

Investing in the quality of life for our seniors

by Sylvia Jones

In Ontario, more than 60,000 hospital emergency visits occur each year as a result of chronic pain, gum disease, and tooth infections. A high percentage of these emergency visits are by senior citizens. About two-thirds of low-income seniors don't have dental coverage. That is why our government is investing \$90 million into a program for low-income seniors to receive dental care. This program is expected to begin in 2019.

Untreated oral health problems can cause serious diseases, a decreased quality of life, and create a reliance on emergency departments at hospitals. This costs the Ontario health care system about \$31 million each year. Providing dental care to low-income seniors will reduce the amount of visits to the ER for oral health issues and is protecting what matters.

The income threshold for the new dental program is the same as the Ontario Drug Benefit, which will be familiar to seniors who are covered for prescriptions with more than 4,400 medications included. Both programs will use an income of \$19,300 or lower or a couple with a combined income of \$32,300 or lower as the threshold. Residency in the province, income and no existing dental coverage are the parameters for eligibility.

As an MPP, I have heard often from residents throughout Dufferin-Caledon that dental care for seniors is not only needed but it is necessary. I am pleased that we are making a difference for many seniors in my community who are struggling with poor dental health. I know there are seniors who are living in pain because of dental problems who simply cannot afford to go to the dentist. This program will improve their quality of life.

Seniors are the highest growing demographic in Ontario, growing by 100,000 each year. 13.9% of the Dufferin-Caledon population is 65 years of age and older based on the 2016 Canadian Census. By 2023, there will be about 3 million seniors in Ontario. A majority of seniors want to live independently in their communities. We need to provide support to these seniors in order to ensure that they are able to live with a high quality of life. We want to ensure that seniors are able to be socially connected, healthy, safe, and active. Programs like the Ontario Drug Benefit and the new Seniors Dental Care Program will help to achieve that goal.