

**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS  
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Thank you! And Good afternoon. I speak today from Winnipeg, Manitoba, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota and Dene Peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

I'm honoured to be part of this discussion on *The Impact of Covid-19 on the Human Rights of Older Persons*. I support the proposed UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons. It is particularly timely now considering the pandemic events of the past year which exposed many nations' societal cracks.

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer stated the largest lesson learned during the first year of the pandemic is that, "We failed our most vulnerable. The tragedy and massive lesson learned for everyone in Canada is that we were at every level not able to protect our seniors, particularly those in long term care homes. Even worse is that in the second wave we warned of the resurgence yet there was a repeat of the huge impact on that population."

These are blunt but such true words. Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II has said "Hope may be found in the care we give the vulnerable in a time of need."

We failed our seniors; we did not protect them in their time of need, and we were warned this could happen. Myriad reports, studies and papers presented over many years laid out the urgent need for us to make changes in our health care approach which would have prevented the most dire effects of this pandemic.

Covid-19 does not discriminate between those it infects, but it does affect the vulnerable in our populations to a much greater degree.

On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the first confirmed presumptive case of Covid-19 occurred in Canada. On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 the first recorded case of Covid-19 was linked to community transmission. On March 7, 2020 the first Covid-19 outbreak occurred in a long-term care home in Canada.

By mid-April Canada's military had been tasked to assist in what had quickly turned into a national nightmare in Canada's long-term care homes. The report they issued is scathing and presents a picture of neglect. It is not easy reading. The cost of the military intervention then was \$53million.

A continuum of care would have cost so much less in dollars, deaths and mental health.

Indeed, a May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020 OECD report indicated 81% of known Covid-19 deaths in Canada occurred in long-term care homes. As of August 2020 the total number of deaths linked to Covid-19 across Canada was 9,000; 7,200 linked to long-term care.

This morning, the Canadian Institute for Health Information reported 69% of Canadian COVID deaths were in care homes; the international average being 41%. Outbreaks in 2500 Canadian care homes resulted in 14,000 deaths by February 2021. Care homes had less medical care, fewer doctors' visits and fewer hospital transfers than earlier years. The second wave increased infection in homes by 62%.

I have heard so many stories of the suffering residents of these homes have gone through during this pandemic. In one instance an entire group of friends who lived and spent time together in their home were gone within days of each other. My heart reaches out to those who lost a parent, grandparent, family member or friend without a last visit or a hug from their loved ones. Families are justifiably angry at the way we have treated our seniors.

The isolation has been devastating, impacting those with and without COVID, and all generations. Those without family visits fared worse. Isolation bred fear and despair. People gave up and died. Many could not comprehend the COVID circumstance. Families filled with fear and anguish suffered a real sense of loss -- How important those hugs are!

I also feel for those care workers who did their best to provide that care and comfort in the absence of family.

Stories of front-line workers spending their own money on personal protective equipment, holding residents' hands to provide some humanity in their time of death remind us of the extreme mental and physical hardships they went through. I thank them for their dedication.

We must embrace the painful lessons and truths learned regarding the human rights of our elder persons during this pandemic. We must fix the broken long-term care system. Canada must develop national standards on long-term care. We must increase trained staff. I hope we are moving in that direction. Canada's chief public health officer advises: "Investment in community health and social services that support older adults to continue living independently at home could also prevent the emotional, social, physical and financial hardships associated with leaving home to live in long-term care residences."

Dr. Samir Sinha noted in today's report: "It really tells us that there were things that we could have done to avoid a lot of deaths. ... Countries that were better prepared ... that had better funded systems ... performed far better than Canada."

Canadian architect Rudy Friesen opined "We need a multipronged approach to caring for older adults. We need a system that is more humane, trustworthy, accountable, equitable, economical, integrated and resilient."

Now is the time!

The household model, much more like a family situation of care home, is proving successful, with more consistent and better trained staff, single larger rooms giving greater personal space and of course smaller groups of people allowing better human connections, better ventilation and better infection control.

In the wider context this is about society providing the respect and dignity our elder persons deserve. The pandemic highlighted the reality that elder persons suffer from isolation, food and economic insecurity, lack of services, lack of participation in society and the mental health issues these worries produce.

We must build better communities to address these concerns and encourage intergenerational approaches honouring the need to connect the marginalized and vulnerable. My own mother in her advanced dementia in her care home benefitted from family visits, those of my children's friends, and from the regular visits of a local preschool and special visits with pets.

We must also address the increasing incidence of elder abuse which occurred during this pandemic, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, abandonment and financial abuse. This must stop. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 people manning the phones at elder abuse lines have experienced a dramatic increase in calls, a sad testament to the need for more protection for our aged population. The hiring of elder persons' advocates must expand.

Now is the time for Canada to support the UN's work for an International Convention On the Rights of Older Persons, certainly given the pandemic, but not just limited to instances of pandemics. Experts have defined what a UN Convention On Older Persons would do.

It would confront ageism, assist in policy making and accountability; it would educate, and empower the rights holders. It would honour the selfless lives of elder persons, their hard work, wisdom and compassion.

We must support this international initiative. We must protect human rights based on compassion and empathy. Quality of life, not just longevity, is important. We must encourage the continuation of prior activities, exercise, engagement with music and colour, and conversation.

**“Human Rights do not have a best before date.”**

Thank you!