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Successful Aging Ottawa Releases Survey of Ottawa-Area Seniors

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On **June 15, 2005** a community coalition of seniors organizations known as Successfully Aging Ottawa (SAO) released a survey that provides the most comprehensive data about seniors in Ottawa since the 1989 Seniors Health Survey. That survey was conducted by the Ottawa Health Department. The 2004 Seniors Survey was released in conjunction with Seniors Month, at SAO's "Charting Our Course" community forum.

The survey of 1,000 Ottawa seniors looked at five components of successful aging. Those are: Physical and mental health and function; Involvement in activities; Adaptation to limitations; Awareness and use of community support services; Life satisfaction and morale.

Respondents were asked to rate themselves on the "successful aging scale" also based on each of the 5 components, to determine who is aging more successfully. The survey finds that the majority of Ottawa's seniors (65+) are aging well – about 75% would rate themselves aging fairly successfully. That said, a significant portion are not living well. 25% of area seniors gave themselves a lower score and 12% are doing quite poorly. This translates into nearly 13,000 Ottawa-area seniors. Many of these seniors need help with activities of daily living, often cannot get the help they need, are also more socially isolated. This number could increase significantly in the future as our population continues to age.

Seniors were also asked to rate Ottawa as a place to age successfully and the average rating was 7.88 out of 10. More affordable housing, better transportation, improved access to home support and long term care, and easier access to lifestyle activities were the top suggestions for improving Ottawa as a place to age successfully.

The survey of seniors 65+ was conducted by telephone in May 2004. The results include four focus groups used to capture information from seniors who typically do not respond to telephone surveys. The error of margin for the survey is 3 per cent, with a 95 in 100 confidence level.

A full summary of the study's highlights are attached.

In releasing the report's findings, Al Loney, Executive Director of the Council on Aging and a member of the SAO partnership said: "This report provides important information about seniors' issues, and factors related to successful aging. As organizations and individuals who serve our community's seniors, we are united in our need for information in order to plan for our community's aging population. We will now use this important data as the basis for an action framework for successful aging for adults age 65 and over."

"When we look at the various components for aging successfully, and then examine who is doing so -- as well as how our community is doing -- we can start to determine the types of personal and community interventions and strategies that might optimize successful aging. This report will be a powerful tool in shaping those responses in the interest of our current and burgeoning seniors population," said SAO member Cal Martel, Director of Geriatric Administration, Regional Geriatric Assessment Program.

"United Way/Centraide Ottawa is delighted to partner with such a committed group of individuals and organizations. They are united in common cause, ensuring that our seniors have what they need to age successfully, and that our community has the resources it needs to assist them in that process. As an evidence-based organization, this tool will also serve to guide United Way's investment and community work in "Reducing Isolation and Enhancing Seniors Quality of Life", one of our six impact

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areas. This is an excellent piece of work, and we are honored to have been asked to assist in this initiative," said Michael Allen, President and Executive Director, United Way/Centraide Ottawa.

About Successfully Aging Ottawa

SAO is a community partnership initiated by The Council on Aging in 2002. Since its inception, a group of over 30 people in Ottawa representing funders, planners, networks of seniors and seniors in the community have been working together to develop a shared vision of what it means to age successfully in Ottawa. Major partners include: City of Ottawa, CCAC, Elisabeth Bruyere Research Institute, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care, SCO Health Service, The Regional Geriatric Assessment Program of Eastern Ontario and United Way/Centraide Ottawa.

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Successful Aging Ottawa: 2004 Seniors Survey Highlights

Overview:

- The survey finds that the majority of Ottawa's seniors (65+) are aging well – about 75% would rate themselves aging fairly successfully.
- That said, a significant portion are not living well. 25% of area seniors gave themselves a lower score and 12% are doing quite poorly. This translates into nearly 13,000 Ottawa-area seniors. Many of these seniors need help with activities of daily living, often cannot get the help they need, are also more socially isolated. This number could increase significantly in the future as our population continues to age.
- Those who fair poorest tend to fall in the \$20,000 and below income bracket, and are generally single or widowed women.
- Rural and immigrant seniors in Ottawa face more challenges - transportation and access to services and affordable housing are the greatest barriers to successful aging for these groups. Seniors living in more rural wards are almost three times as likely to say that they can't get out as often as they would like compared to those living in urban wards. Immigrant seniors are also a growing segment of the population and face language and cultural barriers as well.
- 90% of respondents agreed Ottawa is a good place to age successfully.
- At the same time, affordable housing, home support services, night time safety and public transit are indicated as concerns for a significant portion of area seniors. On average, as many as half of Ottawa seniors have concerns about one or more of these areas.

On the five components related to successful aging:

1. Health: 52% of respondents perceive their health to be very good (32%) or excellent (20%). Statistics Canada reported that 24% of seniors in Canada reported fair or poor health versus Ottawa Seniors (17%).

- Ottawa's seniors report a quality of health somewhat better than Canadian seniors in general: they report fewer sick days and fewer activity-limited days than seniors in a national sample.
- Those reporting fair or poor health are more likely to be: 75+; Speak French as their main language; have a household income of less than \$30,000 (30%) and or have not completed high school (29%).
- Two-thirds of respondents reported at least one diagnosed medical condition – the most frequent was heart-related – down from 1989 when 85% reported a diagnosed health condition.
- **Functional health and getting help:** The most-reported difficulties with functional activities are cutting toenails (37%); sleeping (34%) and reading the phonebook (26%); 25% of respondents have 3 or more functional difficulties.
- The greatest need for assistance was help with heavy chores. Older females living alone in poor health were the most likely to need help with activities of daily living.

2. Involvement in activities: (transportation, helping others/ volunteering, connecting/communicating with others; social activities)

- 78% of seniors drive their own car with 47% of those 85+ doing so.
- 9% of respondents are not able to get out as often because of health, no access to car and public transportation is too inconvenient. Older females living alone on low incomes with health problems are more isolated.

- 60% of seniors reported **helping** family friends or neighbors and almost half (48%) of seniors surveyed did volunteer work for a charity or non-profit organization. Those more likely to be involved were in better health (56%); had higher incomes and more education.
- The majority of seniors read the newspaper daily – regardless of age (85%). Half use the library; 40% use a cellphone. Half of males and a third of females use the Internet and email. Younger seniors are more likely to stay connected using all other modes except newspapers.
- A good percentage of the oldest respondents (20% of 85+) report using email and the internet (12%).
- While 10% report using all of the different forms of communication, 5% indicated doing none of these things and may be fairly isolated from the outside world.
- Most seniors participate in leisure activities. Age, income and health diminished participation.

3. Adaptation to limitations: (health improvement and prevention; use of non-prescription medication; exercise; use of aids and special features; deciding to move)

- 44% felt there were some things they should be doing to maintain or improve their health; 69% said more exercise. Male seniors were more likely to consider improvements (52%) than females (39%). Age is a factor in this pre-disposition, with older seniors less likely to think they should do something.
- Almost all seniors have their cholesterol checked and get a flu shot. However, not all seniors are having the kinds of tests that could provide early warning of different types of cancers and other problems: only one third have been tested for colo-rectal cancer and fewer than half (42%) have had their bone density checked in the past 2 years.
- 70% of respondents report using non-prescription medications. Females, Anglophones and those with a diagnosed medical condition were more likely to do so.
- 73% participate in some form of exercise; 68% are very or moderately active with cardio-related activities walking, jogging or swimming for 30 minutes, 4 or more times a week – 34% do less than this.
- Income, education, language or having a medical condition was not factors in participation.
- Age, perceived health and number of days of poor physical health in the last month are related however. Seniors who are most active are those who are: aged 65 – 74 (39%); feel in very good or excellent health (38%); and do not report any poor physical health days in the last month (36%).
- 40% of respondents 85+ report using a mobility aid such as a cane, walker, or wheelchair and 62% use grab bars.
- The use of a mobility aid is related to health status: fair or poor health respondents were more likely to do so (35%) as were those who indicated one or more poor physical or mental health days.
- Many seniors do not have the types of features in their home that assist aging. Grab bars in the bathroom were the most common aid reported.
- 20% considered moving in the past year due to upkeep of their homes. Those most considering a move felt their health was poor, had experienced some recent poor mental health days and had no features in their homes to support aging.

4. Awareness and use of community support services: (use and awareness; access to services; persons/professionals consulted; social support; quality of life for Ottawa seniors; Ottawa as a place to age successfully.)

- Overall awareness of community services is quite high – particularly Para Transpo (99%); Meals on Wheels (95%) and the VON (94%).
- Less well known services include referral or information services to find out about what services available (46%) are, specialized health services for older people like the geriatric assessment program (55%); and friendly volunteer visits (58%).
- Almost half of respondents report never having used a community service (48%) and another 27% has only used one. However 12% use three or more services, with heavier users older, in poorer health and living alone.
- For those who wanted a service but couldn't get it, the main reasons were that they did not know how to find the service or it was not available when and where they needed it.
- Most had consulted a doctor, eye specialist or dentist in the past year. Many consulted family or friends, with specialists reported less often.
- Seniors who live in rural areas have less access to services such as public transportation and affordable housing according to focus group participants.
- The majority of respondents have someone who provides social support. However, up to 11% report having no-one to turn to in times of need. Those with little social support are more likely to be in poor physical and mental health and live alone. Thus the very seniors who may need social support the most may be the most isolated.
- As many as 10% of Ottawa's seniors may be socially isolated with little real connection to the outside world.
- The majority of seniors are receiving help with daily activities such as

- preparing meals and grocery shopping as well as personal care.
- For some activities such as housework and heavy chores as many as 20% are not getting the help they need, and 6% overall may not getting they help they need for one or more activities of daily living. Women, older seniors, those with less social support and less education all indicate this.
- 90% of respondents feel Ottawa is a good place to retire but there are aspects that some felt could be improved. 74% though there were not enough affordable housing options; Many worry about home support services (44%); public transit may be an issue (only 52% thought the system was good); and some seniors are afraid to go out after dark (61%) in their own neighborhood.
- Seniors rated Ottawa a 7.88 out of 10 on average as a place to age successfully.

5. Life Satisfaction and Morale: (overall happiness now versus 10 years ago; how successfully you are aging?)

- The majority 94% of respondents are pretty happy (59%) to very happy (35%). Those “very happy” are more likely to be living with a partner (81%) and have higher incomes.
- Just over half, (56%) stated they were just as happy now as 10 years ago, 16% are happier now, 28% not as happy.
- Most seniors felt they were aging successfully, with an average score of 8.16 out of 10, and 88% of respondents self-rated at 7 or better.
- Those who were happier and healthier, who got out when they wished (8.27), who did volunteer work and were involved in their community (8.27), and who had higher incomes and better education were more positive about aging successfully and gave themselves a higher score on the self-rated scale.
- Respondents who scored higher on the self-rated scale were also more likely to report having social support and help for activities with daily living when they needed it.
- Those seniors who were engaged in life and activities appeared to be happier. Exercise seems to be a key ingredient for both successful aging and reported feeling of happiness. The higher the level of exercise respondents reported, the higher they scored themselves on the successful aging score.



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