

Opinion

Government helping to build an age-friendly Ontario

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Last month, Ontario celebrated the 25th anniversary of Seniors' Month. The theme this year is "Creating Age-Friendly Communities." It reflects a timely and important opportunity to ensure a better standard of living for seniors, particularly when you consider that the number of seniors in Ontario will almost double to 3.5 million in the next 20 to 25 years.

In a few months, Barrie will host one of six regional forums on age-friendly communities, organized by the Ontario government in partnership with the Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens Organizations and La Fédération des aînés et des retraités francophones de l'Ontario.

Age-friendly communities promote the participation of seniors through wellness and social programs, recognize their contributions and achievements and improve accessibility to buildings and services.

The age-friendly communities forums help steer province-wide programs that support and enable local leaders to recognize the benefits of developing an age-friendly strategy. Making our communities age-friendly does not just benefit seniors; making public spaces, businesses and buildings cleaner, more accessible and safer improves the quality of life for everyone.

As more people reach 65, the face of our province will change and it is our job to ensure the province is prepared.

The province has invested more than \$1.2 million in 34 new centres that provide wellness, social and recreational programs that help seniors stay active and healthy.

One of the major priorities of the Senior's Secretariat, which falls within my ministerial responsibilities, is elder abuse; one of the single greatest threats to an age-friendly community. Last month, we took steps to help eliminate elder abuse by providing, for the first time in the province's history, \$900,000 in annual operating funding for prevention initiatives.

We are also helping seniors financially. Our 2009 Ontario budget doubled the Senior Homeowners' Property Tax Grant to \$500 to provide relief to low-and middle-income seniors living in their own homes. And, this past May, the North Simcoe Muskoka LHIN, announced \$7.4 million for aging at home supports.

In addition, my government helps seniors stay informed about healthy aging through popular programs such as fall prevention seminars and safe medication use. More information about these programs can be found on the ontarioseniors.ca website.

Seniors in communities across Ontario can also access important information about local, provincial and federal government programs through the seniorsinfo.ca portal, a joint project of the Ontario, federal and local governments, and many seniors organizations. The portal was launched in 2006.

These programs and services are just some of the ways we're building more age-friendly communities in Ontario. And, we are working with seniors organizations, municipalities, other ministries and levels of government to do much more.

Creating age-friendly communities is a vital part of fostering a stronger future for all Ontarians. As the minister responsible for seniors, I am delighted to see so many municipalities like Barrie are recognizing the benefits of being age-friendly, and look forward to working to see more communities come on board.