



Office of the  
**SENIORS' ADVOCATE**  
Newfoundland and Labrador

**Submission to the Policing  
Transformation Working Group**

**July 26, 2024**



In response to the May 23, 2024 invitation from Minister John Hogan, the Office of the Seniors Advocate (OSA) is pleased to offer this submission to inform the work of the Policing Transformation Working Group (PTWG). While there are many similarities to the experiences of the general population, seniors' experiences with policing services can have some unique elements; hence the importance of this submission for the PTWG's consideration.

## **Introduction**

Beginning in 1946, Canada was one country where the number of births increased significantly. This growth continued every year through 1964 when the number of births began to decrease and the so-called "baby boom" ended. With the baby boomer generation, Canada's population has been shifting dramatically every year with a rapidly growing proportion of seniors.

Medical advancements, economic changes, and strikingly low birth rates have all contributed to Canada's aging population where it is most pronounced in the Atlantic provinces, with Newfoundland and Labrador having not only has the largest proportion of seniors, but also has the fastest growing population of seniors in Canada. Given the province's demographics, with 47.4 per cent of the province being 50 years and older and 24.4 per cent of the province being age 65 years and older, the likelihood that seniors will require policing services, in some capacity, will increase.

The OSA identifies seniors as people aged 65 and older but know that people self-identify at varying ages after 50 years. Whether a person identifies as a senior at age 50, 65 or 90, as a population group, there is no other cohort with as large an age span. Despite the large number of seniors, many are concerned about being marginalized. Seniors feel that too often negative stereotypes about aging taint perceptions. Seniors simply ask for due respect and recognition. And while this is not unique to seniors, too often seniors are subjected to ageist attitudes and actions. While most negative "isms" like sexism and racism are globally denounced, ageism is too often regarded as less serious and seniors, therefore, less important.

As with the general population, seniors may be victims, perpetrators, witnesses, or recipients of medical or social assistance. Seniors are victims of every kind of abuse especially physical, emotional, financial, sexual and spiritual. In Canada, recent estimates suggest that 2 per cent of seniors experience violence, however, it is likely this is an underestimation (Conroy & Sutton, 2022) because seniors are victimized far more frequently than what is reported to police. The reasons for their reluctance to report offenses varies, but often includes fear of retaliation, sense of shame or embarrassment.

Seniors who are isolated, dependent on others, institutionalized, or have an impairment or disability are at far greater risk. As well, there are higher rates of violence against seniors in rural communities (Conroy & Sutton, 2022). It is no surprise that seniors who experience violence are more likely to suffer extreme negative outcomes than younger

age cohorts, including institutionalization and death. Ensuring that police officers are aware of the differences within the age group, including age-related health concerns, increased risk of victimization, as well as available community resources, is essential to keeping seniors safe in the community.

## **What Is Known**

In addition to regular ongoing contact with seniors via mail, email or telephone, the Office of the Seniors' Advocate has met with well over 1,000 seniors throughout Newfoundland and Labrador during community consultation sessions. The seniors we have been listening to come from all socio-economic backgrounds, from wealthy, independent seniors to the most vulnerable people in our society living in extreme poverty and wholly dependent on external assistance.

Individual experiences with policing services most definitely differ regarding nature, intensity, and perceptions. As indicated in recent data procured by the OSA from the Department of Justice and Public Safety, the number of criminal violations involving a senior victim has grown nearly every year since 2019, at a rate that far exceeds the population growth. Seniors are often targeted because of frailty (perceived or real) and the availability of fewer social supports as people age (Tomaszewska-Hołub, B., 2022).

Poor health and age-related conditions, such as dementia, can place a person at higher risk of abuse. Diminished cognitive capacity heightens susceptibility to being taken advantage of and maliciously manipulated. Many seniors subsist on fixed incomes. Living with limited financial resources makes recovery from victimization quite challenging if not impossible.

Police officers may be called to respond to a suspected case of elder abuse or a complaint of criminal activity involving a senior with cognitive impairment. When first responders lack training or have inadequate insight into the possible behaviours associated with certain illnesses or dementia, the situation can escalate to one of high-risk situation. For example, an individual with dementia may present as impaired, agitated, confused, emotional and/or fearful. The person may not be able to answer even basic questions or provide information. The person could even experience hallucinations or delusions. Police officers, like all first responders, must have an awareness of and recognize the signs of certain illnesses and dementia, particularly if the individual is confused and agitated with no other obvious reasons for the behaviours. When a responder does not have appropriate training and fails to employ appropriate strategies to effectively calm down the individual, a situation can quickly escalate.

After a tense situation has been resolved, the final action of a police officer should be to ensure that the family is made aware of available community resources, supports and services. On the surface this might sound like a duty beyond the scope and practice of a police officer. But this final action is an example of the preventative component of police work. The provision of information is akin to throwing a family a lifeline to help navigate

a complicated situation during a very stressful time; this information might be what actually prevents repeat visits to the home by police officers. Without positive changes or assistance, it stands to reason that a situation will be repeated.

Globally, the increased use of technology has exposed all of us to a myriad of previously unimagined intimidations. Although seniors are becoming more comfortable using technology, seniors tend to be less technologically savvy than younger cohorts of the population. Limited experience with the internet has led to a tendency for older adults to be more naïve to the risks and take fewer precautions therefore making them at a higher risk for falling victim to frauds/scams and abuse (Jiang et al., 2016). Some seniors actively avoid using technology for fear of falling victim to a cybercrime or scam. For the times we now live in, the decision to avoid technology is not a viable option.

Concerned family members, who have older parents who have fallen victim to such frauds/scams cite limited resources to help them navigate the situation or how to protect their parent from further harm. It is clear that as scams become more elaborate and continue to evolve to suit the needs of the perpetrators, the risk to the general population increases, further elevating the vulnerability of older adults (Alagood et al., 2023). To eliminate falling victim to such crimes, police officers must continue ongoing efforts to educate the public on safe internet use and protective resources, with a focus on older adults.

Data shows that reported criminal offenses perpetrated by seniors decreased prior to 2022, after which time these offenses began to increase. While it is difficult to make sound conclusions about senior offenders, sudden changes in this area may indicate a response to a range of systemic issues such as financial insecurity, mental health and addiction issues, and lack of appropriate and necessary supports and services (Holzer et al., 2022).

Some seniors have expressed a negative attitude about the quality and availability of police services. Generally, these sweeping opinions seem to be associated with personal, adverse experiences likely from not receiving the care and protection from the police that they expected. Some seniors attribute their perceptions to their precarious living circumstances i.e., housing-insecure, homeless and economically disadvantaged. These seniors are especially vulnerable and live with the fear of retaliation from people within their social circles if they were to phone the police for assistance; they feel unprotected, unheard, and unimportant.

Other seniors believe that their dwindling confidence in the ability of police to serve and protect them is due to the absence of a regular community police presence. This opinion was expressed more often in the more rural and remote regions of the province. Seniors compared current circumstances to past partnership models when the bond between police and community was stronger. Citizens knew the police officers and the officers knew the people. Police officers remained in communities for long time periods so that they connected to the community and the people; it was community policing in

its truest form. Consideration of geographic deployment with longer-term assignments/placements of police officers could enhance services and facilitate improved, positive contact between police and citizens, thus establishing stronger relationships and mutual accountability. By knowing the communities and the residents, police officers know the people whose behaviours place others at risk, and they know who is at risk. While it might be naive to expect a complete return to this model, much can be said about the benefits of feeling connected to police officers. Citizens feel more secure knowing police are nearby and able to respond quickly. Further, whether there are more police officers available, or they have a greater ability to respond more immediately, this can be a significant factor in deterring crimes. The general premise is that the presence of more police officers means not only that they will apprehend more criminals but also that there is a deterrence effect theorizing if criminals or would-be criminals feel there is a greater chance of being caught in a criminal act, they may choose not to act (Dao et al., 2021).

An issue brought to the attention of the OSA is the challenge seniors experience when removing/evicting unwanted individuals from their homes who refuse to leave. These individuals may be an adult child/grandchild, other family member or a non-relative. In some of these cases, elder abuse or other types of violence directed at the homeowner occurs. Currently, there is no avenue to compel these unwanted individuals to vacate the premises. Police have been called to assist, however, without a clear criminal offence they are unable to become involved in the removal of the unwanted individual.

The OSA has partnered with SeniorsNL and members of an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) subcommittee (part of the Steering Committee of the NL Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse) has met with both the Office of Women and Gender Equality and the Department of Justice and Public Safety to discuss opportunities to protect seniors trying to remove unwanted individuals. Currently, only people who have resided, or currently reside, with the respondent (this refers to the person the EPO would be against) in a conjugal relationship or by a person who is the parent of a child with the respondent (whether or not they are or ever were in a relationship). This means that blood relatives or adults in other trusted or inter-dependent relationships cannot apply for EPOs. One option under discussion is amending the legislation on EPOs to broaden the list of people who can apply for EPOs beyond an intimate partner or person they share a child with. This amendment would allow police to assist seniors in the removal of the unwanted individual.

## **What Is Needed**

For consideration, the OSA offers the following improvement opportunities:

- Education for police officers and other personnel about how and why seniors are more likely to become victims of crimes;

- Ongoing community education and awareness raising sessions for seniors and their families about violence prevention, frauds, scams and abuse, including tips for prevention;
- Education/training on certain illnesses and age-related conditions, including dementia, in which symptoms can be misconstrued as aggression, agitation or non-compliance;
- Education/training about the impacts of poverty, homelessness/housing instability, and how the experiences of seniors differs from other age groups;
- Increased knowledge on community resources and supports for seniors and families;
- Establish/Reestablish a community policing model throughout Newfoundland and Labrador; and
- Increased community presence of police officers to strengthen community partnerships.

The Office of the Seniors' Advocate thanks the Policing Transformation Working Group for the opportunity to provide a submission on this very important issue and looks forward to learning about the PTWG's findings and final conclusions.



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