

Summit embraces concept of age-friendly communities

When Premier David Alward first took office, he received an executive briefing to prepare him for the challenges of his new government. On the social and fiscal side, the briefing showed that the demographic shift will see 25% of New Brunswick's population over 65 years of age in 25 years. The province already has the second oldest population in Canada, and our rural populations have the highest rate of aging.

Based on the demographic shift, it is projected that by about 2020—without making changes in how we provide services for seniors—there would not be an acute care hospital bed available in New Brunswick because they would be filled up with seniors waiting for a long-term care placement. The Premier has since commented that the statistics and projections kept him awake at night, worrying about the future of New Brunswick as it transitions to a society in which seniors account for such a high segment of the population.

Earlier this month, organizations in the field of services for seniors came together to host the Summit for Healthy Aging and Care: Innovating Together in Fredericton. More than 320 people from across the province took part in the two-day summit with the shared goal of developing ideas into a framework for change that would involve and be helpful to all stakeholders, government.

The Premier spoke to us about his concerns, and the truth is, for thousands of us working in the field of aging and care, sleepless nights are all too familiar. There is agreement in all corners that time is short—we need a framework and vision and a plan for action with the public and private sectors collaborating. As the Premier told us, no one group or sector can drive this transformation alone.

Dr. John McLaughlin, Chair of the Premier's Panel on Healthy Aging, did not mince words when he told participants: "This is one of the defining public policy issues of our time. There must be a vision and collective will to come up with a real plan of attack." He cautioned that "the window of opportunity is very small", adding that in one to two years, New Brunswick must develop an agenda for age-friendly communities.

Age-friendly communities—this phrase was heard often during the two-day summit. It has a pleasant ring to it, but what does it really mean in practical, everyday terms? In a brief brainstorming session, summit participants easily came up with several suggestions that would contribute to making a community age friendly, including: reliable, accessible transportation; a community centre, welcoming to seniors; young people who value and maintain contact with seniors; municipal and provincial policies and programs that work together to benefit seniors; activities and events that include seniors; businesses that continue contact with retirees as valued resources; individuals who volunteer to do small tasks for seniors; and neighbours who check in on seniors in their area.

Dr. McLaughlin told the summit: "We focus on the negatives when we talk about the challenges of our aging population. These are important, but the next chapter in our New Brunswick narrative also must be positive. It must speak to the engagement and involvement of seniors in our communities and of communities giving back to seniors. We must move past our self-imposed limits—thinking that we can't do something because there's no money to do it. We must break through and build a plan shaped by a vision and collective action."

The creation of age-friendly communities is an exciting element of a vision for New Brunswick. It captured the imaginations and passion of those attending the summit.

There is much to be done, but after witnessing the building of relationships and expressions of commitment at the summit, we feel the first and perhaps most difficult hurdle has been overcome. The summit was more than a year in planning by organizations that had never worked together before, despite all being in the same field. The New Brunswick Special Care Homes Association, the Home Support Association and Association of Nursing Homes, the Senior Citizens Federation and Association Francophone des aînés, the University of New Brunswick and Université de Moncton, and the Vitalité and Horizon health networks all came to the table together, recognizing the increasing urgency for solutions. With the summit, we've moved from being dozens of organizations and individuals working separately to being a unified force with a shared goal—to improve the quality of life for our seniors, in ways that are sustainable for the long-term. For us, the summit was a vital first step, and the response to the summit was both inspiring and encouraging for the future.

We look forward to reading the report of the Premier's Panel on Healthy Aging in the near future, and we anticipate working closely and continuously with our partners in government toward solutions that could make New Brunswick a model for healthy aging and quality care for seniors.

Jodi Hall, Chairperson

On behalf of the Organizing Committee for the Summit on Healthy Aging and Care:
Innovating Together