

GUEST COLUMN: Home is where the health is

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Let's face it. One day, if you are lucky, you will get old. What then? Who will help you get dressed, prepare your meals and follow your doctor's orders? Most people prefer not to think about this until they absolutely must. But COVID-19 has taught us that we cannot afford to delay these discussions. Above all else, COVID-19 has taught us that it is time for a serious rethinking of the way we deliver senior care in Ontario, and seniors across the province agree.

According to a new study conducted by Campaign Research Inc. on behalf of Home Care Ontario, a staggering 91% of seniors want to live in their own home or apartment for as long as possible. What's more, 95% believe their home is the safest place to be during a pandemic with the support of quality home care services.

Home care workers are professionally trained to keep people healthy and safe at home as well as to bring thousands of Ontarians home following surgeries and post-acute care. Staff include Personal Support Workers, who help with basic tasks like dressing, bathing and eating, specialized Nurses, who administer complex home-based chemotherapy monitor vitals, track progress and support cancer patients, and Wound Care Specialists who heal the most complex wounds. Your home care worker might be a Physiotherapist helping you recover from injuries due to a serious fall, or a community respiratory therapist who gives life-sustaining home oxygen treatments. Across the spectrum of health care services, there is a home care professional to meet your needs, and advances in technology are allowing even more care to be provided at home.

Our research shows that if seniors were destined to move into a long-term care facility, but additional supports could be provided to keep them at home or living with a family member, 93% of seniors say they would prefer to stay at home.

The survey findings also demonstrate Ontario's seniors are looking to the government to create a stronger home care system that makes this a reality – and to do it fast.

First, we need to ensure fair and competitive wages for home care workers. Right now, our amazing home care workers are paid far less than if they worked in a long-term care home or hospital. This needs to change, and 69% of seniors surveyed agree. Seniors want to see professional caregivers paid the same, regardless of where they work.

Second, we need to invest. When Ontario seniors were asked to identify their first and second priority for additional government investments, publicly-funded home care was tied with long-term care as the first choice of most seniors at 28%.

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Third, we need to help supports seniors and families who purchase additional home care supports. This new survey shows that 27% of seniors indicate their first choice would be for the government to provide financial relief for families that pay for additional home care services. The best way to do this would be by introducing a simple tax credit to help offset the cost for those who purchase professional home care services. This easy step will go a long way towards adding capacity to the system and supporting seniors who choose to age at home.

Sue VanderBent is the CEO of Home Care Ontario