

Mobility for Older Adults in Manitoba

A Position Paper by the
Manitoba Association on Gerontology

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Outline

	Page Number
I Introduction	1
II Guiding Principles: Improving the Mobility of Manitoba Seniors	3
Principle 1: Mobility is a basic human right.	4
Principle 2: Mobility is fundamental to the quality of life of older adults.	5
Principle 3: Mobility is affected by the aging process.	7
Principle 4: Mobility is dependent on the accessibility afforded by the environment.	8
Principle 5: Mobility optimization is dependent on the needs of the seniors.	10
III Conclusions and Recommendations	11
References	13

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I Introduction

The increasing proportion of the Canadian elderly population has made it imperative to study how the living environment of this age cohort affects their quality of life. Although particular attention has been given to the necessities of seniors in the spheres of health care and social services, comprehensive analysis of their transportation requirements has been limited. Older adults are particularly susceptible to mobility problems and, as a result, the issues concerning the provision of adequate transportation services are especially relevant for the aging population. The issue of transportation for the elderly must become a priority for the investigation and development of policy to improve the mobility of the older members of our society. The Manitoba Association on Gerontology has developed this position paper to provide a statement of support and guidance for the development of realistic transportation solutions designed to improve the mobility of Manitoban seniors.

Personal mobility, the ability to travel from place to place, is an important component of independence and full participation in society. Adequacy of mobility directly impacts on a senior's independence and quality of life. Mobility represents self-sufficiency and engagement for

older people. The maintenance of an older person's independence is reliant in part on access to the goods and services and social contacts necessary to a good quality of life. Accessibility is largely determined by an individual's level of mobility. There are several factors that affect the mobility of seniors including the decreasing physical, social and financial capacities of the individual and the opportunities and constraints encountered from an environmental perspective (AARP, 2000). As a result of these factors many elderly persons experience mobility restrictions. It is the provision of adequate transportation that can maintain the well-being of an elderly person regardless of mobility limitations (Andrew et al., 2000). Therefore, transportation is a key to an active and healthy old age, but inadequate transportation leads to the isolation of the elderly (Wachs, 1988).

The need to focus on improved transportation for seniors is underscored by the growing elderly population. In Manitoba, issues related to growing older are particularly pronounced as 13.6% of the population was 65 years of age and older in 1996 compared to 12.1% for Canada as a whole (Statistics Canada, 1996). The issues related to aging will become more acute as it is projected that the national proportion of persons 65 and over will increase to 22.6% by 2041 (Statistics Canada, 1999). As the most rapidly growing segment of the senior population will be those over 80, issues of mobility will become increasingly important

due to the growing number of frail elderly requiring greater support (AARP, 2000).

It has only been in the last two decades that greater efforts have been made to understand the problems associated with aging and decreasing mobility (Hallman et al., 1993). There is now greater advocacy in the community to promote the need for society to address the transportation problems of our older members. As in other regions, there have been initiatives in the province of Manitoba to address the mobility needs of seniors. The role of the Manitoba Association on Gerontology has been to develop a series of guiding principles as a framework for the advancement of solutions that will improve the quality of life of older persons in Manitoba through transportation provision. These guiding principles are outlined in the following section.

II Guiding Principles: Improving the Mobility of Manitoba Seniors

The principles established by the Manitoba Association on Gerontology provide guidelines to direct investigation and implementation of solutions for the mobility problems of seniors. They were developed through discussions with service providers, community, business and government representatives, MAG members, and, most importantly, from the perspective of seniors themselves. The guiding principles fall into three categories: (1) the foundations for the importance of unrestricted mobility for seniors; (2) the issues that create

mobility limitations; and (3) the factors that must be considered to ensure optimum mobility of older adults. The guiding principles are defined within the context of these categories.

Principle 1: Mobility is a basic human right.

Unrestricted mobility is essential for the quality of life of all members of society. Unrestricted mobility must be regarded as a basic human right, that is, everyone is entitled to equal access to all resources provided in the community. It has been advocated that elderly individuals “are entitled to the mobility necessary for them to maintain adequate nourishment and good health, conduct personal business, engage in social relationships and pursue recreation” (Wachs, 1979: 213).

It is essential to recognize that if all are entitled to unrestricted mobility, then society must provide support for those members who encounter mobility limitations. Restricted access to resources in the community has created the disenfranchisement of several groups including the poor, the disabled and the elderly. In order to uphold the principle of equal opportunity to resources, solutions to these groups mobility problems must be addressed. Accessibility through appropriate transportation provision is a key element to respect this basic human right (Wourgaft, 1992).

Principle 2: Mobility is fundamental to the quality of life of older adults.

A basic determinant of the quality of life of all persons is unrestricted mobility that allows access to needed services and social and recreational outings (Wachs, 1988). In particular, mobility is critical to the physical, social and psychological well-being of older adults. Access to medical facilities and other social services is essential to maintain physical health. Social contact is dependent upon accessibility to family and friends, as well as recreational and cultural activities. Finally, mobility enhances the psychological health of the elderly by enabling the avoidance of isolation and allowing choice of activities.

The lack of appropriate transportation for elderly persons results in immobility and isolation that may contribute to other social and physical problems of the older individual. Inadequate transportation services restrict the living space of any person, limit self-sufficiency, restrict activities and contacts with other people, and may contribute to disengagement and alienation from society. Therefore, accessibility to transportation is an important component of the quality of life of older adults.

The relationship between transportation provision and the emotional and physical well-being of the elderly indicates that mobility issues must be integrated into health and social care solutions for seniors. Joseph and Fuller (1991) advocate that the generation of policy alternatives has been hampered by a sector-specific approach. The emphasis of policy

has been on the delivery of health and social services to ensure that seniors can age within the community. However, it must be recognized that the key to the policies of aging-in-place and the delivery of services is adequate transportation. A new framework is required that integrates issues of health, housing, services and transportation.

The population health approach promotes the concept of many determinants of health, focusing not only on physical health but also incorporating social health and psychological health (WHO, 1984). This approach advocates the need for the provision of supports to improve and maintain health. Fox and Gooding (1998) identify transportation to be one such support that is required to ensure access for many older adults to social support networks and health services.

It has been suggested that the provision of applicable modes of transportation might be considered as a determinant of health if transportation can moderate the effect of mobility limitations (Andrews et al., 2000). Therefore, health and social policy that promotes the independent living of seniors in the community must support the improvement of transportation provision. Improvements in access through the provision of transport and mobility services can be a major contributor to the quality of life of individuals who are transportation disadvantaged. Transportation strategies that are most effective in reducing the inadequacies of mobility will improve the well-being of the elderly population (Patrick, 1992).

Principle 3: Mobility is affected by the aging process.

Despite the importance of mobility for the quality of life of older persons, many seniors experience mobility restrictions as a result of declining physical, social and financial resources. The vast majority of trips made by elderly persons are made in a private vehicle (Rosenbloom, 1993). The automobile is key to mobility and feelings of independence. However, the ability to drive can be impacted upon by the aging process. For example, changes in visual capability, loss of cognitive ability or other major changes in health can alter the ability of an individual to walk or drive a car (Fozard, 2000). In addition, a decrease in social supports and financial resources can affect an older person's access to the unrestricted mobility offered by the automobile.

The issue for older adults is the transition from independent mobility to dependency on transportation provision. This transition is often complicated by the lack of transportation alternatives that meet the physical and emotional needs of older riders (Stern & Stern, 2000). The mobility needs of seniors vary depending on a wide assortment of factors including their level of health, their social support networks, their financial resources, as well as their ethno-cultural background. The development of transportation solutions for seniors must recognize that the mobility needs of seniors are diverse. Therefore, optimum types of transportation will vary throughout the population. The provision of transportation services must reflect that seniors have varying levels of

mobility and that they require access to a wide assortment of services, social contacts and events.

Principle 4: Mobility is dependent on the accessibility afforded by the environment.

In addition to the declining competencies of the older person, mobility is also affected by components in the environment that obstruct accessibility. In effect, it is the combination of the aging process of the individual and environmental barriers that cause incongruities between the user and the type of transportation that is available (Golant, 1976). There is a consensus that inconvenient geographical location and environmental barriers, along with the increased propensity of the elderly to experience functional impairment, diminishing health and lower income, contribute to mobility problems (Golant, 1976, Carp, 1988).

A wide variety of environmental factors exist to create mobility limitations for seniors. The design of new transportation alternatives for older persons must incorporate these factors into the solutions. The walking environment, for example, is often not suitable for older adults because of uneven walking surfaces, traffic hazards and long distances to access services and social contacts. Public transportation can also be inadequate because of long distances to bus stops, lack of assistance on the bus and the inappropriateness of bus routes for the needs of the older population.

Environmental factors in Manitoba demonstrate that issues of mobility must be addressed in terms of physical accessibility. One important factor that must be stressed is the extreme climatic conditions experienced in this province. Manitoba winters are characterized by a prolonged period of cold and snow. These conditions result in particularly vulnerable situations for an older person's mobility. Cold temperatures and ice-packed roads and sidewalks create very dangerous environments for older persons to access services and social contacts. As a result, many Manitoban seniors are house-bound for months at a time. Although there has been very little investigation of the effect of extreme climatic conditions on the mobility of seniors, this factor must be considered in the development of policy to improve transportation for seniors in Manitoba (Klinger-Zepic, 1995).

Transportation solutions for Manitoban seniors must also take into account that older persons live in a variety of environments and that mobility is affected by the local characteristics of each environment. In Winnipeg, the major urban center of the province, seniors live in both inner city and suburban locations. The availability of transportation, as well as health and social services, varies in these two distinct environments. As Rosenbloom (1988) has emphasized, mobility issues reflect the local conditions of transportation options and the ease of accessibility to desired services and social contacts.

Manitoba also has a great number of rural elderly. Mobility issues in rural areas are distinct for the older population because of long distances, heavy reliance on automobile use and the lack of transportation alternatives (Grant & Rice, 1982; Glasgow & Blakely, 2000). The rural elderly are considered as “transport dependent” because the lack of public transportation requires that they rely on others for mobility (Joseph & Mathews, 1994).

The varying environments in which Manitoban seniors live suggest that a wide-range of transportation solutions must be developed. These solutions must recognize the impact of local environmental conditions on the mobility of an older person. There must be equal opportunity to mobility throughout the province, however, local issues and conditions must drive research and solution development.

Principle 5: Mobility optimization is dependent on the needs of seniors.

There are several needs specific to the aging population that must be considered as key elements of transportation provision. It is only with the inclusion of these elements in the development of solutions that the mobility of seniors can be optimized. The provision of the following elements is essential in order that seniors have equal opportunities to mobility:

- **Safety**

Mobility solutions must ensure the safety of the older adult.

- **Affordability**

Mobility solutions must be affordable to ensure accessibility to all seniors.

- **Assistance**

Because of the varying levels of personal mobility of seniors, solutions must ensure the provision of assistance, including escort services, if required.

- **Equal access of mobility provision for all trip types.**

The well-being of seniors is dependent not only on access to medical services, but also on access to other services and social resources. Therefore, mobility solutions for seniors must ensure that medical, as well as trips for shopping and social outings are regarded of equal importance.

III Conclusions and Recommendations

The objective of this position paper is to provide support and guiding principles for the development of alternative transportation solutions that address the mobility limitations of seniors in Manitoba. The guiding principles provide a basis to understand why transportation provision is so vital to the well-being of our aging population. The principles also provide a framework that identifies why mobility is an issue for seniors. Mobility solutions must derive from a clear understanding of the factors of the aging process and the environment that create mobility problems. Furthermore, solutions must incorporate key elements of the needs of seniors. With a clearer understanding of the issues, it is anticipated that

future transportation solutions will be more accountable to the needs of the older population.

The Manitoba Association on Gerontology recommends that these guidelines be forwarded to the Seniors Transportation Working Group that is currently working to develop recommendations and the implementation of solutions for elderly mobility in Winnipeg. The Association also recommends that further investigation is required of the mobility issues facing rural seniors. It is hoped that the guiding principles established in this paper will be beneficial in the further development of transportation solutions for Manitoban seniors.

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