

# OLDER AND WISER: Pandemic changes how we look at aging

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COVID-19 has likely increased incidents of senior abuse.

Oct. 1 is the International Day of Older Persons and the theme this year is: Pandemics: Do They Change How We Address Age and Aging?

The world according to the United Nations has seen an explosion in the population of older people and it's the UN's concern that people "respond to the opportunities and challenges of population aging in the 21st century and to promote the development of a society for all ages." According to the UN, the number of people aged 60 years and older will outnumber children younger than five.

A B.C. Stats 2018 report states the seniors population in the province is projected to grow by 75 per cent by the year 2041, with seniors representing more than a quarter of people living here at the end of the projection period. On the North Shore in 2016, there were 35,385 people over the age of 65, or almost 20 percent of the population of the three North Shore municipalities. These

statistics mean that as a society we should value our aging populations' historical and ongoing contributions to community. Seniors continue to contribute to the economic value of Canada through taxes, consumerism, transfer of wealth, staying in the workforce and more. They contribute untold volunteer hours, often stepping up to the plate to assist organizations to run their services and programs.

We should also recognize the various challenges seniors face in society, including financial issues such as end of life concerns, how to age in place, social isolation, poverty, poor housing and the immense amount of caregiving hours performed by seniors for their loved ones or friends that often takes a toll on their health.

But why the concentration on pandemics this year, especially COVID-19? As UN secretary general Antonio Guterres states: "The COVID-19 pandemic is causing untold fear and suffering for older people across the world. Beyond its immediate health impact, the pandemic is putting older people at greater risk of poverty, discrimination, and isolation."

In terms of discrimination, as I wrote in an earlier column, I have heard troubling things from people who try to stereotype and marginalize seniors in this difficult time. Some of these people think seniors are expendable during the COVID 19 pandemic. "But for many family and friends of seniors on the North Shore who have lost their lives to COVID-19, their passing has caused considerable grief."

Isolation is a major factor for seniors' health and well-being at any time and now the pandemic is furthering the issue. Since COVID-19, seniors have felt a loss of community supports as organizations have shut down their usual activities. Many are also isolating from their friends and family for safety concerns. Seniors have been asked to practise physical distancing to help control the spread of the virus and keep ourselves safe. But as the HealthLinkBC website suggests, "physical distancing can create even greater feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression."

The Canadian government website states: "It is easy to show your respect and gratitude for the older adults in your life. There are many options to thank the seniors in your life for all of their hard work and show them just how much they're appreciated." You could give them a few extra phone calls a week, go for a distanced walk a couple of times a week, and if they are computer savvy, set up Zoom calls with family and friends. It might be a good time to assist a senior with an internet connection and devices to use it. Once again, let us make Oct. 1 a banner day for seniors.

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