

Op Ed

“It will be nice when you get people going to social workers just like they’re going to dentists and doctors” (Fredericton area resident, age 76).

It is often beneficial to build a team of people we trust to help us, such as doctors, lawyers, and even the “car guy”. So why don’t we, particularly seniors, utilize social workers the same way?

We are social work students at St. Thomas University. In a joint project with the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers, we interviewed seniors in the Greater Fredericton Area to get a picture of how social workers are impacting seniors in our community. Two things stood out in our research. First, seniors expressed a lot of pride in maintaining their independence. Seniors in our community should be proud. Many have lived and worked here their entire lives, creating the fabric of our communities. Secondly, they didn’t really know the full role of a social worker. It can even be difficult for us as students of social work to express the wide range of services that social workers are involved in. Yet, this research gave us some insight about social work with older folks. Contrary to popular belief, social workers are not shuffling grandparents into nursing homes to be forgotten.

There are many ways that social workers are helping seniors. Most commonly, social workers in New Brunswick help seniors to navigate ‘the system’. While New Brunswick is making strides to improve service delivery, it remains cumbersome. Social workers are helping seniors with service navigation, exploring what services they may qualify for and assisting them with access and funding. Through these services, seniors have told us that they have been able to stay at home longer, have experienced improved quality of life, and have spent less time in hospitals. In other words, they have remained independent.

Social workers also provide education by teaching self-advocacy and skills to deal with life’s challenges and changes. Social workers can further enhance wellbeing and quality of life through mental health and addiction counselling. Above all else, social workers can help seniors to achieve greater well-being as seniors, themselves, define it. We learned that social workers also provide services within nursing homes, though few homes offer this service in New Brunswick. In New Brunswick, moving to a nursing home often means a change from a rural home to a larger town or a city. Social workers provide support to seniors and their families helping them to work collaboratively with other service providers during this difficult transition. Once residents are settled in their new home, social workers promote quality of life and social engagement.

Our research showed that social workers are striving to improve the lives of seniors. However, the people we spoke to also told us that their social workers struggle to maintain regular contact due to high caseloads. A desire to have more social workers in the province, specifically designated to work with seniors was expressed. The 2016 census concluded that New Brunswick has the oldest population in the country. As such, New Brunswick has an opportunity to be a leader in senior care, and this is not limited to medical health. Research has demonstrated that having additional social workers in areas such as health centres, hospitals, and

nursing homes reduce costs and improve service provision. This has also demonstrated improved quality of life and better well-being for seniors and their families. The placement of social workers in all nursing homes in New Brunswick would ensure that our seniors' voices are heard and that their rights are promoted. Social workers encourage autonomy and independence, especially during times of change. When we need medical advice we call the doctor. When we chip a tooth, we call the dentist. Why then, would we not call a social worker when we need to access services that promote our independence?

“... I don't know where I would be without them.” (Fredericton area resident, age 72)