

# Government of Alberta Social Policy Framework Public Consultation

Focus Group Summary Notes: Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton (SAGE)

Facilitated by the Edmonton Social Planning Council

With support from the United Way of Alberta Capital Region, the City of Edmonton, and FCSS

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## VISION

### Question 1: What words would you include in your vision for social policy?

Probing Questions:

a) What do the words in the proposed vision mean to you?

1. The words that I would include in a social policy vision:

- Equality (where everyone including seniors is treated equal and given opportunities to engage in society)
- Accessibility (to programs, resources and support services when needed)
- Perseverance (in pushing forward for better living conditions for seniors)
- Accurate needs (not all seniors are well-off, there are many who struggle and need access to programs and services)
- Progressive ( All people working to support each other would improve government spending and accountability)

Responses:

a) The words in the proposed vision mean the following:

- Perspective
  - If you've lived here all your life, it is all you know. But if you live some other province, then you might not see the proposed vision as accurate.
- Alberta is falling behind.
  - I think we need big-time social upgrades –for example regarding the treatment of seniors (For instance, in some of the nursing homes you should see some of the “slop” they feed them, it is awful) In these situations, seniors are the ones that don't usually speak up and say anything for fear of being penalized.
  - I volunteer with SAGE and see how hard the social workers work with heavy caseloads. They need more funding or help.
- The proposed vision is something to work towards.
  - It's an excellent pie-in-the-sky vision. However, at this time, there is a lot of work to be done to achieve this vision. A lot of people are falling through the cracks.
- Next wave of seniors will face deeper problems.
  - The problems we see will get a lot more serious as boomers retire. There was a time when seniors got their drugs covered – now they have to choose between drugs or food. Yes,

some boomers will have money saved up, but so many are “all living on credit.” Many have to ask family for help.

- I take issue with the word “all Albertans”.
  - The vision doesn’t mention single people and is therefore not inclusive. As we age, more of us become single as our spouses pass away. The vision statement refers to families, not singles
  - When I read this, I agree that there are plenty of opportunities to find work and be successful. But with seniors, nothing seems to be brought up about the growing needs of this demographic. More and more baby boomers are reaching this age. This vision only focuses on families.
- Inequality.
  - I’m past raising a family. As we get old, sometimes we have problems finding place to live that’s affordable. Some get into the senior’s homes and then the price goes up, making it unaffordable.
  - As far as equal opportunity goes, “that’s not really true.” There are people who can’t afford bus passes; people become isolated – “some people are so afraid ... [they’re] not used to holding a conversation.” The reality is that not everyone is able to participate on an equal playing field.
  - It is the “land of opportunity for those who can afford it.” We are “treated like dirt.” I have not savings because I was raising three kids on my own, working and paying for day care. I “deserve more.”
- Seniors are forgotten.
  - We are told that seniors need to take better care of their health. That doesn’t happen. People have to go to the Dollar Store near the end of every month to buy food cheaply because they have so little. This issues need to be addressed in order for a healthy quality of life. The government should pay more attention to seniors. We are people on a fixed income paying high rents.
  - Born and raised here. I love Alberta. Land of opportunity for those who can afford it. I am one of the baby boomers who are on a fixed income. Barely able to afford to live. By the time I pay rent and utilities, I’m broke until the next cheque comes in which could be 2-3 weeks from now. We are the backbone of Canada, we have given our time, raised our children, we’re citizens, and we supported them, to be treated like dirt is absolutely disgusting. I have no savings because I raised my children by myself. To have government men retiring with six figures and to have seniors with much less is wrong.
- Government accountability.
  - We are letting the private sector continue to build home that people like us can’t afford to live in. In some of these nursing homes the workers are making far less than they should, and they’re owned by people who aren’t from Alberta. You go into the lobbies of some of these places, there’s a nice interior with nice pictures and such, but there is “not a soul” in the lobby socializing. The money is going to that, not healthy food. Also, for seniors living at home, there is no help unless you can afford it at \$30.00 per hour.
- I disagree with the proposed vision statement.

- They have to do something about the baby boomer generation, who are now retiring. I live in subsidized housing; some of my co-residents have problems paying for medication. They are barely getting by. Many have Type 2 Diabetes. They don't have family to provide them with support. There needs to be planning in place.
- I like living in Alberta. I have visited every province and like it best. I disagree that all Albertans have the opportunity. The statement isn't true. People can't afford bus passes. We have a pass. To buy one, you have to budget. Also, not everyone wants to engage in these kinds of discussions – I think it is a cultural barrier.
- Inequality of access to services.
  - I live downtown in a hi-rise like many other seniors. I believe there are a lot of resources and funding going to the homeless that the seniors aren't getting. This makes me mad. I don't believe people have to pay anything to stay in shelters and there are companies out there that will provide free groceries, furniture, etc. They are getting everything for free and seniors get nothing.
- I agree with the proposed vision statement to a point.
  - I agree that it's the finest place to live, depending on your perspective. However I am concerned about the number of homeless people, unemployed and folks using the food bank.
  - People like to move back here because of the health-care system. (Cheaper medication)
- Alberta seems to be losing some of the caring I saw in the 1960's when I emigrated here. My husband's company closed up, and he lost his/our pension.

## OUTCOMES

Question 2: What results are needed in order to achieve your vision for Alberta's social policy?

Probing Questions:

- a) Where are positive social outcomes for Albertans already being achieved?
- b) Where could significant improvements be made?

Responses:

2. What results are needed in order to achieve your vision?
  - Retirement planning,
    - People coming up now should be prepared. We weren't prepared to retire because we worked most of our life. They should all be prepared to be a senior and save money to be a senior.
    - We raised our family on very little. Eventually I went to work so I could get a pension and as a result I am comfortable. Money isn't an issue for young people. They don't put money in savings for their seniors' days.

- The cost of living has increased. We need rent controls so younger people can raise a family. Younger people think that they should own a home right away, and get into debt right away.
  - There's a group that are pre-seniors. They don't qualify for certain services that they need. More money is needed to help them access services that they require.
  - Financial literacy.
    - I look at my kids, why don't they save money. They don't know how to budget. If the economy falls flat on its face, they are going to be out on the streets.
  - Responsible spending.
    - I would like government to spend money on helping people instead of spending things on ridiculous things. There is no need for a social welfare state just important services that are needed.
    - What happened to the honesty in this province? You look at the current health-care scandal. When I look at the government and the way they waste money, some of the money could be spend on what we need
  - Fair and equal treatment for all.
    - Some children are struggling to make it on their own so they end up staying with their parents and as a result are not entitled to some benefits that they would get if they were on their own. However, Immigrants coming here get these benefits automatically. This is not right.
  - Affordable accessible housing.
    - Should be rent controls in place to allow people to have affordable places to live.
  - Better monitoring of the income support system is needed.
    - I think there's a lot to be said about the people on the streets who are helped out. If they do get free rent and free food, they probably need it. But there are people getting away with scheming. Those people will always exist. You just have to keep on top of it. I was raised in Saskatchewan with a wonderful upbringing. I think it's great that people can get an education here and improve their future. I consider myself to be fortunate.
- a) Significant improvements could be made in the following ways:
- Review current benefit entitlements.
    - Some seniors get more than they "should" get.
  - Government owned utilities so that prices are regulated.
  - More of an investment in job training especially for Canadians.
  - Bring back rent controls so that folks can stabilize their spending and maybe get ahead.
  - Subsidies to participate in recreation programs so that people can stay fit.
  - Keep policies consistent over time and governments in order to see the benefit over the long-term.
    - Why does new government have to change the policies that the earlier governments introduced? That's always happening. It is as if new governments always feel the need or

have to fix what was done before. How come there can't be consistent with fundamental things? There's no consistency.

- Continue to support education of our young.
  - Well-educated people produce well-functioning economy. If we don't have well-educated young people, we will all suffer.

## MOVING FORWARD: STRATEGIES

Question 3: What actions could help achieve the desired outcomes for Albertans?

Probing Questions:

- a) What is being done well already? What makes these actions successful?

Responses:

3. a) What's currently working and what could be improved

- More consultations with seniors who need help.
- Continue to support seniors so that they can remain in their homes as long as is safely possible. Provide financial assistance to the programs that keep them living independently (for example: homecare, housecleaning, meal preparation, yard maintenance, etc.)
- There are ways to help seniors. Where my family is from (Belfast) there is a program where young mothers, when their child is at daycare, make a wage cleaning houses and doing tasks for seniors.
- More education and information about programs geared towards seniors so we know what is going on.
- Schools encouraging exercise within the curriculum and seniors centers having exercise rooms and programs to help them keep it up.
- Concerns over the cost of medications, especially supplies for diabetics who are required to pay for this.
- Need for more physicians.
  - I can't find a family doctor; there are not enough doctors.
- Incentives for children obtain post-secondary education/training.
  - There's no incentive for people to stay in school. They're being taught things they don't need. Kids need more hands-on skills. When they get to Grade 10, they're encouraged to go out and get a \$30 / hr in trades. There needs to be an incentive to keep them in school until at least Grade 12.
- "Politicians could be improved." Politicians should listen to people like those profiled in the *Edmonton Senior* who are struggling to get by.

## FACILITATOR'S FEEDBACK

- Our team rephrased some of the questions to facilitate a more meaningful discussion around the needs of the population we engaged with. The questions we used were as follows:

What do the words in this vision mean to you?

For Alberta to become the best place to live, work and raise a family ...

a) What would it look like?

b) Why is that important to you?

What has to happen in order to achieve what you described?

What's currently working and what could be improved?