



# **Creating a Seniors' Advocate for British Columbia**

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**A Stronger Voice for  
BC Seniors**

**Consultation Discussion Paper**

May 2012



## How could an Office of the Seniors' Advocate help seniors in British Columbia?

*We want to hear from you.*

We invite you to consider the questions in this discussion paper – as an individual, family, caregiver or service provider – and send us your ideas. Or we encourage interested organizations to share with their networks and make a submission.

Please send written input to:

**Seniors Action Plan  
Ministry of Health  
PO Box 9825, STN PROV GOV  
Victoria, BC V8W 9W4**

**The deadline for written  
submissions is July 31, 2012.**

Or by email: [SeniorsAdvocate@gov.bc.ca](mailto:SeniorsAdvocate@gov.bc.ca)

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# Introduction

Seniors are important members of our communities and it is critical that we plan to meet the needs of this growing population. In *Improving Care for B.C. Seniors: An Action Plan* (February 2012), the Provincial Government announced concrete actions to improve the quality of life for all seniors with the goal to help them remain independent for as long as possible. The Action Plan outlines steps that will make it easier for seniors and their families to access and understand the care system and identifies steps to strengthen protection for vulnerable seniors. This includes the creation of an Office of the Seniors' Advocate for British Columbia that will support a more accessible, transparent and accountable approach to addressing the issues and interests of seniors in British Columbia (B.C.).

Older adults, families and stakeholders are being invited to help shape the future role of the Seniors' Advocate through participation in a province-wide consultation process. Through a series of meetings, public forums and written submissions, we are seeking the views of British Columbians on the development of an innovative model that will build a stronger voice for British Columbia's seniors.

This consultation will look at the role and functions of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate, with a particular focus on how the role could collaborate with existing organizations currently performing similar roles for B.C.'s seniors. The organizational structure for the Office of the Seniors' Advocate will not be included in this consultation process. Once the role and functions are finalized, the most appropriate structure will be determined.

This Discussion Paper presents background information about advocacy and describes potential principles, purpose and key functions for the Seniors' Advocate. The information provided in this paper is intended to stimulate discussion and is not meant to provide all the answers, but to outline concepts and options for consideration.

The overall objectives for the consultation process are to:

- ▶ Identify the types of issues that the Office of the Seniors' Advocate could assist seniors with;
- ▶ Identify the range and scope of services for the Office of the Seniors' Advocate;
- ▶ Identify the potential role of the Seniors' Advocate in elder abuse prevention and response;
- ▶ Identify issues and opportunities on how the Seniors' Advocate can work with existing community organizations currently engaged in similar work; and
- ▶ Ensure that seniors, their families and caregivers have a voice in the creation of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate.

This is your opportunity to help shape the role of the Seniors' Advocate. We look forward to hearing as many views as possible and encourage everyone with an interest to participate in the consultation process.

# Background

Population aging is a success story – the fact that British Columbians are living longer and that the province has a growing population of seniors is something to be celebrated. But the shift in demographics requires society and all levels of government to adapt and plan ahead. B.C. has one of the most rapidly aging populations in Canada. By 2036 it is estimated that about 25 percent of the population will be 65 years and over.<sup>1,2</sup> In the face of rapid population aging, the issues and challenges facing seniors become more apparent. Some of the most common challenges seniors may face are: access to health and social care, housing and transportation, isolation and loneliness, elder abuse and navigating the complex system of services. It is in response to these issues that many jurisdictions around the world are exploring various mechanisms to ensure that the voices of seniors are heard in the creation of public policy, while also protecting the rights and interests of the most vulnerable seniors.

Seniors are, like the rest of the population, a diverse group of people with varying needs, but are also a group of people with distinct interests which must be recognized, protected and represented. The majority of B.C. seniors live active, independent lives with little or no need to access government or private services; however, there is a population of vulnerable seniors who are isolated and have no one to assist or support them. These seniors may experience significant health issues, loss of independence, isolation or abuse, and may have difficulty accessing services they need on their own and could benefit from additional advice and support. The range of issues facing seniors is as varied as the population, illustrating the broad scope that must be considered in the creation of an office focused on these issues.

Many of these issues and challenges have also been identified by the B.C. Ombudsperson in *The Best of Care: Getting it Right for Seniors in British Columbia (Parts 1 and 2)* and echoed in the recent province-wide consultation on elder abuse prevention. A common theme identified was the need to make it easier for older people and their families to raise and resolve issues and concerns relating to health care services. In *Improving Care for B.C. Seniors: An Action Plan* (February 2012) the Government of B.C. acknowledged and acted upon these issues through the announcement of a new provincial phone line to report care concerns, as well as through the commitment to create a new Office of the Seniors' Advocate for B.C.

*“Now is the time to expand our efforts in ways that help seniors and their families navigate the system, easily access information about care options, and have a clear and simple way to have any concerns addressed.”*

Honourable Michael de Jong, QC, Minister of Health, February 14, 2012

To help inform the development of the potential role and scope of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate, we looked at other national and international jurisdictions to identify comparable models specific to the senior population. This scan highlighted that although many jurisdictions have begun to recognize the need to address the issues of older people in a more integrated, systematic fashion, the majority of the models tended to focus on seniors residing in residential care facilities. Of the models that had a broader focus, the following common functions were identified: promotion, consultation, advocacy and education. Advocacy was primarily focused on system level policy issues that would improve the quality of life for all seniors, while working in collaboration

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1. BC Stats, Ministry of Labour and Citizen's Services, <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/vital.asp>

2. PEOPLE 36 population data, BC Stats, Service BC, Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services; as cited on QA Knowledge Base 2.20

with existing bodies and organizations to address concerns and complaints. Jurisdictions that have developed government appointed positions have recommended that the model should be developed based upon the needs of the larger population, protect the most vulnerable individuals and address the specific issues facing that particular jurisdiction.

As the population continues to age, it has become apparent that B.C. could benefit from the creation of an office that has a specific focus on promoting and protecting the interests of seniors. It is essential that the establishment of any new office carefully consider the added value to the system and the population that it serves, and whether existing bodies already fulfill some of the potential functions. It is these questions and more that will guide the consultation process.

## What is advocacy?

There is no one common definition of advocacy - it can mean different things to different people, depending on experiences and understanding. Some think it is mainly to deal with complaints. Others may think it is providing information and advice. But while advocacy could include both of these elements, it is more about listening and ensuring that the views and needs of a specific population are heard and addressed.<sup>3</sup>

Advocacy has many forms and the Office of the Seniors' Advocate could provide a continuum of services ranging from information and advice to influencing government policy. Advocacy is an important means of raising awareness about issues facing a specific population and ensuring that these issues are brought to the attention of decision makers, leading to improvements in policy, legislation and service provision.<sup>4</sup>

## What is an advocate?

"An advocate is typically someone who speaks on behalf of another person or a group of people to promote and represent their interests and to make sure that their voice is heard and considered in decisions".<sup>5</sup>

**An advocate can raise the voice for a specific population**

## What can an advocate do?

A review of national and international advocate models identified that government appointed advocates typically respond to complaints and issues, both individual and system level, and act as problem solvers and navigators to ensure that individuals are connected to the most appropriate person, organization

3. National Standards for the provision of Advocacy Services (2003) Welsh Assembly Government

4. National Disability Advocacy Program (NDAP) Quality Assurance Consultations Report. 2008. Sydney Australia. Retrieved: [http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/disability/pubs/policy/Documents/national\\_disability\\_advocacy/national\\_disability\\_advocacy\\_program.pdf](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/disability/pubs/policy/Documents/national_disability_advocacy/national_disability_advocacy_program.pdf)

5. Advocacy Definition. Retrieved at: <http://www.elitestaffordshire.co.uk/uploads/file/Advocacy%20Definition.pdf>

or agency to meet their needs. The majority of the advocate models reviewed primarily focused on system level advocacy as this is perceived to be the most efficient use of resources and provides the greatest benefit to the targeted population. Although system level advocacy is the preferred model, most jurisdictions identified that individual advocacy may be appropriate for the most vulnerable individuals when no other existing body was in place to address the issue and or when system level issues were identified.<sup>6,7</sup>

Advocates may do some of the following functions:

- ▶ Accept and refer individual and group concerns or complaints;
- ▶ Support individual's rights;
- ▶ Represent individual and collective interests;
- ▶ Assist in navigation and accessing services; and
- ▶ Create a climate for change and influence positive change at the system level.

### **What an advocate typically does not do.**

- ▶ An advocate typically does not participate in or direct the change process
- ▶ An advocate is not a decision-maker
- ▶ An advocate does not replace the courts or the legal system

### **Who is an Advocate?**

Anyone who acts on another person's behalf to obtain services, helps that person assert their rights or achieve some goal is acting as an advocate. There are many different ways of providing advocacy, and many people who can be advocates. Advocates can range from an informal advocate such as a family member or friend, or a more formal advocate such as a community organization, professional advocate or ombudsperson.

The following is list of some potential advocates:

- ▶ Self (individual)
- ▶ Family member
- ▶ Friend
- ▶ Caregiver
- ▶ Community organization
- ▶ Health care professional
- ▶ Ombudsperson
- ▶ Public Guardian and Trustee
- ▶ Banker

6. Examining The Case for A Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland Final Report .May 2008. Retrieved at [http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/opc\\_report\\_may\\_pdf463kb\\_pdf](http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/opc_report_may_pdf463kb_pdf)

7. A Commissioner for Older People in Wales: The Report and Recommendations of the Welsh Assembly Government's Advisory Group March 2004.

## Options for the Office of the Seniors' Advocate

This section of the paper outlines various options that we ask British Columbians to consider for the role and scope of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate. The options have been created based upon key themes that were identified from similar roles nationally and internationally. One of the learnings identified from other jurisdictions, which we are sure will be echoed by British Columbians, is to make sure that we do not create another layer of bureaucracy that causes confusion and duplication with existing bodies and services. It is with this caveat that options for the role of the Seniors' Advocate have been presented that focus on adding value to the current system and supporting collaboration with existing bodies and services, while promoting and protecting the interests of seniors in B.C.

- **Values and Principles**
- **Purpose of the Seniors' Advocate**
- **Role of the Seniors' Advocate**
- **Key Functions of the Seniors' Advocate**



## Values and Principles

Advocacy offices are often guided by a core set of values and principles, which direct their actions and interactions with the public, government offices, service providers and community agencies. The Office of the Seniors' Advocate could adopt the *United Nations Principles for Older People*, 1991 as the foundation on which to build the work of the office.<sup>8</sup> These principles could provide guidance to the Seniors' Advocate in determining the interests of seniors and in deciding when and how to act in their best interest.

The United Nations encourages governments whenever possible to incorporate the following principles into their seniors' policies and programs:

- ▶ Independence
- ▶ Participation
- ▶ Care
- ▶ Self-fulfilment
- ▶ Dignity

While the *UN Principles for Older People* can provide guidance for the foundation of the work provided by the office, it is proposed that a set of operating principles is established to guide the operation and interactions of the office with the public, government offices and community agencies.

The operating principles *could* include:

1. The older adult is always the client regardless of who initiates contact with the Office;
2. Ensure that the work of the Office is informed by the views, issues and concerns of seniors and seniors groups across B.C.
3. Easily accessible;
4. Presume people are capable and support self advocacy as the preferred approach;
5. Timely and responsive, proactive and solution oriented;
6. Efficient and accountable; and
7. Complementary and works in collaboration with existing bodies and other organizations that provide services to seniors.

## Questions for Consideration

- *What do you think of these values and principles?*
- *Are any potential values and principles missing from this list?*
- *Are there potential values and principles that should not be on the list?*

8. 'United Nations Principles for Older People' - adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 16th December 1991

## Purpose of the Seniors' Advocate

The broad purpose of the Office of the Seniors' Advocate could be to focus on the interests of seniors to ensure that their issues, needs and concerns are heard and considered in the provision of services and the development of public policy.

Stated another way, the heart of the work of the Seniors' Advocate could be to "listen and to give voice" in promoting the interests of seniors while influencing positive systemic change for the benefit of all seniors residing in B.C.

### Questions for Consideration

- *What would be the desired outcome from the creation of this position? How can it add value?*
- *What are the types of issues that the Office of the Seniors' Advocate could assist seniors with? Are there potential values and principles that should not be on the list?*
- *Should there be an age range to access the Office of the Seniors' Advocate? If yes, which age would you recommend?*

## Role of the Seniors' Advocate

In addition to the broad purpose of promoting and protecting the interests of and influencing change for all seniors, there is a specific role that the Seniors' Advocate could play in the provision of information, advice and support for all of B.C.'s older adults. As seniors represent a sizable percentage of the population the initial mandate could focus on seniors who are seeking or receiving health care supports and services, including consumer issues related to these services. There would be the potential to expand the scope at a later date once the Office is well established.

### Questions for Consideration

- *Should the Office focus on health care supports and services, including consumer issues related to these services? What should this include?*
- *As seniors represent a large diverse population, what part of that population should the office initially target? Should it start with only vulnerable seniors? How would you define a vulnerable senior?*
- *What should be the role of the Seniors' Advocate in supporting capable seniors who have support and informal advocates in place?*

## Key Functions of the Seniors' Advocate

Advocacy offices often fulfill a number of important roles for the clients they serve. When thinking about the needs of the older adult population in British Columbia, some potential key functions might include:

1. **Advocacy Services**
2. **Information and Advice**
3. **Receiving and Referring Concerns and Complaints**
4. **Public Awareness and Communication**
5. **Collaboration and Engagement**

## Questions for Consideration

- *What is the most important function for the Seniors' Advocate? Why?*
- *Are any potential key functions missing from this list? Any that should not be on the list?*

### 1. **Advocacy Services**

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate could provide a continuum of advocacy services. The large majority of seniors can advocate for themselves or are supported by family, friends and caregivers. The Office of the Seniors' Advocate should not replace this valuable function, as this role is best carried out by the senior themselves or those close to them. However, there will be some vulnerable or isolated seniors who have nobody to advocate on their behalf. So in these limited circumstances, the Office of the Seniors' Advocate could provide individual advocacy services or support organizations in the community which may provide such support.

On the other hand, systemic advocacy seeks to proactively influence or secure positive long-term changes that affect a large number of individuals (as opposed to one person). It often leads to broad "systems level" changes in services, policies and laws at the provincial level and provides benefits to the larger population. A systemic advocacy role could support early identification of emerging issues and trends and recommend preventative action that could have a positive impact on the quality of life and quality of care for all seniors in B.C.

The potential range of advocacy services provided by the Seniors' Advocate **could** include:

- ▶ Identify trends and issues relating to gaps in services, legislation, policy or practice affecting seniors;
- ▶ Provide policy advice to government about the state of services for seniors within the mandated scope of the Office;
- ▶ Identify areas where government policies, services and legislation could be more “senior-friendly”;
- ▶ Recommend proactive and prevention-focused solutions to problems and issues;
- ▶ Conduct systemic reviews, produce special reports and policy statements about issues impacting seniors;
- ▶ Commission research which could assist in tracking and identifying issues, challenge attitudes and perceptions of seniors;
- ▶ Propose legislative changes to government where necessary; and
- ▶ Encourage and promote best practice in the treatment of seniors in B.C.

## Questions for Consideration

- *What is the most important advocacy role for the Seniors' Advocate? Why?*
- *Are any potential key roles missing from this list? Any that should not be on the list?*
- *Should a systemic advocacy role be broadened beyond an initial scope of health care supports and services to include other services? If yes, what else?*

## 2. Information and Advice

Information and advice are important in promoting the independence, involvement and interests of seniors. Information and advice can help to support a senior in making choices, decisions and acting in his or her own best interest as well as contributing to the life of the community. Although there are already a number of services and systems in place that offer these services, we have heard from seniors and their families that they are unsure of which organization to call, or that they are informed that the organization they did call is not able to help them.

The Seniors' Advocate could assist in streamlining this process through collaboration with existing services to support better integration and communication between organizations and with the Office of the Seniors' Advocate.

The following functions are options that *could* be performed by the Office of the Seniors' Advocate to provide information and advice about the range of services available for seniors:

- ▶ Maintain a current relevant inventory of available information on services and programs for seniors within B.C.;
- ▶ Offer information, advice and guidance to seniors and their families about services, resources and options available to them; and
- ▶ Provide seniors with information on how to connect with or contact appropriate organizations and agencies to address their issues and to meet their needs.

### Questions for Consideration

- *Should information and advice be a primary role for the Seniors' Advocate?*
- *Are there existing bodies and services that offer this role to seniors?*
- *How can the Office of the Seniors' Advocate avoid duplication and confusion with existing systems or organizations that provide information and advice to seniors?*

### 3. Receiving and Referring Concerns and Complaints

Many programs and services for seniors – for instance within the health care system – already have established processes for receiving concerns and complaints. However, government has heard that seniors and their families are not always aware of where to go, or may find themselves in situations where there is no clear authority to turn. In efforts to simplify this process while avoiding further confusion and duplication with existing bodies, the Seniors' Advocate **could** receive and respond to concerns and complaints by:

- ▶ Supporting the senior, family member or caregiver by providing information on how to raise their concern or complaint with the appropriate existing body, or directly by referring their concern or complaint and ensuring it is heard.
- ▶ For concerns and complaints not addressed by an existing body the Seniors' Advocate could:
  - Assist capable seniors and families to resolve the issue themselves
  - Assist and support vulnerable seniors to seek resolution
- ▶ Supporting seniors and/or people raising concerns about suspected elder abuse to have their concerns addressed by the most appropriate body.

### Questions for Consideration

- *What are the types of issues that might compel a senior to contact the Seniors' Advocate?*
- *Where are the gaps for seniors in the oversight roles of existing bodies?*
- *What criteria should the Seniors' Advocate use to determine if the Office should advocate for an individual case?*
- *Should the Seniors' Advocate have a role in elder abuse prevention and response?*

#### 4. Public Awareness and Communication

A potential key function of an advocacy office is to raise awareness and understanding about the issues and needs of the clients that they serve, as well as to inform the general public of the existence of the office and its role and mandate.

The following activities are options that the Office of the Seniors' Advocate *could* perform to support this key function:

- ▶ Promote the awareness of the role of the Seniors' Advocate through public presentations, the media, and meetings with individuals and groups;
- ▶ Coordinate public education efforts in collaboration with other agencies and organizations;
- ▶ In collaboration with other organizations, become the "voice for seniors" by raising awareness and understanding of issues affecting seniors to policy makers, community groups, private business and members of the public;
- ▶ Promote a positive image of aging and encourage participation of seniors;
- ▶ Promote opportunities for and the elimination of discrimination against seniors; and
- ▶ Respond to inquiries from the public.

#### Questions for Consideration

*- Should public awareness, education and communication be a key role for the Seniors' Advocate?*

*- Are there any activities missing from this list?*

## 5. Collaboration and Engagement

There are many individuals and organizations in local communities across B.C. that already provide a range of services for seniors. It is envisioned that the Seniors' Advocate would complement and not replace the efforts of these individuals and organizations that are well established, well known and have extensive networks and expertise. The Seniors' Advocate could work in collaboration with these community organizations to increase the capacity for advocacy services, and use their networks as an avenue to facilitate the engagement of seniors in the work of the Seniors' Advocate.

The following functions are options that could be performed by the Seniors' Advocate:

- ▶ Consult and liaise with voluntary and community advocacy groups to avoid unnecessary duplication, and to help identify key issues of concern to seniors;
- ▶ Proactively seek the opinions and priorities of seniors making sure that their views are heard and understood about issues that affect them; and
- ▶ Work collaboratively with voluntary and community advocacy groups to build trusting relationships between agencies and further strengthen overall advocacy for seniors in B.C.

### Questions for Consideration

- *How can the Seniors' Advocate identify existing community organizations that provide advocacy services for seniors?*
- *How can the Seniors' Advocate best engage seniors to enhance dialogue about the services and policies that most affect them?*
- *How can the Seniors' Advocate work with community and voluntary organizations to raise the overall capacity for advocacy for adults?*

## Summary

British Columbia has an opportunity to lead the country in meeting the challenge of responding to the aging of the population. We can promote healthy and productive aging and help to create a society in which older people's voices are heard and respected, while protecting and promoting their interests. The Office of the Seniors' Advocate could have a key role in supporting this shift in public attitude by promoting and celebrating the positive aspects of aging, including the valuable experience and wisdom that come with older age.

Thank you for your interest in the development of the role and scope for the Office of the Seniors' Advocate.