

The Call for Mandated Social Work Positions in Long-Term Care and Assisted Living

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Introduction

As Health Authorities take a “home is best” approach (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2013), people are moving to Assisted Living and Long-Term Care with higher and more complex health care needs than in the past. Family caregivers are experiencing higher levels of distress (Office of the Seniors Advocate, 2017a). With the changes proposed to the Community Care and Assisted Living Act in Bill 16 (2016), coming into effect December 1, 2019, the support services offered in Assisted Living will evolve and grow.¹

To meet these changing needs in our community, social workers are ideally positioned to be integral members of interdisciplinary teams at both Assisted Living residences and Long-Term Care homes (Fields, Koenig, & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2012; Jackson, 2014). Social workers have the expertise and bring a unique perspective to help meet the needs of the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. Resources to fund mandated social work positions would benefit residents and their families, care teams in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care (formerly known as Residential Care) and the community as a whole.

Current Situation in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care

Imagine having to leave everything that you are familiar with and move to a Long-Term Care home. Perhaps you have dementia and struggle with understanding the world around you. Who helps you with this life transition when you are at your most vulnerable?

Picture living in an Assisted Living residence and having no family or friends who can help as your needs change. Who takes notice of your changing abilities and assists you if you are no longer able to manage your affairs independently? Who will inform you of available services and help to facilitate referrals to community agencies?

Consider being in an Assisted Living residence and relying on a family member for weekly shopping and getting to appointments, only to learn that this individual is having difficulty and is using your money for their own benefit, not leaving you with enough to pay your bills? Who can help protect you and your interests? Who will help to ensure that your needs and values are respected and honoured?

Think about the physical and emotional toll of caring for a loved one at home. Who provides you, as a caregiver, with emotional and practical support when your loved one moves to a Long-Term Care home? Who helps you navigate “the system” and understand what government benefits you and your loved one may be entitled to?

Envision living in a Long-Term Care home due to a life-limiting illness. Who will provide information and support to you and your family about personal planning and end-of-life care? Who will help facilitate

¹ Amendments will remove the limit of two “prescribed services”. Residents will be able to receive any number of seven assisted living services.

conversations to ensure that the care team understands what is important to you and your quality of life?

These scenarios, and many similar ones, play out regularly in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care settings. Both Assisted Living and Long-Term Care sites aim to be as “home-like” as possible while offering both health and supportive care services to the most vulnerable and frail adults in our communities.

Social work is not a mandated service in either Assisted Living or Long-Term Care. Currently, individuals in Assisted Living have limited ready access to a social worker unless their Health Authority Liaison happens to be one. Some Long-Term Care sites have a social worker; some do not (British Columbia Law Institute, 2019). When there is a social worker, often the ratio of social work hours to the number of residents is very large. One social worker can be responsible for service to well over 100 residents (Munn & Adorno, 2008; Rockwell, 2012). Social workers also provide critical and meaningful support to residents’ families. To help us better understand the gaps and varying availability in social work services to residents and their families in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care throughout the province, the BC Association of Social Workers’ (BCASW) Seniors Community of Practice sought out provincial data on the number of social work positions in BC. To date, we have been unable to secure any provincial data and it is unclear whether it is being collected.

The British Columbia Ministry of Health (2019a) notes that, “(l)ong-term care services include: (...) clinical support services (e.g. rehabilitation and social work services) as identified in the care plan.” Long-term care sites also provide “end-of-life and palliative care services” as outlined by the British Columbia Ministry of Health (2019b) that include “psychological care” and “loss and grief support for family caregivers.” Considering these important aspects of long-term care services, it is critical to ensure sufficient and appropriate social work services are available to all individuals in Long-Term Care across our province.

Changing Landscape in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care

The focus of care in both Assisted Living and Long-Term Care is changing. With the introduction of Bill 16 (2016), Assisted Living sites will be encouraged to offer more, and a wider range, of services to meet the increased health, care, financial and psychosocial needs of residents. In addition, people are moving to Long-Term Care with very complex and often life-limiting health conditions, including dementia. With this in mind, many Health Authorities and Long-Term Care sites are moving towards a “palliative approach to care” (Bacon, 2012; Pallium Canada, 2018; Webley & Edmunds, 2015), which is more holistic in nature for residents and their families, with an emphasis on quality of life and comfort.

A palliative approach to care focuses on meeting a person’s and family’s full range of needs – physical, psychosocial and spiritual – at all stages of frailty or chronic illness, not just at the end of life. It reinforces the person’s autonomy and right to be actively involved in his or her own care – and strives to give individuals and families a greater sense of control. It supports and encourages earlier and more frequent conversations about the goals of care when patients and families are faced with a life-threatening illness. (Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association, 2016)

Social Workers Unique Perspective and Knowledge

Social workers have a unique multi-faceted skill-set that cannot simply be replaced by other disciplines. Social workers bring an important psychosocial lens to an interdisciplinary care team (Jackson, 2014;

Sanders, Bern-Klug, Specht, Mobily, & Bossen, 2012). Person-centred care, with a focus on the Resident and their unique needs, is a primary goal in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care. It is also at the core of social work values (Rockwell, 2012). Person-centred care echoes the British Columbia College of Social Workers (2009) Code of Ethics to “maintain the best interest of the client as the primary professional obligation” and “respect the intrinsic worth of the persons she or he serves in her or his professional relationships with them” (p. 1). Social workers encourage the care team to go beyond the medical model and basic care needs to see the whole individual including their history and current psychosocial needs (Sanders et al., 2012). Social workers help to advocate when a resident may not be able to advocate for themselves. This advocacy is within the Assisted Living or Long-Term Care site and in the community and our systems, as a whole. Social workers recognize, bring awareness to, and work to eliminate systemic and cultural barriers that individuals may face in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care sites when they identify, for example, as Indigenous, LGBTQ, minority culture or as having language barriers.

It can be a traumatic experience for both a resident and their family prior to moving, and throughout the transition period, to an Assisted Living residence or Long-Term Care home. Social workers can help to ease this transition. They have the skills and knowledge to provide information and education as well as practical and emotional support during this time (Fields, et al., 2012; Jackson, 2014; Malench, 2004; Sussman & Dupuis, 2014). Building a trusting relationship with the care team is key in positive outcomes for a resident and their family. Having a social worker as the first point of contact facilitates this relationship from the beginning. All Long-Term Care and Assisted Living sites would benefit from having social workers to facilitate and provide additional support to residents and their families during these initial stages (Fields et al., 2012; Jackson, 2014; Malench, 2004; Sussman & Dupuis, 2014).

Family support has been shown to improve a resident’s quality of life (Leedahl, Sellon, & Chapin, 2018; Malench, 2004). Social workers are well versed in family dynamics and family systems. They build and strengthen ties between the care team and a resident and their family. Social workers can help the care team understand the larger context from which a resident and their family comes. They also provide support to residents who are experiencing challenges with their families. They may facilitate conversations and make referrals for further support in the community. Social workers provide much needed emotional support to residents and their families to address challenges such as those related to living in Long-Term Care, caregiving, grief and loss. Social workers also offer residents and families practical support and information on accessing government benefits and community resources. In regard to healthcare decision making, “social workers play a positive role in supporting families to understand their rights and responsibilities” (British Columbia Law Institute, 2019, p. 226). Often, social workers are the liaison for Family Councils in Long-Term Care (Community Care and Assisted Living Act: Residential Care Regulation, 2009). Family Councils can enhance a family member’s experience and connection with a Long-Term Care site, through education, peer support and community-building opportunities (Baumbusch, Reid, & Koehn, 2017; D’Souza, 2017).

Social workers take a lead role in advocating for, and protecting, the rights of vulnerable residents. Financial abuse is more common than one would like to believe (Seniors First BC, 2019). With their knowledge and understanding of adult guardianship legislation, social workers try to intervene earlier to help prevent financial abuse. Social workers can offer support and information about personal planning, adult guardianship and pension management programs as well as make more timely referrals to a variety of local agencies. Social workers are a vital support to residents who do not have any family or friends

available to assist them. They are also a key liaison for enhancing quality of life when a resident's financial and/or personal affairs are managed by a third party.

Social workers bring strong communication skills to complex and challenging situations. They are well poised to take a lead with the "palliative approach to care," initiating conversations with residents and their families about personal planning, quality of life and end-of-life wishes. Social workers often take a lead role in helping care teams work through ethical issues that are prevalent in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care sites such as issues of intimacy, living at risk and treatment options. According to a recent report by the British Columbia Law Institute (2019), "social workers across the region are supporting health care staff and physicians to better understand and apply health care consent law" (p. 222).

Social Workers as Leaders

With their unique skill-set, social workers take a leadership role within an interdisciplinary care team. Social workers mentor and model skills in communication, conflict-resolution and person-centred care. Many social workers facilitate workshops and offer educational opportunities to their colleagues on topics such as ethical issues that arise in practice, personal planning and mental and emotional wellness. Social workers are ideally skilled to address the Office of the Seniors Advocate's (2017b) recommendation, following the Residential Care Survey for "ongoing education for all care staff on the importance of resident emotional well-being" (p. 46). Social workers help to build relationships and collaborations among team members. They facilitate and support other staff in their work. They also bring a unique lens to care planning and problem-solving when challenges arise in a resident's care needs. Social workers have a comprehensive vision and critical lens with a focus on social justice and the individual. They also have knowledge of legal and practice-based issues, which allows them to contribute to the development of policy and procedures in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care sites.

What is needed?

Social workers and their unique contribution to overall care are vital to the quality of life of residents in both Assisted Living and Long-Term Care. The social work role needs to be more widely recognised and valued by management and the interdisciplinary team. Social workers need to figure prominently as integral clinical support team members among allied health professionals. Sufficient resources need to be allocated specifically for the social work role. A Canadian Association of Social Workers report (2002) states, "in order to provide adequate core services a (Long-Term Care) facility requires one full-time equivalent (FTE) clinically assigned social worker for every 60-70 residents." This ratio would allow social workers in Long-Term Care homes to do effective and meaningful work. We believe that all Assisted Living sites should have a social worker available on a minimum regular part-time basis. Residents in Assisted Living and Long-Term Care deserve and have a right to holistic care from skilled professionals who can offer appropriate psychosocial support, advocacy and referrals to community agencies. Mandating sites to have a social worker available to provide clinical support services will enhance holistic care and quality of life for adults in both Assisted Living and Long-Term Care throughout our province in a more consistent and equitable way.

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