

**Alternative Planning Group/
Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network
Public Forum on Poverty and Income Security Issues:
*Hearing the Voices of Immigrant Seniors in Toronto***

**Forum Proceedings
Report**

**Saturday May 6, 2006
1:30-5:00 pm.
Cecil Community Centre, 58 Cecil Street
Toronto, ON**

Alternative Planning Group Members
African Canadian Social Development Council (ACSDC)
Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO)
Hispanic Development Council (HDC)
The Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA)

Acknowledgement

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Alternative Planning Group
APG Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network: Public Forum on Poverty and Income Security
Issues
Hearing the Voices of Immigrant Seniors in Toronto
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Invited Participants

The Honorable Jim Bradley (Ontario Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues)
The Honorable Chris Charlton (Critic, Seniors and Pensions, Federal NDP)
The Honorable Nicole Demers (Critic, Seniors Issues, Bloc Quebecois)
The Honorable Diane Finley (Minister for Human Resources and Social Development)
The Honorable Shelly Martel (Critic, Seniors Issues, Ontario NDP)
The Honorable Cameron Jackson (Critic, Seniors Issues, PC Party of Ontario)
The Honorable Maria Minna (Critic, Seniors Issues, Liberal Party of Canada)
Ms. Andrea Maurice (Assistant Deputy Minister, Community and Developmental Services Division, Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services)
Mr. Alan Nymark (Deputy Minister, Human Resources and Social Development Canada)

In Attendance

Invited Speakers

The Honorable Bob Delaney (Parliamentary Assistant to the Ontario Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues) - For The Honorable Jim Bradley
The Honorable Maria Minna (Liberal Opposition Critic for Seniors Issues)
The Honorable Nicole Demers (Bloc Quebecois Opposition Critic for Seniors Issues)
The Honorable Olivia Chow (MP, Federal NDP) – For The Honorable Chris Charlton
Mr. Athos Sani (Director, Old Age Security Policy, HRSDC) – For Mr. Alan Nymark

Other Special Guest

Ms. Rosemary Bell (Community Development Officer, City of Toronto)

APG Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network Leaders & General Participants

Ms. Kamlesh Oberoi, South Asian Canadian Community
Ms. Shen Hui Zhu, Chinese Canadian Community
Mr. Raul Hermosilla, Hispanic Canadian Community
Honourable Kiflejesus Woldemichael (Retired Presiding Judge, Supreme Court of Ethiopia)
Mr. Mr. Kuldeep Singh Sahi (Director, *Old Age Benefits Forum*, Brampton, Ontario Chapter)
216 Participating Seniors (Several Seniors Groups from the GTA)

Alternative Planning Group

Mr. Duberlis Ramos (Executive Director, Hispanic Development Council)
Mr. Raymond Micah (Executive Director, African Canadian Social Development Council)
Ms. Andalee Adamali (Program Manager, Council of Agencies Serving South Asians)
Ms. Lele Truong (Interim Executive Director, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter)
Mr. Farrukh Saleem (Communications Officer and Webmaster, CASSA)

OPENING REMARKS AND INTRODUCTIONS

(RAYMOND MICAH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AFRICAN CANADIAN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL)

Mr. Raymond Micah welcomed all attendees and gave a brief background on the Alternative Planning Group (APG), its objectives and its interest in working with immigrant seniors to strengthen their voice in advocating for measures that address their specific needs. He stressed the need for a special focus on immigrant seniors' issues given the peculiarities of the needs of immigrant seniors, particularly in light of barriers to income security they face under Canada's old age security programs.

The key purpose of the forum was to highlight to the various political parties, governments at all levels, and senior civil servants the fact that immigrant seniors have specific challenges that are not faced by the general seniors population, and that the impact of these challenges on the lives of immigrant seniors need to be addressed as a matter of priority. In many instances, these challenges include their language and cultural adjustment difficulties and related needs around housing, employment, income and pensions. He emphasized that the fundamental source of these challenges is how the immigration and income security systems are constructed, whose regulations unfairly impact the plight of immigrant seniors.

He indicated the APG's regret that there continued to exist a broad and pervasive lack of recognition of these particular problems facing immigrant seniors among the general population, politicians, civil servants, and even broad-based seniors organizations across Canada. This has forced immigrant seniors to suffer in silence away from the glare of public discourse.

It was in recognition of this that the APG secured a small amount of funding support from the City of Toronto to mobilize and support immigrant seniors to bring attention to their own needs, particularly in regards to their access to Canada's Old Age Security pension, the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS), and other social assistance programs in Ontario.

Through the forum and ongoing work, the APG has begun to work directly with a broad spectrum of immigrant seniors to highlight the income security and other needs of immigrant seniors for action. The APG and its alliance of immigrant seniors plan to continue the process of building awareness and support among key stakeholders at the community, government and civil service levels. Their ultimate goal is to facilitate federal, provincial and municipal legislative and policy changes that would ensure that there are equal income security, housing, and other quality of life outcomes for immigrant seniors in Canada.

He then gave a brief overview of the Agenda for the afternoon, introduced the Panel of Speakers and invited them to give their presentation.

What follows is an overview of the key points covered in each of the speaker's speech.

WELCOMING REMARKS

(DUBERLIS RAMOS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HISPANIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL)

After several years of work, the four members of the Alternative Planning Group (APG) have come together to help address one of the most pressing needs amongst our collective member communities: The difficulties confronting immigrant seniors with respect to income and quality of life.

The APG has, as one of its key concerns, the advancement of the diverse communities in our region and Canada; and one of our priorities is the advancement of our most vulnerable populations.

Hence today, in the spirit of cooperation in forging a positive future for immigrant seniors, the APG and seniors from the Chinese, South Asian, African, and Hispanic Canadian communities have gathered to begin to put together a collective initiative to change inequities through policy change. We hope that this form beginning steps that would lead to new policy directions that would ensure a decent quality of life and participation for seniors in our communities, also. We hope, in this way, to facilitate the attainment of full fledged membership of immigrant seniors in this country of ours.

By the end of the day, we expect that ideas, feelings and hopes would have come alive, and we would be able to confirm the next important steps we will all have to take to achieve that meaningful quality of life all seniors in Canada yearn for.

I would like to thank our panel of guests for joining us today, especially given the fact that many of them have had to travel a long way in order to contribute to this forum; and, on a weekend like this, they no doubt would have found many other good uses for their time.

I encourage all of us to continue the dialogue we are starting here beyond today. Certainly, the APG will continue to keep in touch; and we will make every effort to ensure that the communication lines are open for further dialogue and action.

We look forward to a fruitful day of work; and many thanks to all of you present here today.

Thanks

KEY POINTS IN PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Mr. Athos Sani, Director, Old Age Security Policy, HRSDC – On behalf of Mr. Alan Nymark, Deputy Minister, Human Resources and Social Development

Mr. Sani pointed to the increasing seniors population in Canada and the income supports available to them.

Key Points

- There are 4.2 million seniors in Canada, most of whom receive some form of social assistance; in 30 years over ¼ of Canadians will be over the age 65
- Old Age Security is available to all. However you must be a resident for at least 10 years
- The Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) acts as a safety net to bring seniors above the low-income cut-off
- 1.3 million seniors renew their applications for the GIS annually
- In January 2006, there was an increase in to the GIS by \$18/month for single seniors and \$29/month for couples. In January 2007, payments will increase again by the same amount.

The Hon. Bob Delaney, Parliamentary Assistant to the Ontario Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues - On behalf of The Hon. Jim Bradley, Ontario Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues

The Hon. Bob Delaney outlined the importance of immigration to Canada, the needs of seniors, and how the Ontario government was helping address the needs of seniors through budgetary allocations to seniors programs.

Key Points

- Immigration is key to Canada's and Ontario's success, both economically and socially, and Canada's multiculturalism offers a role model to other countries around the world
- There is a key need for affordable housing for seniors, so since August 2005 the province has invested \$600 million in affordable housing
- Seniors, however, do have unique health care needs, and the government is taking action to address them:
 - Long-term care: \$200 million has been allocated for the creation of new beds
 - There has been a rate freeze on nursing homes
 - \$113 million was invested in seniors health care in 2005-2006
 - There has been an increase in funding for cataracts and hip and knee replacement surgeries.

Other immigrant seniors concerns are also being addressed by the Ontario Government

- Need for continued access to the workforce – In Dec 2006, the age 65 mandatory retirement requirement was eliminated
- Language training and settlement services have increased
- Help to train professionals to work in their fields has increased
- Plans are underway to speed up the process of gaining professional licenses for foreign-trained workers in Canada
- There is a Seniors Help Line now available (1-888-910-1991), and it is available in 30 different languages.

The Hon. Maria Minna, Liberal Party of Canada Opposition Critic for Seniors Issues

Key Points

- The previous Liberal government increased funding for the seniors program, *New Horizons*. This funding supports social activities for seniors
- The level of income support for seniors is too low, even with the GIS. This affects women seniors the most. In 2005, the Liberal government increased the GIS, but it is still not sufficient to meet the needs of seniors
- Increased age equates to increased medical costs, and this needs to be addressed
- There is a need to increase government supports to caregivers
- There is a need for caregiver benefits, specifically short term acute care benefits, so families are not overburdened. This is especially important for women, since they become most often the primary caregivers.
- Caregiver benefits would help offset the costs related to the time taken off work by the caregivers. Canada is behind most developed countries in providing such supports to caregivers
- In 2003, a Canadian Caregiver Initiative for short-term acute care was part of a Liberal government's national strategy. However, this needs to be enhanced
- There is an urgent need to designate a Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues - the focus of the Conservative Government is off seniors, since there is now no minister designated for seniors concerns.

The Hon. Nicole Demers, Bloc Quebecois Opposition Critic for Seniors Issues

The Hon. Nicole Demers presented a number of options for addressing immigrant seniors issues through advocacy, planning and policy change.

Drawing on her experience in working with seniors prior to her election to Parliament, the Honourable Nicole Demers discussed a range of issues affecting seniors across Canada which require government leadership and action.

Key Points

- Seniors are becoming a large percentage of the general population. This increase could potentially give them more influence over planning and policy
- There is a great need for a Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues

Suggestions

- Write to Prime Minister Stephen Harper suggesting the need for a Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues
- Write to MPs and MPPs raising seniors issues, so that all parliamentarians and governments would put the necessary focus on seniors issues for action.

Olivia Chow, MP Trinity-Spadina Federal NDP

The Hon. Olivia Chow outlined the need for increased awareness of social assistance available to seniors, and the federal NDP is demanding the government take action to make it easier for seniors to access such support.

Key Points

- There have been some positive actions taken by the government regarding immigration
- There has been a formal apology for the Chinese Head Tax that was once imposed (\$500/person). There may also be reimbursement to the affected families. This is an enormous victory for the cause of justice.

Increasing the GIS

- GIS increases have not been any more than a dollar a day
- Many seniors are not aware of their eligibility for GIS
- Seniors who fill out income tax forms should automatically re-qualify for the GIS, rather than having to reapply annually.
- GIS forms are often only offered in English/French; they need to be multilingual
- There is a need for multilingual access to all government services and programs
- There is a need to link the OAS and the GIS to the cost-of-living, as the current income supplements do not meet the current cost-of-living.

Seniors Disability Credit

- There is a Seniors Disability Credit. It is for disabilities requiring a wheelchair or involves problems in walking, as well as speech and sight disabilities
- This information is contained on income tax forms, but a number of seniors with a disability are unaware that they are eligible for \$1,400/year, and that this can be backdated for up to 10 years.

Increasing Funding for Seniors Health Care

- Increased health care, home care, and long term-care was initiated by the NDP, under the visionary leadership of Tommy Douglas
- Currently the NDP, with the leadership of its Critic for Seniors Issues, the Honourable Chris Charlton, is lobbying for seniors and for better pensions. Specifically, the NDP has demanded the following:
 - Perform an annual review on seniors issues
 - Change the Pension Benefits Standards Act to provide better support to seniors
 - Make changes to the Canadian Pension Plan to protect families who care for elderly family members and must take time off work
 - Provide guaranteed income support to all seniors
 - Provide supports for health care and home care, and ensure better pharmacare costs for seniors

Quality of Life and Housing for Seniors

- Affordable/safe housing- no more than 30% of a senior's income should go to housing
- Seniors housing has not been built for 20 years
- There should be more life-long learning programs that are free, e.g., physical fitness and skills classes for seniors.

What follows are the speeches made by members of the APG Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network**Seniors' Speeches****Mrs. Shen Hui Zhu**

Good afternoon. Everyone!

My name is Shen. Like my friends here today, 7 years ago, my husband and I were sponsored to Canada from China.

I used to be a Chinese doctor with more than 30 years experience. But being a senior with no English language skills, I could not find employment. It's not easy for a senior like me to start a new career in Canada. I was only able to get work as a personal care attendant for less than one year with low pay.

My husband was a Chinese doctor too. He worked as a general worker in Canada for a short time. Four years ago, he left me alone because of liver cancer. I have no income and could not find a job. I was getting depression and feeling hopeless.

Because of the 10-year residency requirement, I am not able to get OAS or CPP survivor benefits. I applied for ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), and after a very long waiting period, *I got help from ODSP.*

So I am attending LINC class now and joined the Chinese Seniors Group.

As a senior with knowledge and skills, I'd like to have job opportunities and continue to work to support myself. But employment is impossible for seniors like me.

In conclusion, we need help from Government for income and more seniors services.

Thank you.

Ms. Kamlesh Oberoi

Good afternoon, my name is Kamlesh Oberoi. I have been in Canada since 1993, I am a volunteer with 10 community organizations and groups including Senior Awic Club, Indio Canadian, Aryasamaj Senior Citizen Club & Women Awic as Joint Society. I am working in many senior groups very closely and aware of their problems. I have completed 8,000 volunteering hours and received two awards from the Ministry of Immigration & Citizenship.

Today I would like to point out that many senior men and women both or living isolation & victim of loneliness. Some of them are not mobile. Today, I came here to represent my friends and speak out for our needs.

We need more creation places. Just like in BC, they provide free public transportation to seniors in order to encourage them to reach senior clubs and recreation centre to get together for social gathering & community and events. They can meet other seniors, they feel happy and it will reduce their loneliness and isolation that can help them to be healthy and stronger.

Because of my experience with different senior groups, I can say seniors can get motivation from other seniors. Today I have a group of seniors with me here who will present some songs for us. This is an example that seniors who do not live in isolation, get together and sing songs and dance together.

I'd like to thank all of you to provide me a chance to tell you the needs of seniors. More places for seniors to improve the quality life in Canada.

Thank you.

Mr. Kuldeep Singh Sahi (Director, *Old Age Benefits Forum*, Brampton, Ontario Chapter)

1. *Who We Are*

Old Age Benefits Forum is a registered body with more than 3000 members all across Canada. **Forum** is engaged in creating awareness in Canadian society regarding the income and other needs of all seniors, so as to enable all seniors to continue to play an active and positive role in the enrichment of social life in our country and all mankind. **Forum** has chapters in all the major cities of Canada.

2. *The Concept and Goal of Canada's Old Age Security System*

- (a) The concept and goal of Canada's Old Age Security system (the Old Age Security Pension and the Guaranteed Income Supplement combined) is to provide a basic level of support for all Canadian seniors, irrespective of country of origin. As such, it functions as a social welfare program for the aged - to help seniors 65 years and over who have little or no income. By combining the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) with the Old Age Security (OAS) program, the Old Age Security system in Canada seeks to ensure that those seniors whose income fall below the National Household Income Average are able to meet their basic needs, such as shelter, meals, clothing and other sheer necessities of life, irrespective of cast, creed or color. In this way all Canadian seniors can live with dignity and respect. It is this sort of support for all that enabled Canada to earn the reputation of being the best country in the world to live in. In fact, Canada won this important accolade from the UN for 6 years in a row.
- (b) Old Age Security (OAS) benefits are not based on any personal financial contributions.

3. *What is the Issue?*

- (a) Presently there is discrimination prevalent in the act governing the Old Age Security system. Under that act, there is a 10-year residency requirement for eligibility for the OAS. In effect, this requirement imposes limitations on the basis of country of origin and race, which violates the letter and spirit of the EQUALITY CONCEPT enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution Act, 1982).
- (b) The act was amended in 1977 to incorporate provisions allowing reciprocal social security agreements to be entered into between Canada and other countries. This permitted portability of residency periods in those countries, so that previous residents of the agreement countries are able to qualify for Old Age Security benefits in Canada.

This means that even after as little as one year of residency in Canada, Canadian seniors who are sponsored immigrants from the favored countries/nations (the agreement countries), are allowed to receive Old Age Security benefits in Canada, plus the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Yet seniors in Canada from non-agreement countries could live in Canada for 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 or 9 years and not be eligible for any OAS or GIS benefits whatsoever; and it does not matter whether they are 65 or 75 years old! This unfairness has been admitted by the Department of Human Resources and Social Development itself (Development FACT SHEET dated March 1996, and Policy Directive dated October 1997), yet no corrective action has been taken. Clearly the ailment has been correctly diagnosed, but the available cure has been ignored.

4. *Why We Need Change*

- (a) The 10-year residency requirement, which has the effect of imposing an eligibility barrier on the basis of country origin and race, violates the Rights of Equality enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution Act, 1982)
- (b) The Old Age Security Act was enacted to ensure a basic standard of living for seniors in Canada - a cornerstone principle of the Canadian Social Security system.
- (c) The 10-year residency requirement has a significant impact on elderly immigrants. An elderly person often has limited physical and mental resources to provide for him or herself. Such a person's need for the basic necessities of life will not depend on where he or she came from.
- (d) Since 1977 Canada has entered into agreements with 50 countries, including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, 20 Western European nations, Mexico, Chile, Philippines and 9 Caribbean nations. Areas of the world without such agreements with Canada include Africa (except Morocco), Asia (except Philippines, Israel and Turkey), Central America, South America (except Chile), and Eastern Europe.
- (e) It was here that the discrimination between seniors over the age of 65 on the basis of country of origin starts, creating two classes among residents of Canada: one coming from certain countries who get Old Age Security benefits as soon as they reach age 65, and another group of immigrant seniors who are asked to fulfill a 10-year residency requirement before they are eligible for support.

This rule, and the treatment flowing from it, was not justifiable right from its inception, but its injustice became more pronounced when it came into conflict directly with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, following the coming into effect of the Charter on April 17, 1985.

The denial of old age pension benefits to most new immigrant seniors is also contrary to the motto/claim of all the political parties, **THAT EQUALITY IS THEIR FUNDAMENTAL VALUE, AND THAT BEING HUMAN, EVERY MEMBER OF THE CANADIAN SOCIETY DESERVES TO BE TREATED AS EQUAL IN EVERY RESPECT.**

This denial is also contrary to the unanimous view of the Supreme Court of Canada (in the case of *Andrews versus Law Society of British Columbia*) that the primary mission of provisions of Section 15 of the Charter is:

“THE PROMOTION OF A SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL ARE SECURE IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THEY ARE RECOGNISED AT LAW AS HUMAN BEINGS EQUALLY DESERVING OF CONCERN, RESPECT AND CONSIDERATION [(1989) 1SCR 143 AT P171, 56, DLR (4TH) 1]”

- (f) This discrimination is also contrary to the principle of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) that “All Human Beings are born free and equal in Dignity and Rights.” Yet, Canada is a signatory to both of these conventions, and is therefore obliged to follow its fundamental precept!
- (g) Although belatedly, through a Fact Sheet dated March 6, 1996 and Policy Directive #17/97 OAS-03, issued on October 24, 1997, the federal government, in its wisdom, has admitted the fact that the law is unfair to immigrant seniors from non-social agreement countries, no action has thus far been taken to grant of Old Age Security benefits to such seniors.
- (h) In fact, while Policy Directive #17/97 OAS-03 was intended to remove the existing discrimination and promote fairness, any subsequent action that may have been taken has failed to achieve the aim of granting OAS benefits to seniors who had been denied.
- (i) The federal government continues to maintain that it is committed to ensuring equality for all, particularity for vulnerable and needy seniors. The federal government therefore has a historic opportunity to achieve this goal by removing this black spot from the fair face of the Canadian legal system.

5. *What Will the Proposed Change Cost?*

- (a) Statistics Canada data shows that in May 1996, there were 3,527,845 individuals in the 65 and over age group, of whom 3,510,847 were receiving Old Age Security benefits. This left some 16, 998 Canadians in the 65+ age group without any such benefits.
- (b) Out of the 16, 998 seniors who were not receiving any Old Age Security or Guaranteed Income Supplement benefits, more than half received Social Assistance, instead.
- (c) If the amounts paid out in Social Assistance to half the OAS-ineligible seniors were taken into account, government would only have had to spend a moderate additional amount in order to provide the OAS-equivalent support to all immigrant seniors. In fact, we estimate that in 1996 government would only have had to spend an additional \$7 million - \$8 million to fully provide OAS support to all seniors. As a proportion of the total amount spent on seniors through the OAS and CPP programs - \$24 billion in 1999

- this is really a small amount indeed. Yet, this small additional amount has the potential not only to significantly improve the lives of the many immigrant seniors currently denied OAS benefits, but also to remove the discrimination and unfairness felt by most immigrant seniors in Canada.

6. *What Needs To Be Done*

We ask that the federal government amend the Old Age Security Act to remove the 10-year residency requirement, as contained in Section 3 of the Act, to give OAS benefits to all Canadian seniors without discrimination.

Concluding Statement

We once again sincerely request that OAS benefits be provided to each and every senior over the age of 65, irrespective of country of origin, color or creed, which is the intended purpose of the Canadian Old Age Security system. This can be done at the established rule of 1/40 of the flat rate full pension for each year of residency in Canada plus due Guaranteed Income Supplement, in order to achieve the basic living standard, or at least 1/10 of the GIS per year and growing over the period of 10 years, as provided to non-sponsored immigrants from agreement countries.

Mr. Raul Hermosilla

Ladies and Gentlemen, representatives of federal and provincial ministries, Honorable Members of Parliament and Opposition Critics on Senior Issues, and fellow seniors:

On behalf of the Asociacion de Seniors Hispanos de Toronto (ASHTOR) -Hispanic Seniors Association of Toronto, I bring you greetings as well as a message on some of the needs over a 125 Hispanic seniors from three different clubs voiced in our consultative meetings.

After the consultative meetings, our membership identified “ten priority needs”: housing, retirement homes and nursing homes, health issues, transportation, language, pensions, safety in the building we live, security on streets and public places, home rent, and work opportunities. As you can see these identified needs range from the real and doable, to concern and optimistic nature with housing being the number one need.

A majority of the seniors from emerging communities came to Canada late in their lives, most of the time to help their own children to raise their families. Every elderly individual or couple would like to have their own space, but the income of our community of seniors is so low that we cannot afford to rent in the commercial housing market.

Therefore, members of our association would like to unify efforts to acquire accessible and subsidized housing without enduring a long waiting list for years, that especially at old age when a prolonged period may become a slow suicide, or can even become a fatal endeavor. To compound the problem, those seniors who need long term care end up totally isolated in a facility as a consequence of linguistic and cultural barriers, far from their peers and families. Special attention should be paid to ethnic seniors to place them in culturally sensitized wings or pavilions interacting with members of their own communities.

Like many other senior groups in Ontario we continue to support our public health care system as universal, accessible to all and based on needs rather than ability to pay. Therefore, in view of the large number of people becoming seniors in the next few years, supportive home care and long-term residential care will need adequate funding to make the process of aging a healthy one.

We also appeal to the pertinent authorities, to step up security for the seniors in those buildings and areas of the city where due to their frailty they become victims of crime. This creates a situation that increases the isolation of our senior citizens and opens the doors to depression and other illnesses that make the third age a painful process rather than a peaceful one. Municipal authorities should give to this concern a high priority in their planning for future years.

In closing I would like to state that the \$1.4 billion for affordable housing of which \$800 million are “for the provinces to draw upon the next three years based on their population” takes into account the needs of the senior population as stated above.

Therefore, Ladies and Gentlemen, representatives of federal and provincial ministries, Honorable Members of Parliament and Opposition Critics on Senior Issues, I am asking you to bring our message to the House so that our voice is heard through you and we are allowed to grow older in comfort, peace, and security.

Thank you very much.

The Honourable Kiflejesus Woldemichael (Retired Presiding Judge, Supreme Court of Ethiopia)

Honourable Parliamentary Assistant,
MPs, Director, Other Guests of Honor,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please allow me to extend my gratitude to you for coming to hear us, immigrant seniors from the African, Chinese, Hispanic, and South Asian Canadian communities.

I do wish to present to you some of the chronic and common problems we face as immigrant seniors, hoping that you will take them seriously, and take the actions we recommend.

The particular problems I wish to present to you focus on two issues:

- *Qualifying for the Old Age Security Pension and the related Guaranteed Income Supplement; and*
- *Problems sponsored immigrant seniors and their families face when there is a genuine sponsorship breakdown and the seniors have to seek social assistance.*

A. Old Age Security Pension & Guaranteed Income Supplement

According to the Old Age Security Act and Guaranteed Income Supplement, to be eligible for Old Age Security pension, a person must have lived in Canada as a legal resident for a minimum of 10 years, after reaching the age 18.

This is a major problem that negatively affects the lives of immigrant seniors in Canada.:

(1) The 10-year waiting requirement causes immigrant seniors to live in poor circumstances that seriously affect their livelihood and mental well-being.

As immigrant seniors, we feel highly discriminated against, as compared to other seniors in Canada.

(2) The 10-year waiting requirement prevents us from receiving the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) benefit.

This is unfortunate and unfair to us, since the GIS is supposed to be the one safety valve that seeks to prevent abject poverty among seniors in Canada.

(3) The immigration process is so very slow that our children try for many years before they succeed in reuniting with us, their parents.

(4) Although we believe the 10-year residency requirement is discriminatory, the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that it is not discriminatory, agreeing that the government is allowed to set residency criteria for benefit plans.

However, the Court has not prevented the adjustment or amendment of law in accordance with the present and changed circumstances.

So the government is still free to make policy and legal adjustments to this clearly outdated law.

(5) It is important not to assume that immigrant seniors bring no value to Canada. On the contrary, senior immigrants bring a wealth of knowledge, skills and culture. Indeed, they only need fair opportunity to exercise their professional work.

Also, while many are prevented from having equal opportunity to employment when they can work -and wish to work -, as seniors, many others eventually do get some work, and are working.

(6) Canada prides itself on having one of the world's most generous old age benefit systems.

This is true, and as immigrant seniors we value this, also.

But this is true only for seniors who were born in Canada, or who have lived most of their lives in Canada.

Sadly, when we compare the generosity and fairness Canada shows regarding the Old Age security pension for long-term Canadian residents, and the barriers erected against new immigrants who come to Canada at or above the age of 60, we can not agree with the above description.

Canada can do better. It can amend the Old Age Security Act to extend the same benefits to all seniors, regardless of time spent in the country, or immigrant sponsorship status.

As I have said, when situations change, laws and policies must also adapt; and outdated laws must be amended.

Therefore:

- ***On the basis of humanitarian consideration;***
- ***for good public policy purposes; and,***
- ***to sustain Canada's good name and practice in the area of old age income security,***

It is urgent and necessary that the Canadian government become more flexible and accommodating, and treat immigrant seniors as equal members of the Canadian family by eliminating the 10-year residency requirement.

B. Sponsorship and Income Support

The issue:

Immigrant seniors and their families are currently put under severe financial and emotional strain through cost recovery and other punitive schemes when there is a genuine situation of sponsorship breakdown, and this practice needs to end.

Sometimes, unforeseen circumstances develop that make it extremely difficult to handle the situations families face without outside help.

This sometimes includes obligations our family sponsors sign as a condition of being allowed to reunite with us.

Therefore, the actions federal, provincial and municipal governments take when there is a genuine sponsorship breakdown involving seniors need to be considered more deeply, and with far greater compassion, than the current practice shows.

Family reunification is a central aspect of Canadian values, and should apply to all, regardless of place of birth.

In a situation of genuine sponsorship breakdown, where the sponsored person is a senior, the government should not seek enforcement of sponsorship obligations as a condition of social assistance support.

Pensions and social assistance are granted to individuals as they reach the age of 65, or as the need arises.

This should be the case, for example, when the sponsor is still working, earning an adequate income to sufficiently support their family, and there is no genuine breakdown in family relations that would necessitate a separation of the family for emotional or safety reasons.

Certainly, when a person sponsors their parents, and deliberately breaks their sponsorship agreement, they should be required to live up to their obligations.

However, in unforeseen situations of unemployment, reduced income, or genuine breakdown in family relations, the consequence is often sponsorship breakdown.

Such an unforeseen situation is what is called **force major** in law;, and even under the law, individuals who fall victim to force major are excused from their previous obligations.

In such cases, then, the sponsor should not be forced to fulfill their obligations as a condition of helping the senior.

Specifically, as sponsored seniors, we are asking that:

- *When our sponsors face such situations, they should not be forced to repay what assistance is provided to us; and,*
- *They should not be banned from sponsoring other family members in the future when they are in a better position to do so.*

By forcing poor sponsors to live up to their sponsorship obligation, regardless of the intensity of the poverty they may be facing, ***governments add undue pressure to the already difficult family situation. This pressure, in itself, often contributes to family tensions and, ultimately, to family breakdowns and mental anguish for all the family, including the seniors.***

We have seen many sponsored immigrant seniors suffer tremendous emotional strain, and choose to remain without any social assistance even when they desperately need the help.

They do this only because they are afraid of the consequences for their families, who they know are not in fact in a position to really help them financially, no matter what their sponsorship obligation says.

Therefore, this joint meeting of immigrant seniors respectfully asks the concerned authorities to stop enforcing the sponsorship agreements as condition of support, and provide the social assistance to the sponsored seniors immediately after the breakdown of the sponsorship.

Thank you.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS and NEXT STEPS

(RAYMOND MICAH, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AFRICAN CANADIAN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL)

The summary recommendations agreed to by the seniors and the forum participants are as follows:

Eliminate the 10-Year Residency Requirement

- On the basis of humanitarian consideration;
- For good public policy purposes;
- To sustain Canada's name and practice as a global leader in the area of old age income security issues:
 - It is urgent and necessary that the Canadian Government become more flexible and accommodating, and treat immigrant seniors as equal members of the Canadian family by eliminating the 10-year residency requirement.
- This needs to be implemented by an amendment to the Old Age Security Act and applicable regulations and policies.

Access to Social Assistance For Sponsored Immigrant Seniors

- In a situation of genuine sponsorship breakdown, where the sponsored person is a senior, the government should not seek enforcement of sponsorship obligations as a condition of social assistance support.
- This may require a special transfer from the federal government, or a cost-sharing arrangement between the provinces and the federal government, to address the financial costs of such a change.

Overcoming Cost-Related Isolation of Seniors and Improving Quality of Life

- It is recommended that a more affordable, nominal public transit charge be established for all seniors, within the range currently in place in British Columbia (45/year) so that all seniors, particularly immigrant seniors, would be able to overcome the isolation they suffer because of the cost of using public transit.

Affordable Ethnospecific Housing for Immigrant Seniors

- It is recommended that the federal and provincial governments provide funding to support more ethnospecific, affordable housing for seniors who need or desire it, so that they would be more readily able to address their housing needs and build comfortable relationships with other seniors, thereby helping improve and sustain their quality of life.

NEXT STEPS

- The APG and the Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network will be seeking dialogue with all appropriate political parties at federal and provincial levels, and with municipalities, to address the recommendations put forward and to seek their support for action.
- We will continue to correspond directly with the forum speakers and those who were unable to attend because of scheduling and similar problems.
- Delegations of seniors will be going to the political parties to discuss the recommendations and to find champions who would raise related questions for answers in the House of Commons, provincial legislatures, and municipal councils, and who would possibly push for action through a Private Member's Bill, if party action is not forthcoming.
- The APG Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network will also be meeting with appropriate seniors-focussed institutions, such as the Ontario Seniors Secretariat, to raise these issues and to seek their support for the recommendations, as well as their assistance in connecting with other stakeholder groups in the various provinces.
- Campaign to appoint a federal Minister Responsible for Seniors Issues
- Lobby various levels of government for a nominal seniors public transit pass similar to that available in British Columbia.
- Hold an all-candidates meeting during city and other elections on immigrant seniors issues to promote consensus for action.

Desired Outcomes

- The recommended actions receive the endorsement and support of all parties and stakeholders, and are acted upon as a matter of priority.
- The actions taken result in income security for immigrant seniors to the same extent that is available to Canadian-born and long-term senior residents; and the social housing and other measures taken result in a comparable quality of life for all seniors in Canada.

CLOSING REMARKS

(MS. LELE TRUONG – INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CCNCTO)

On behalf of the Alternative Planning Group, I would like to thank all the Forum presenters and participants, including the seniors groups, for their support and participation, which have made this Forum a most successful event.

A special thanks to our Senior Leaders for their tremendous contributions throughout the organizing of this event. We are all inspired by their energy and commitment to sharing their personal experiences and wisdom with us.

I would also like to thank our guest speakers for joining us today, namely, the Honourable Bob Delaney, the Honourable Maria Minna, the Honourable Nicole Demers, the Honourable Olivia Chow, and Mr. Athos Sani. We really appreciate the trouble you took to be here to contribute to this Forum today. We will most surely be getting back to you as we go forward.

We would also like to thank our funder, the City of Toronto's Access, Equity and Human Rights Program, for their ongoing support of this work.

Our seniors have expressed their hopes and concerns today. Income security is necessary to provide the means for immigrant seniors rise out of poverty. But other social supports, such as affordable, ethnospecific housing and nominal public transit fares, are also needed if immigrant seniors are to be able to overcome the barriers to a decent quality of life, such as isolation, communication, and civic participation.

In closing, I would like to stress that the current income security system has unwittingly turned a key component of the beauties and riches of Canada, immigration, into a deficiency and, in the process, has made immigrant seniors its victim.

The APG and its partners in the Immigrant Seniors Advocacy Network are committed to ensuring that immigrant seniors and all seniors have a strong voice in advocating on their issues, so that Canada's income security tent can truly accommodate the quality of life needs of all.