

**A plan for dementia care**

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By Andrew Reeves

Alzheimer advocates from across Ontario will be at Queen’s Park Thursday to present a blueprint for improving the quality of life for individuals with dementia.

The Alzheimer Society of Ontario will unveil Focus ON Dementia, a five-point plan for dramatically improving the quality of care while staying within the government’s budget guidelines:

- Investing in self-directed care;
- Improving access to primary care and early diagnosis;
- Increasing dementia workforce training;
- Promoting brain health; and
- Focusing on the needs of high-risk seniors

Society spokesperson David Harvey said he was pleased by the government’s commitment to generate an additional three million hours of personal support worker from people with dementia.

“It ties in with our first proposal that suggests investments in personal support workers should be distributed in a self-directed care model so families have more control and influence over the kind of care they get from support workers,” he said.

“There is increasing science which links heart health and brain health together, along with rates of diabetes,” Harvey told QP Briefing. “There needs to be a comprehensive public health strategy that includes a focus on the brain.”

The society says it’s time to move forward with substantial improvements to Alzheimer care in the province because seniors will soon outnumber all other age groups. And with dementia set to increase 40 per cent by 2020, this problem will “pervade every aspect of our system.”

“If we don’t start planning for an increase in dementia and become competent in managing the challenge, it can turn into a crisis because you ignore it. That’s the risk here,” Harvey said. “As we begin this growth spurt we have an opportunity to learn how best to mitigate the risks of a growing population of people with dementia.

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“It will be manifest in increased wait times, people lingering at home waiting for long-term care beds, and increased levels of abuse from over-worked and under-trained workers.”

An increase in the number of seniors with dementia will mean an increase in both paid caregivers and unpaid assistance from family and friends. Ontarians caring for those with dementia will devote 100 million unpaid hours this year and that figure will rise to 140 million unpaid hours by 2020.

Yet a report from the Health Council of Canada indicates that high-risk seniors receive only a few more hours of home care per week than those with moderate needs.

“Family caregivers provide most of the support to people with dementia, there’s no question about it,” Harvey said. “The health care system needs to think of itself as a supplement to family care as opposed to an alternative. Families already carry most of the work, so we need to assist them as much as possible.”
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