

# OLDER AND WISER: Latest budget will increase services for seniors across B.C.

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Margaret Coates / North Shore News

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**WISER**  
Margaret Coates



So how did seniors fare in the provincial budget which came out last week?

Many are lauding some initiatives in the budget which affect seniors, including the reinstatement of the Monday to Thursday ferry fare discount for seniors, the increase in rental subsidies, \$150 million pledged to help connect those who do not have a family doctor with team-based primary care, a reduction in pharmacare deductibles, and \$548 million total in new funding over three years to improve services for seniors, including investments in home and community care, residential care, and assisted living.

The BC Care Providers Association (BCCPA) stated in a media release that “New investments directed at seniors’ care outlined in BC Budget 2018 is a critical first step toward meeting the growing needs of an aging population.”

BCCPA also notes the “new investments can help address critical labour shortages in the sector and improve quality of life for seniors”.

In order to address the worker shortage, the BCCPA, through BC Cares initiatives, hopes to secure the workers needed to fill thousands of anticipated vacancies in the sector.

Daniel Fontaine, CEO of BCCPA states that “at over four per cent projected growth over the coming decade, seniors’ care is the fastest growing part of our economy which highlights the urgent need for us to move quickly.”

Isobel Mackenzie, the provincial Seniors Advocate, called the budget a good one for seniors.

It addresses some of the issues Mackenzie raised in her review of services for seniors in a document called “Monitoring Seniors Services 2017” released in December that can be found at [seniorsadvocatebc.ca](http://seniorsadvocatebc.ca).

In the report, Mackenzie raised issues around home support hours, noting the average home support hours delivered per client per year has decreased by three per cent from the previous year, while the number of clients increased by 3.5 per cent.

She also reported that since 2005, the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) maximum rent that qualifies for a subsidy has increased nine per cent, while rents have increased by 45 per cent (seven per cent in the last year alone).

Mackenzie was pleased that the province is pledging \$116 million over three years to the SAFER program and Rental Assistance Program and raising the ceiling to include those who have annual household incomes of \$40,000, up from \$35,000.

The government is increasing rental assistance to seniors so that assistance will increase to \$930 for the year, and this will affect 35,000 seniors.

Along with the BCCPA, Mackenzie is also pleased with the promise to increase care hours for seniors living at home and in residential facilities through the \$548 million dollar investment.

In the BC Budget 2018, there is also a commitment to eventually eliminate the Medical Service Plan premiums in January 2020. This is following the reduction of the premium by half this January, which is a saving of \$450 per year for a senior who is not on a subsidy.

Pharmacare costs will go down for a family with a net income of \$45,000 as the deductible will be reduced, and for a family with a net income of \$30,000, the deductible will be eliminated.

Wanda Morris from CARP, an advocacy organization for seniors, stated: "The elimination of pharmaceutical deductibles for B.C. residents with the lowest incomes will help alleviate the strain our lowest income members feel when purchasing (or foregoing the purchase of) their medications. We also welcome the complete elimination (in 2020) of MSP fees – we've heard from many members that these fees are a hardship for them to pay."

Not everyone was happy with the budget.

While affordable housing (which is crucial to some seniors) was addressed, not enough is being done. B.C. Green Party Leader Andrew Weaver stated: "The steps on housing are welcome but not enough to deal with the crisis."

Some critics felt the government did not have a plan for paying for the new programs, and some felt the budget did not go far enough in supporting poor people.

Nevertheless, for many B.C. seniors this budget was good news. But going forward agencies like the BC Seniors Advocate Office will need to continue to monitor how well seniors' services are being delivered.

*Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 47 years and has worked for and with seniors for 20 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome Email: [lions\\_veiw@telus.net](mailto:lions_veiw@telus.net).*

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