



Canadian Policy Priorities for Older Adult Services: 2019 to 2025

Change is the only constant

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Introduction

This report analyzes changes over time in the older adult programs and initiatives that Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments identify as priorities in high-level policy statements.

Older adults in Canada rely on a variety of publicly funded programs and services to maintain their quality of life. Retired older adults who were previously wage earners receive monthly pensions through the Canada Pension Plan or Québec Pension Plan^{1,2}. In addition, 95% of Canadian older adults receive federal Old Age Security payments, and 37% receive the Guaranteed Income Supplement³. Many also receive provincial or territorial income supports. Depending on their province or territory of residence, older adults may be able to access a variety of programs intended to help them live independently, such as publicly funded home care, home renovation or adaptation programs, or community support services. Approximately one third of older Canadians used at least one of those supports in 2019-2020^{4,5}. Older adults are also relatively frequent users of health services, accounting for around 45% of Canada's publicly funded health care expenditures⁶.

While governments provide important services to older adults, jurisdictions across Canada face multiple demands on their available resources. Policy priorities shift as governments respond to emerging challenges⁶, and it is important for AgeTech innovators and others working to improve the well-being of older adults to understand trajectories of those changes.

Methods

This report is based on secondary analysis of policy priority scans that AGE-WELL Innovation Hub - Advancing Policies and Practices in Technology and Aging (APPTA) conducted in 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2025⁷⁻¹⁰. Each scan used scoping processes^{11,12} to locate publicly available high-level policy documents, such as throne speeches, mandate letters and budgets, where Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments announced changes in older adult programs and services.

The two-year scans included statements about policies in their analyses if they described the introduction of a new initiative, or changes to an existing initiative that was specifically meant to provide services or benefits to older adults. The analyses excluded statements which repeated the announcement of initiatives that were already included in a previous two-year scan. They also excluded statements which only mentioned older adults incidentally when describing initiatives intended for the general population, for example by pointing out older adults as an example of a vulnerable population that might benefit. As such, *policies identified in the analyses do not represent all policies and initiatives related to services for older adults that each government launched during each two-year period*. The programs and policies mentioned in high-level statements are ones that governments have chosen to emphasize, however, and indicate focal points for policy or program development at that time.

For this report the author used comparative analysis¹³ to examine changes over time in the policies and initiatives that high-level policy documents emphasized. Initially, the analysis identified themes¹⁴ in the policy areas highlighted in each two-year period by each government. Next, the analysis compared how many jurisdictions, up to a maximum of 14 (federal government, plus 13 provinces and territories), emphasized the theme during each two-year period. Finally, the comparative analysis charted changes over time in the number of jurisdictions emphasizing 10 themes that received the most widespread attention.

Policy Statement Themes

Thematic analysis identified 23 policy topics focused on older adults from 2019 to 2025 (Table 1). Every jurisdiction mentioned four of the topics at least once. Three other topics received widespread attention. Federal, provincial or territorial engagement with other policy themes was narrower and seven themes were each mentioned only in documents from a single jurisdiction.

Table 1: Policy Priority Topics

Engagement Level	Policy Theme (number of jurisdictions)
Ubiquitous (all 14)	Healthcare infrastructure expansion (13 P/T+FG); Healthcare human resources (13 P/T+FG); Home care (13 P/T+FG); Mental health and addictions (13 P/T+FG)
Widespread (13-10)	Pandemic response (13 P/T); Pensions and financial supplement benefits (12 P/T+FG); Affordable housing for older adults (11 P/T+FG)
Moderate (9-6)	Tax credits or rebates (9 P/T); Extended health or drug coverage* (8+FG); Caregiver supports (8 P/T); Accessible transportation (6 P/T); Virtual care (6 P/T)
Narrow (5-2)	Palliative care (2 P/T+FG); Older adult workforce participation (2 P/T+FG); Housing repair programs (2 P/T); Community program funding (1 P/T+FG)
Solitary (1)	Establishment of a Seniors' Advocate Office (1 P/T); Food security projects (1P/T); Home heating programs (1 P/T); Medical transportation programs (1 P/T); Social inclusion strategies (1 P/T); Health care system reform (1P/T); Establishment of long-term care standards (FG)
* Includes general medical coverage, programs covering specific drugs such as shingles or RSV vaccines, dental coverage, and coverage for equipment such as hearing aids or diabetes monitors to address specific conditions. Does not include COVID-19 vaccines, which were coded in Pandemic Response.	

Change Over Time

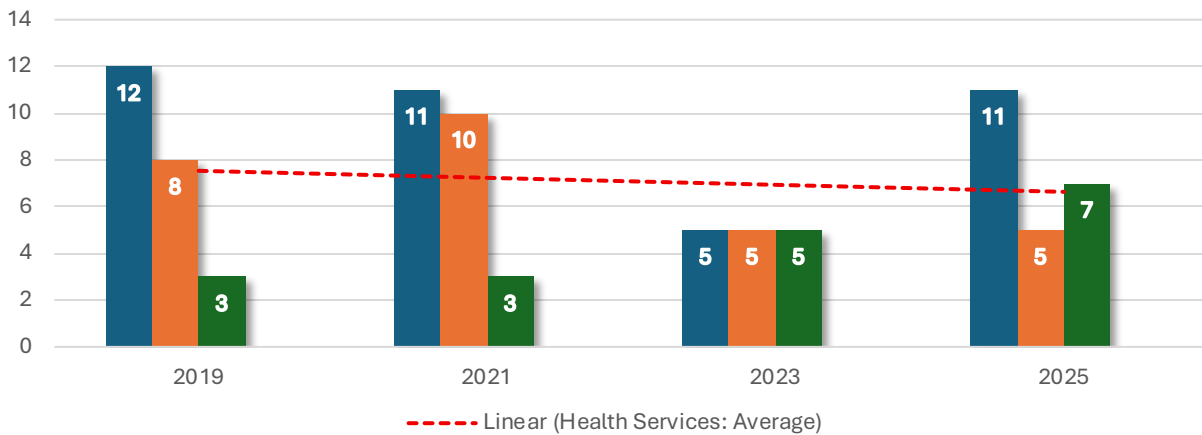
The analysis grouped the healthcare infrastructure, healthcare human resources, and extended health coverage themes together under *health care service provision* (Figure 1). Similarly, the analysis grouped the home care theme and caregiver support theme together as *home care* (Figure 2). Two other healthcare-related themes were mental health services (Figure 3), and pandemic responses (Figure 4). Widely mentioned non-health policy areas were *financial supports for older adults*, which includes the financial benefits and tax credits/rebates themes (Figure 5), and affordable housing for older adults (Figure 6).

Health Service Provision

Health service provision for older adults was a widespread priority in 2019. Nearly all jurisdictions announced initiatives aimed at improving healthcare infrastructure, such as hospitals or long-term care facilities, and over half mentioned initiatives for increasing health human resources for older adult care. In 2020-2021, two fewer jurisdictions announced health infrastructure initiatives, but the theme remained widespread overall. During the same period, more jurisdictions announced initiatives related to health human resources for older adult care. In 2022-2023, the number of jurisdictions making announcements related to both themes dropped sharply. The trajectory changed again in 2024-2025. The number of jurisdictions emphasizing health human resources remained consistent while attention on health infrastructure grew more widespread as jurisdictions announced construction and renovation initiatives.

Announcements related to publicly funded extended health coverage for older adults, such as pharmaceutical benefits, dental benefits and health device coverage, followed a different trajectory than the other two themes. Extended health coverage was a less widespread topic from 2019 to 2023. However, announcements related to that theme became more widespread over time and in 2024-2025 more jurisdictions emphasized expanded health coverage initiatives than health human resources. Despite growth in policy announcements related to extended care benefits, the overall trend for the average of health services themes showed little change between 2019 and 2025.

Figure 1: Health Service Provision

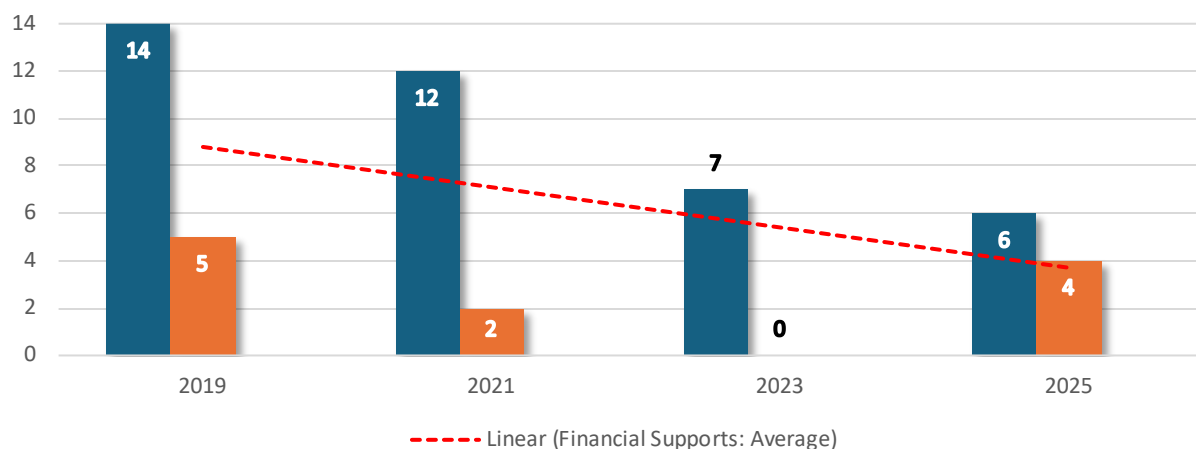


Healthcare infrastructure expansion		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	12	BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
2021	11	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT
2023	5	AB, SK, ON, QC, NS
2024	11	FG, BC, AB, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, NU
Any Scan	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
Healthcare human resources		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	8	BC, SK, MB, QC, NB, PEI, NS, YT
2021	10	BC, AB, SK, ON, QC, NB, PEI, YT, NWT, NU
2023	5	FG, SK, QC, NS, NL
2024	5	MB, NB, PEI, NL, NU
Any Scan	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
Extended health or drug coverage		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	3	FG, BC, MB
2021	3	FG, PEI, NS
2023	5	FG, MB, QC, PEI, NS
2024	7	FG, SK, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL
Any Scan	9	FG, BC, SK, MB, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL

Home Care Provision

Announcements related to the provision of home care services were very widespread in 2019, with all provinces and territories, and the federal government mentioning initiatives. Some provinces also announced supports for unpaid family or friend caregivers, who are integral in supporting older adults to remain in their own homes. In 2020-2021, announcements related to home care services remained high, but policy documents mentioned caregiver supports less often. Home care provision was a much less widespread topic for policy announcements in 2022-2023 than in previous years. It remained less of a focus in 2024-25 despite increased attention on caregiver supports by some provinces and territories. Overall, the trajectory for home care provision policy announcements showed a trend toward fewer jurisdictions emphasizing those topics.

Figure 2: Home Care Provision

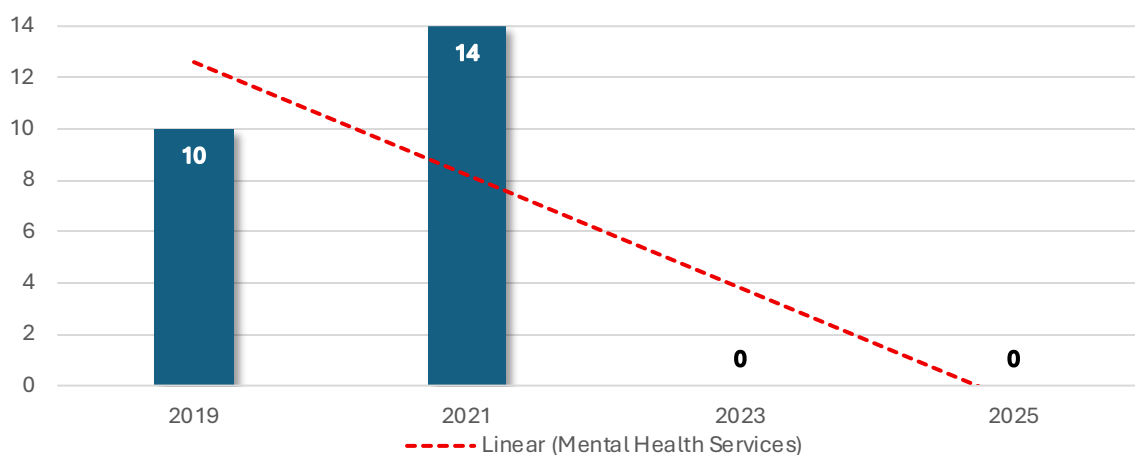


Home care		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
2021	12	BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT
2023	7	AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, NS
2024	6	FG, BC, SK, MB, NB, PEI
Any Scan	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
Caregiver supports		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	5	AB, SK, MB, ON, QC
2021	2	MB, QC
2023	0	-
2024	4	SK, NS, NL, YT
Any Scan	8	AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NS, NL, YT

Mental Health and Addictions

Addressing mental health and addictions among older adults was a common theme across jurisdictions in 2019 and it became even more widespread in 2020-2021. Announcements about policies to address mental health and addictions abruptly became much less widespread. The 2023 and 2025 scans did not identify any new policies or initiatives for older adult-focused mental health. The overall trend line from 2019 to 2025 shows a sharp decline in emphasis on mental health services for older adults in high-level policy announcements.

Figure 3: Mental Health Services

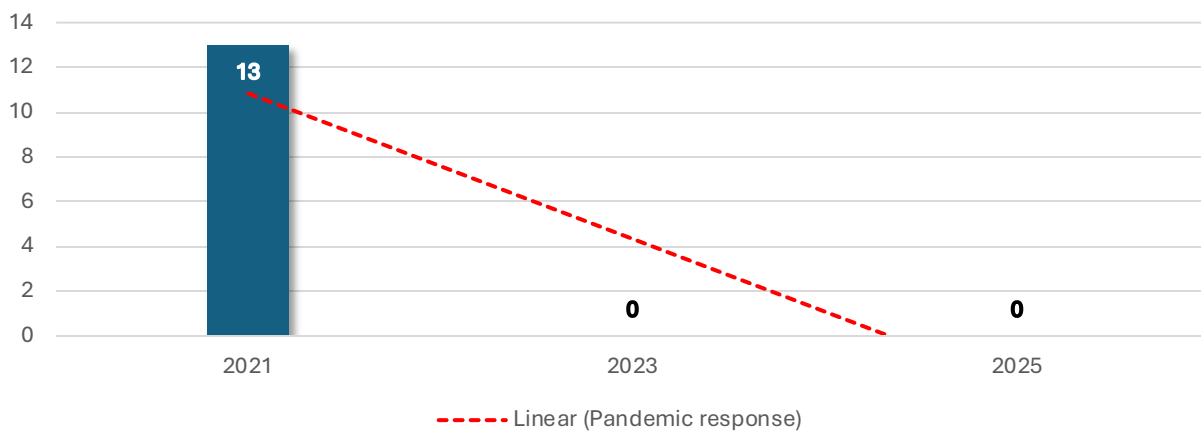


Mental health services		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	10	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, PEI, NL, NWT, NU
2021	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
2023	0	-
2024	0	-
Any Scan	14	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU

Pandemic Response

A short and widespread period of engagement characterized announcement of policies and initiatives to address impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on older adults. All provinces and territories announced policies or programs focused on managing the impacts of COVID-19 on older adults in their high-level statements during the 2020-2021 period. By 2022-2023, Canada's governments classified COVID-19 as an endemic disease. While provinces and territories continued annual vaccination programs for older adults, no jurisdictions announced new pandemic response policies or initiatives in 2022-23 or 2024-25.

Figure 4: Pandemic Response

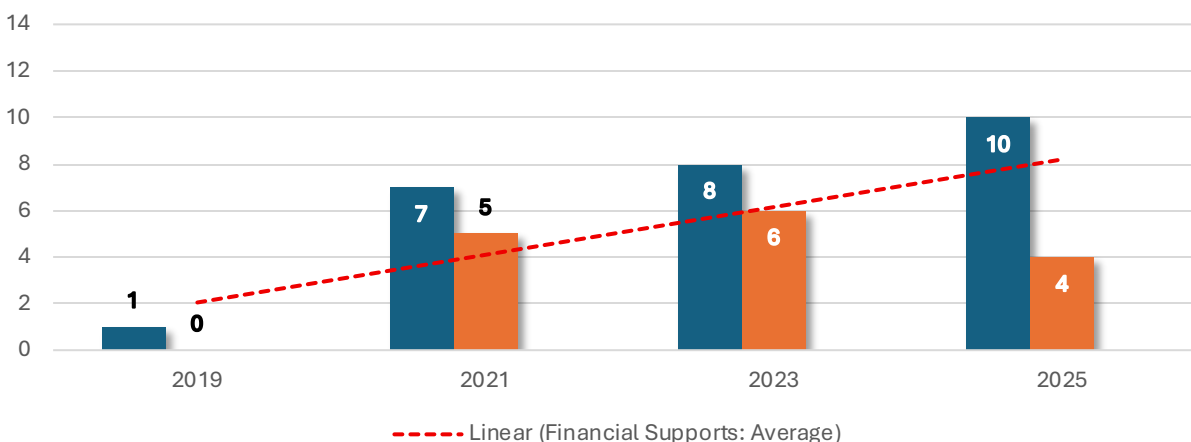


Pandemic response		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2021	13	BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU
2023	0	-
2024	0	-
Any Scan	13	BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT, NWT, NU

Financial Supports

In 2019 the federal government's statements about changes to the Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security, and Guaranteed Income Supplement programs were the only announcements about financial supports for older adults. Initiatives related to financial supports became more widespread in 2020-2021. The federal government and six provinces or territories announced increases to financial benefit programs and five mentioned tax credits or rebates for older adults. Statements about financial supports for older adults were even more widespread in 2022-2023, with the federal government and provinces and territories announcing financial support and tax credit or rebate programs. Financial benefit programs remained a widespread policy theme in 2024-2025. However, the number of jurisdictions announcing new tax initiatives for older adults declined compared to the previous four years. The overall trend between 2019 and 2025 was toward more widespread emphasis on financial support policies for older adults.

Figure 5: Financial Supports

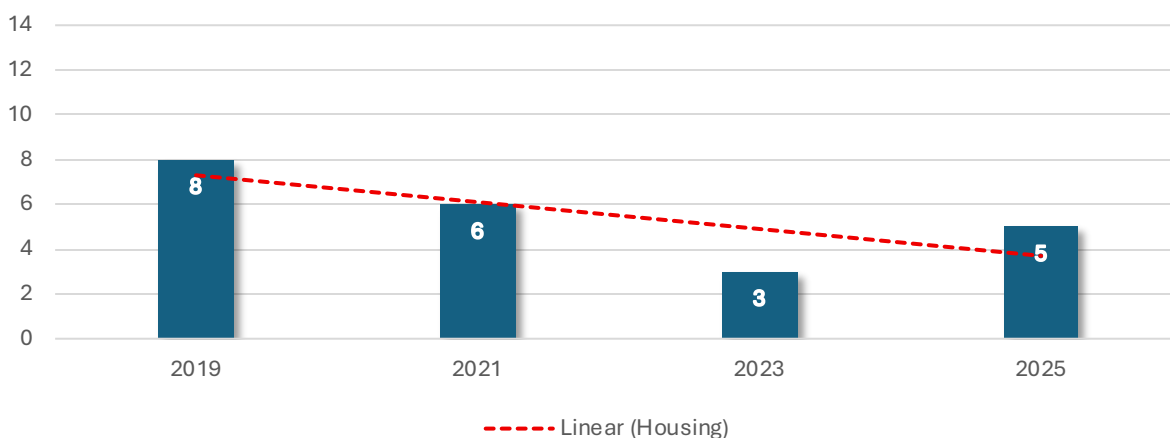


Financial supplement benefits and pensions		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	1	FG
2021	7	FG, BC, SK, MB, NL, NWT, NU
2023	8	FG, BC, AB, SK, ON, NL, YT, NWT
2024	10	FG, BC, AB, SK, ON, QC, NB, NL, YT, NWT
Any Scan	12	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, NL, YT, NWT, NU
Tax credits or rebates		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	0	-
2021	5	SK, MB, ON, QC, NS
2023	6	BC, MB, ON, QC, PEI, NWT
2024	4	SK, MB, NB, NS
Any Scan	9	BC, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NWT

Affordable Housing

Announcements related to affordable housing for older adults were moderately widespread in the 2019 policy priority scan, with the federal government and half the provinces or territories including the theme in their high-level statements. Emphasis on affordable housing for older adults was narrower in 2020-2021 and 2022-2023, then expanded somewhat in 2024-2025 compared with the previous two years. Overall, the trend line from 2019 to 2025 shows a small decline in the number of jurisdictions engaging with the theme.

Figure 6: Affordable Housing



Affordable housing for older adults		
Scan	Number	Jurisdictions where prioritized
2019	8	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, PEI
2021	6	FG, BC, MB, PEI, NS, NL
2023	3	NS, NL, YT
2024	5	FG, BC, MB, NB, YT
Any Scan	12	FG, BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, QC, NB, PEI, NS, NL, YT

Aging and Dementia Strategies

From 2019 to 2025, eight provinces or territories and the federal government released strategy documents that describe principles or plans of action for supporting older adults or addressing the needs of people with dementia, a large proportion of whom are older adults^{15,16}. Some of the strategies focused on specific topics related to services for older adults, for example the federal National Dementia Strategy in 2019¹⁷. Others, such as Manitoba's Provincial Seniors Strategy in 2023¹⁸ and Nunavut's Aging with Dignity: Elders and Seniors Strategy in 2024¹⁹, took broader approaches meant to address multiple policy areas that are important for supporting older adults.

Federal Priorities for Policies Focused on Older Adults

The federal government's role in supporting older adults is narrower than the role of the provinces and territories due to Canada's constitutional division of powers. The federal government focuses mainly on funding and regulation rather than service provision and policy topics that appear in the federal government's high-level policy statements reflect this difference. The federal government consistently announced reforms and initiatives related to the Canada Pension Plan and federal financial benefits paid directly to older adults, such as Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. Similarly, in 2019, 2020-2021, and 2024-2025 it emphasized efforts to improve the availability of affordable housing for older adults as part of the National Housing Strategy²⁰. The federal government also drew attention to several other policy themes over shorter time periods. These included its focus in 2019-2021 on mental health and addictions and on plans to develop national pharmacare coverage²¹, in 2023 on development of a national dental plan²², and in 2025 on the dental care plan's implementation.

Policy Change Drivers

The analysis presented only assesses how widespread engagement was by federal, provincial and territorial governments with policy themes focused on older adults. It does not evaluate the government engagement's intensity, which would be reflected in the number of times a jurisdiction mentioned a theme, or analyze actions taken to follow through on initiatives. That level of discourse analysis²³ was not practical within this study due to high variation in the formats of captured documents and removal over time from publicly available websites of documents checked in the earlier scans.

The analysis is able to show how common each theme was across Canada at specific points in time, however, and it gives a sense of the overall trajectories for older adult policy themes from 2019 to 2025. Importantly, the analysis shows that the priority governments place on policies or initiatives that support older adults changes over time. At least some of those changes correspond with events in the wider political and economic environment.

In 2019, widespread older adult policy themes, such as healthcare and long-term care infrastructure initiatives, policies to increase healthcare human resources, and expansion of publicly funded home care services, reflected recognition by policymakers of future consequences from population aging in Canada¹⁶. Rising demand for affordable housing over the previous decade²⁴, and mental health and addiction concerns driven by increasing opioid abuse across Canada²⁵ also influenced the older adult-related policies governments focused on.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused proportionally higher fatalities among older adults than among other age categories in Canada²⁶⁻²⁸. The pandemic also exposed personnel gaps in long-term care²⁹⁻³¹, which increased attention on policies that impacted the older adult population. The impact of the pandemic on policies is most obvious in the high priority all provinces and territories placed on

pandemic responses in 2020-21. More widespread emphasis on healthcare human resources, response to the impacts of pandemic lockdown policies on mental health, and the widespread implementation of financial supplements and tax incentives for older adults to offset income losses also reflect the pandemic's impacts on policy priorities.

While governments responded to the pandemic by announcing policies related to services for older adults, they did not sustain that increased engagement – seven of the ten themes examined in detail show narrower engagement in 2022-2023. This rapid shift corresponds with lifting most pandemic measures in early 2022, and also with rapidly increasing inflation³² in the post-pandemic economy³³. Two of the policy themes that received more widespread attention in 2022-2023 were financial supports, in the form of increased benefit payments and tax credits and rebates for older adults to help them maintain financial stability in the face of inflation. More governments also announced publicly funded health coverage for older adults, which may have been driven in part by provincial or territorial responses to the federal government's pharmacare and dental care funding initiatives.

The trend toward emphasizing economic measures continued in 2024-2025 as governments across Canada faced economic disruption stemming from US tariff policies³⁴ and threats to Canadian sovereignty³⁵. In addition to announcements about increased financial benefit payments for older adults, statements about affordable housing for older adults became more widespread, possibly due to the federal government's emphasis in 2025 on providing incentives for increased housing construction as part of efforts to boost economic growth³⁶. Announcements about healthcare infrastructure also became more common in 2024-2025. While most jurisdictions across Canada need additional hospital and long-term care capacity, governments also favour capital infrastructure construction projects as a method for providing economic stimulus, and the federal 2025 budget included \$5 billion for a Health Infrastructure Fund³⁶.

Conclusion

These findings showing continuous changes in policy priorities imply that innovators developing products and services for older adults are likely to face challenges navigating the policy environment. They cannot rely on sustained long-term engagement from policymakers on specific topics and it is difficult to anticipate what specific factors will shape future priorities in publicly funded services for older adults. In that shifting political, social and economic environment, it may be useful for innovators to adopt flexible approaches to engagement with government, by focusing messaging on areas of ongoing need and developing communication that can be adapted to new situations as they emerge.

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