the democratic process is an absolute shame.

Specifically, we need investment at all levels of senior service. From more investment in the non-profit so that seniors can receive services from individual organizations that specialize in seniors, to an increased investment in our healthcare system when it comes to senior services - from home care all the way through the continuum to continuing care.

We need more beds. We need more specialized services. We are seeing an increased need in complex services for seniors because they are coming to us in continuing care sicker. This means we need more physical therapy, occupational therapy, social work, and nursing. We need more doctors to specialize in geriatrics services.

Seniors issues are not "sexy". They are not receiving the attention that, I believe, they deserve. Social workers believe they deserve it. From a general point of view, we need democratization. From a specific point of view, we need increased investment in social services that are targeting seniors.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think a lack of an overall social policy or a plan has really impacted seniors negatively?

SCOTT: Yes. It seems that we are shooting in the dark. We knew that this demographic change was coming. We could see that. As people get older of course their healthcare needs increase. They become more complex and yet it seems that we are now surprised that we're in the situation that we're in.

There is no sense of cohesive planning or long-term strategic planning on the part of the Alberta Government. This is disconcerting from my point of view as a younger person. If this is happening now, what is it going to be like in 20 years, in 30 years? Where are we going to be? How much work is my generation going to have to do in order to keep the system going; to make sure that it's functional for every member of society?