

A City for the Ages

TORONTO SENIORS STRATEGY EMPHASIZES ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

It has long been said that “it takes a village to raise a child.” However, some municipalities are coming to realize that planning for and addressing the needs of seniors also takes a community-wide effort, as well.

*“Design for the young and you exclude the old.
Design for the old and you include everyone.”*

- Bernard Isaacs, Geriatrician

In Toronto, that reality led City Council to unanimously adopt, in 2013, the Toronto Seniors Strategy: Towards an Age-Friendly City. It has become a globally recognized effort, with city staff beginning to report progress annually as of 2015.

Once they began tackling the issue, politicians and officials found that most services touched on the lives of seniors in some way—from housing to policing, transit and public health and even solid waste management. Today, an accountability table, which includes executive staff members from 20 departments and agencies as well as more than 20 representatives from community agencies, service organizations, academic institutions and other experts, meet regularly to track progress and share ideas to ensure the needs of seniors are addressed so they can be engaged in the life of their community.

“The way in which government services are currently designed, resourced, organized and delivered often has the unintended effect of disadvantaging older adults who are vulnerable,” says Andrea Austen, the policy development officer who coordinated the strategy on behalf of the City. “The Toronto Seniors Strategy is really just the beginning of an ongoing process to make Toronto more age-friendly.”



Quick facts

In Toronto, the number of older adults is forecasted to grow by up to 60 per cent in the next 20 years.

Over 114,000 families with at least one member 65 years or older have low incomes.

Among adults 65 and older, 54 per cent have an activity limitation or disability.

Among adults 55 and older, 37 per cent speak a non-official language and 68 per cent are immigrants.

Source: Hemson Consulting/2011 Census

Today, as the City prepares to renew its seniors strategy, the “2.0” version, they’re drawing on the partnerships they’ve created—inside city government and outside—to create the next round of policy goals with direct community involvement.

Focus on what you control

While many services impacting seniors are provided by the provincial or federal governments and their agencies, Toronto's Seniors Strategy was strictly focused on issues within the City's authority to plan, manage and deliver.

The City began by taking an inventory of what it currently does to assist seniors, while highlighting some of the gaps. Then, they consulted the public and undertook demographic research. This helped establish 25 issues, which are grouped under eight themes. The themes are aligned with the World Health Organization's Age-Friendly Cities and Communities initiative:

- Respect and social inclusion
- Civic engagement
- Volunteering and employment
- Social participation
- Community support
- Health services
- Housing
- Transportation
- Outdoor spaces and buildings
- Communications and information

The City then developed 25 broad recommendations to define the strategic direction the City will take to address older adult issues.

A community-wide effort

The City of Toronto seeks advice, input and action across a wide spectrum of partnerships, including the following:

Gathering citizen input

Residents submitted suggestions and concerns through a consultation workbook available in multiple languages. There were 524 completed responses received from individuals and groups. When asked to identify their priorities, respondents chose health, housing and transportation, although many cited other services that were important to their daily lives. One fifth of the responses were received in languages other than English.

Continuing the conversation

The Toronto Seniors Forum is a formal advisory body of City Council supported by city staff. It gives a voice to age-related issues at City Hall.

Working across the administration

An accountability table of city divisions and agencies involved in services for seniors, as well as community partners, aging experts and older Torontonians, meet regularly to set goals, measure progress and report out to Council annually.

Accessing ideas and experience

The City enlisted an expert panel of 33 leaders from the community, universities, business, medical and seniors' advocacy organizations to share their perspectives and have a voice in policy making, including CMHC.

Aligning with provincial efforts

Dr. Samir K. Sinha, the architect of the Ontario government's seniors strategy, participated in the city's strategy development process, helping to ensure both strategies were aligned.



Focusing on action and accountability

Each recommendation contains a series of short-, medium-, and long-term actions proposed by city agencies, boards, corporations and divisions. In total, the city committed to 91 specific, implementable steps to meet each recommendation.

For example, one issue identified was the cost of housing for many older adults, which can have a significant impact on quality of life. The strategy recommended taking steps to increase older Torontonians' access to affordable housing. An action for fulfilling the recommendation is that "the Affordable Housing Office will aggressively pursue a full range of partnership opportunities to create and maintain affordable housing for lower income seniors." Progress was measured by the number of partnerships created, and the number of innovative housing initiatives and homes created or maintained. In November 2015, among actions cited, the Affordable Housing Office reported home repairs and accessibility modifications to 1,105 homes primarily for seniors, as well as 637 rental units expected to house 50 senior households and housing allowances for 167 senior households. Partnerships included working with the Performing Arts Lodge, a non-profit senior housing provider. The Affordable Housing Office also worked with Build Toronto in developing five sites, including one with a potential component for seniors.

"Rather than stating aspiration goals, Toronto's recommendation clearly identifies which program area is responsible for implementation. The expected time frame is made clear, and the status of each action is monitored and reported on," says Austen. "When the Accountability Table meets, councillors are there to reinforce the political will behind the strategy."

Dr. Samir K. Sinha

"The success of this strategy has been getting the City's elected officials and administrators working collaboratively with older Torontonians and front-line service providers from all areas to ensure we could set and achieve clear and meaningful goals to make Toronto a truly age-friendly city," says Dr. Samir K. Sinha, Director of Geriatrics, Sinai Health System and University Health Network. "The recent recognition we received from the WHO in having Toronto formally recognized as an age-friendly city is a positive reflection of what we have achieved as a collective to date, but also a reminder of the great work that lays ahead if we want to retain our status as an age-friendly city."

Engaging the broader community

The development and implementation of Toronto's efforts were given a considerable boost with the participation of Dr. Samir Sinha, Director of Geriatrics at Mount Sinai System and the architect of the Ontario Seniors Strategy. "His expertise and stature raised the profile of our efforts and helps attract more partners," says Austen. "Having someone from outside the municipal administration can help build the bridges in the community that are so essential to fully addressing seniors' issues."



Building relationships to help vulnerable seniors

In Toronto, when seniors have faced challenges connecting to the services they need, it can impact other vital public services. For example, isolated seniors, in need of some assistance, were taking the only step they knew how—dialing 9-1-1, even when it was not an emergency. Toronto paramedics had noticed a pattern of such calls coming from elderly residents living in Toronto community housing. So, Toronto Paramedic Services, together with the housing agency, Dr. Sinha and other partners, applied for provincial funding to launch a pilot project, the Independence at Home Initiative. As part of the pilot program, two paramedics began visiting the vulnerable seniors regularly. They explained proper use of 9-1-1 services, but they also listened and learned about the elderly residents' issues and challenges. The pilot program then helped connect the vulnerable seniors to the community and health services that could help them. Today, unnecessary calls to 9-1-1 are down 49 per cent in the pilot project area after six months. The program, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care, has been extended to 2017.

Seniors are part of the solution

Toronto's strategy reflects four key service planning principles. One, older adults should have equitable access to services and programs. Two, the contribution of older adults to the life and vibrancy of Toronto should be valued and respected. Three, the social and physical connectedness of Toronto should be enriched by facilitating older adults' participation in city life. Last, older adults in Toronto should be supported so that they may enjoy a higher level of health and well-being. As one contributor of citizen input said: "[It is] important not to forget that a large majority of older adults are capable, active, independent and a resource to the community. We are part of the solution as well as the 'problem.'"

Councillor Josh Matlow, Toronto's Seniors Advocate

"The Toronto Seniors Strategy is about serving seniors in an equitable, respectful and inclusionary way to improve their quality of life and support their full participation in civic life," says Toronto's Seniors Advocate, Councillor Josh Matlow. "We look forward to continue working alongside all of our partners, including the World Health Organization, which recently recognized Toronto as a global age-friendly city."

A work in progress

Within the first two years of the Seniors Strategy implementation, 86 of the 91 recommended actions were fully or partially implemented. City staff credit the coordinated, inclusive approach and cite the importance of integrating accountability into the plan. Now, Toronto City Hall is focused on completing implementation, integrating seniors' needs into other city strategies and developing the next iteration of city actions for seniors, a Toronto Seniors Strategy 2.0.

"The first version of the Strategy was led by an expert panel and a separate staff steering committee. Aging experts and community partners provided advice. For the next version, we combined that into one process, one table. For the 2.0 version of Toronto's Seniors Strategy, city staff are co-creating the policy with all those community partners. Addressing seniors' issues really does take a comprehensive effort," says Austen.



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Produced by CMHC

08-08-16

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