

Serving city's aging population requires changes

Social isolation among the most serious challenges facing older adults

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As an older adult, I was interested in the recent trends that show changes in our community's older adult population, and there are many important policy implications that need to be considered.

The first and perhaps most significant trend cited in the recently published bulletin *Changing Older Adult Population*, from the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, is the aging of the population in each of the former municipalities that ring the downtown core of Hamilton. Most of the housing in these former municipalities were built on the suburban model: single family houses on large lots on crescent-type street design. However, the assumptions underlying this design, young families and car-dependent, are no longer valid. An older population, with a diminishing number of people per household and not wanting to be completely car-dependent, needs a different type of housing that offers easy access to shopping and services. While the large tracts of suburban-type housing will not be easily convertible to meet the needs of the aging population in these areas, it certainly is important for all future development in Hamilton to consider the trend of an aging population and to offer diverse types of housing with reasonable access to work, shopping and services using a variety of transportation modes.

Older adults in Hamilton are also becoming more ethnic and linguistically diverse as well. 10.6% of older adults identify with a visible minority as compared to 7.3% in 2006. Furthermore, the number of indigenous residents has almost doubled from 540 in 2006 to 1,175 in 2016. These trends have important implications, especially for the type and location of recreational services offered. A greater variety of exercise and dance programs as well as more varied art, craft and needlework activities should be incorporated into Hamilton's Recreation programming.

An increased representation in the labour force is another significant trend. In 2016, 26% of older adults in Hamilton indicated that they had worked the previous year as compared to 17% in 2006. Even as the population ages, the participation in the labour force continues to rise. This trend can be partially attributed to an increase in good health amongst older adults, which, of course, is positive. However, this increase might also reflect the necessity for many older adults to continue to work because of the lack of other financial resources. While the continued participation in the labour force might explain the reduction in the poverty rate among seniors aged 65 and over (from 17% in 2006 to 14% in 2016), it is important to note that rate of poverty in Hamilton remains higher than the provincial average. The continued participation of older adults in the labour force has many implications, one being the perception of an older person as diminishing in both physical and intellectual abilities. Ageism, along with sexism and racism are harmful and must be eliminated. The doddering old gent and the stupid old lady are stereotypes that all of us must erase from our minds. The

City of Hamilton and all other institutions must continue efforts to portray and treat all residents in Hamilton as they truly are: diverse in so many ways.

Finally, data from the bulletin also indicate that Hamilton's adults age 50 to 64 are more likely than adults 65 and older to rank their perception of their physical health as good or excellent and their mental health as fair or poor. On the other hand, adults over 65 are more likely to rank their perception of their mental health as very good or excellent. Of course, this reversal in mental health perception can be explained perhaps by the fact that adults age 50 to 64 are part of the sandwich generation, being responsible for the care of both children and parents. However, the perception of better mental health amongst adults over the age of 65 should not be accepted as reflecting their lived experience. Other data indicate that loneliness and depression is being experienced by more and more seniors. Between 2006 and 2016, the proportion of Hamilton's population 65+ increased from 14.9% to 17.3%; the number 65+ plus increased from 75,400 to 92,910; and the number 65+ living alone increased from 19,815 to 23,135 (Statistics Canada, 2014 & 2018). Recognizing that we have a growing older population, we can reasonably expect the number of isolated older adults to grow. The HCoA has a page on its website (www.hcoa.ca) called Social Inclusion Matters that gives information and resources relevant to promoting more social inclusion of older adults into the fabric of our society.

Jeanne Mayo is a member of the Hamilton Council on Aging's Education and Advocacy Committee, the Seniors Advisory Committee and the Age Friendly Hamilton Governance Committee. For more information on the Hamilton Council on Aging or to join our membership or make a donation please see www.coahamilton.ca