

## Welcome Statement to the Seniors' Health, Housing and Incomes Conference, September 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Honored Guests':

My name is Art Kube, I am the President of the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of British Columbia(COSCO for short) I would like to welcome you, especially those coming from outside the Lower Mainland and out of Province, to this ground breaking conference. We have accomplished the first goal of the conference namely we have representation from Seniors organizations, the three levels of government, the Health Authorities and Health Professionals, the Academia, Advocacy Organizations, Unions, Non Governmental Organizations, and even some Business Groups, all the Players' necessary to build the GLOBAL AGE – FRIENDLY COMMUNITY. So thank you all for coming.

I'd like to spend a couple of minutes to reflect on our organizations' past and where we are today. COSCO was founded over fifty years ago by retired Railway Workers for the purpose of advancing the health and welfare of senior citizens in BC. COSCO fulfilled its mandate very quietly during all the years of fast growth and social program expansion, until the time when universal social programs and public

institutions came under attack, the very same programs and institutions we seniors worked very hard to establish. We are the children of the Great Depression, we remember what it felt like not to have healthcare, no income security and the majority having to live on the wrong side of the track. We weren't prepared to revisit these good old times and COSCO started to mobilize. In the last seven years our membership increased from 25 affiliates with a membership 20,000 to 75 affiliates and a membership 85,000. Virtually thousands of seniors joined our campaign to mitigate the damage caused by government cutbacks and privatization.

If you look at the special issue of the COSCO NEWS contained in your binder you can see our fight-back but you can also see our suggestions for reform of our healthcare program and our institutions. You also can see our work in the area of health literacy, Elder Abuse Prevention, Peer Counseling. Seniors Advocacy, mature safe driving and leadership development.

Healthcare and some of the institutions have not served seniors well and need reforms, reforms like those advocated by the 1986 Ottawa Charter of Health Promotion. Reforms which assure dignity, independence, participation, fairness and security to seniors, we want to participate in planning these positive changes. Not everything is well as far as we

seniors are concerned. Yes many of us have statistically high incomes, but poverty among seniors mostly elderly surviving spouses' is on the increase and cries out for solutions. Elder abuse and neglect in institutions and families needs addressing. Seniors homelessness is on the increase, ageism continues to persist in healthcare and in services, all these issues COSCO is committed to combat.

Attitudes towards seniors and attitudes of seniors have to change to reflect their increased longevity. Society has to recognize that seniors can and do make continuing contributions to the community and each other. In COSCO our motto is 'SENIORS HELPING SENIORS'. We have to convince seniors that the attitude still prevailing among a lot of seniors: 'Leave it to the Young Folks', where maybe O.K. when we lived to 68 or 69, maybe we could vegetate and suffer these short three years until we died. Today we live to be 80, we can't vegetate for 15 or 20 years, nor can we leave it to the young folks. As an abused seniors remarked to me:" If you leave it to the Young Folks, they not only **do it for you**, but **they do it to you**". For our own quality of life and our responsibility as citizen we must continue to participate and make our continuing contribution to society.

The World Health Organizations "Global Age – Friendly Cities" initiative is an attempt to deal with the increasing aging population in a human way, but

unfortunately instead of celebrating people living longer and healthier lives it is often falsely portrayed as a threat to civil society, its social infra structure and the bankruptcy of public finances. Such portrayal does not do much for the self worth of seniors and therefore should always be challenged. We seniors' are the most under utilized asset in society and if treated with respect and dignity we can increase our effort and levels of participation. The motivation for our additional effort should be our increased quality of life and never the possible savings accrued by the public treasurer. If anything the public treasury should be enlarged to deal with many of the ills still befalling our society.

We seniors have to convince society of the need of strong seniors' organizations which are capable to strongly advocate on behalf of seniors and a civil society and are able to drive the agenda for Age – Friendly Communities. Unfortunately, advocacy by seniors' organization is still frowned upon, but if you look upon it objectively there is a democratic deficit when it comes to seniors input into public policy. If you look at organizations of business, labour and the professions, you look at well financed, well staffed and well housed organizations capable of affecting public policy. Indeed one of the recommendations in the Global Age-Friendly Cities Guide calls for support for seniors organizations.

In the next two days we will collectively attempt to flush out the best practices in the different component of seniors' health, housing and income. We in seniors' organization hope to come out of this conference with an agenda for Age – Friendly Communities. We hope that the representatives of the three levels of government will understand our concerns and engage us in meaningful dialogue and in the planning process for the Age – Friendly communities. To our friends in seniors support services and seniors centres, we thank you for your help and support but ask your cooperation in bringing about changes to empower seniors and encourage them to engage in more education and discussions on public policy and less paternity and over protection. All in all let's have a good and productive conference. Thank you and welcome again.