Helping people age safely at home

VON provides clinical and non-clinical supports to clients who hope to age in place

VON is Nova Scotia's primary source for home and community care, offering essential services to vulnerable individuals across the entire stretch from Sydney to Yarmouth. PHOTO CREDIT: Contributed

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The share of Canada's population in the over-65 age group continues to grow. It was 14.1 per cent in 2010, and it's expected to rise to 25 per cent by mid-century, according to Statistics Canada.

In Nova Scotia, a growing and aging population, combined with a shortage of some healthcare workers, challenges us to be innovative and continue to find new ways to meet the care needs of seniors. Beyond hiring more staff and building more facilities––which takes time––healthcare providers in the province have also been looking at new ways to make the most of available resources.

VON, a not-for-profit organization, is Nova Scotia's largest provider of home and community care, delivering home nursing, home support and community support services from Sydney to Yarmouth to the most vulnerable community members.

Last year alone, VON provided almost a million nursing visits in the province. Some of those visits were what we might expect— nurses treating patients in their houses or apartments. But VON is thinking beyond traditional home care to bring more help to those who need it. Care can be delivered at home, in nursing clinics or in neighbourhood hubs (which enables residents in close proximity to each other to receive care from a team dedicated to their geographic area).

For home care clients who are mobile, visiting a local community nursing clinic provides them with opportunities for social interaction while increasing access to home care for others who need it.

"A clinic nurse can see more than two times as many clients in the time required for a single home visit," explains Jeff Densmore, VON's regional executive director, Central and Western Zones. "When someone is receiving treatment, such as an IV, the nurse can attend to a second person while the IV is infusing."

Earlier this year, VON completed the expansion of its Bayers Road clinic in Halifax, doubling the number of treatment spaces. VON also operates a temporary three-bed clinic inside Dartmouth General Hospital.

Community nursing clinics are just one part of an overall strategy to keep people in their homes and communities as they age (known in healthcare circles as "aging in place").

VON also addresses the non-clinical needs of clients with supports such as Meals on Wheels, transportation to appointments and to do errands and Adult Day Programs.

With food insecurity on the rise, Meals on Wheels is a seemingly simple concept with an important goal. It gets affordable food right to the doors and into the hands of people who need it—people who, for various reasons, can't shop for groceries or prepare food.

This year, VON expects to deliver 400,000 meals.

"Sometimes these meals alone are all the support that's needed to keep people in their homes," says Densmore. "This means we can help other people who are on the waitlist for home support."

Programs like Meals on Wheels and Adult Day are also geared to reducing the heavy burden on family caregivers, supporting their loved ones' dietary and social needs and giving caregivers more time to work, tackle their to-do lists or simply get much-deserved rest.

"With this tailored bundle of home and community supports, older adults, people with disabilities and those recovering from or living with illnesses can get the necessary clinical and non-clinical help they need to live where they want to live—most often in their own homes," says Densmore. "Our goal is to help people live each day with dignity and better peace of mind."

While many of VON's programs receive government funding, the organization relies on fundraising to get programs like Meals on Wheels, transportation and Adult Day Programs to more people who need them.

Visit von.ca for more information or to donate.