

York Region 'ground zero' for growing dementia cases

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Although Teresa Durante learned English after moving to Canada from Italy in 1959, dementia is robbing the senior citizen of her ability to speak her second language.

Fortunately, her round-the-clock caregiver, Connie Bertucci, discovered a new day program in Vaughan for Italian-speaking seniors who have been diagnosed with early-stage dementia or Alzheimer's.

"We moved (to Woodbridge) to be with the Italian community because I came from Oakville where there was a beautiful program but they were all English-speaking and English food and it just made it that much harder," Bertucci said at the official opening of the Calabrian Benevolent Association of Ontario (CBAO) Centre at Islington Avenue and Hwy. 7 as Durante painted at a nearby table with other seniors.

"When I found this program, she felt at home in

a way because they speak Italian. The environment, she just fit in and she felt good. I'm so fortunate to find something like this to give me two days off a week. She loves it here, she loves the people, the people are terrific. It means a lot to her. They should have more of these (centres)."

With an aging population and a growing number of patients with dementia, there is an increasing need for services, including those that cater to multicultural residents, Loren Freid, CEO of the Alzheimer Society of York Region, said.

"The needs are not being met. The dementia population is substantially larger than the services that are here for them," he said.

Because short-term memory is the first stage of memory to go with Alzheimer's and dementia, the diseases' victims born overseas often lose the ability to speak the English they learned after moving to Canada and revert to their mother tongues, Freid said.

"All of this is a unique challenge here in York Region for a couple of reasons. One is York Region has perhaps the fastest-growing population of seniors across the country," he said.

"While dementia is not a normal part of the aging process, age is its most significant risk factor. So, York Region is essentially ground zero for seeing an increase in people with dementia."

There are about 15,000 people in the region with some form of dementia, which is expected to double by 2031.

There are about 80 languages spoken in the Greater Toronto Area, according to the Greater Toronto Market Alliance.

"York Region as part of the GTA forms the largest, most diverse ethnocultural community in Canada so it is extremely important to have dementia programs in the native languages of the people who live here," Freid said.

Not only do programs help people with the disease

communicate more easily, but they also encourage family members to work with organizations such as the Alzheimer's Society to get their loved one the care they need, he said.

The society, a leader in providing programs, including staff able to provide services in different languages, helps about 2,200 residents and their families a year. That's only about 15 per cent of the 15,000 York residents with Alzheimer's and other dementias.

Both Freid and Dr. Giovanni Marotta, clinical adviser to the CBAO seniors day program, are worried about the impact of the growing population of Alzheimer's and dementia patients on the health care system.

"There are 360,000 cases of dementia in Canada and every minute, a new case is diagnosed," Marotta said.

"Dementia is ranked fourth in the world for disease burden and that's increasing."

The day program, sponsored by CBAO and Active Green + Ross, helps clients perform to the best of their cognitive and behavioural abilities while also giving caregivers a break, Marotta said.

"What also makes our program unusual is that it has come from generous donors from within our community. They've seen the gap in care and the suffering within our Italian-Canadian families with long wait lists," he said.

"We have a number of day programs here in the Greater Toronto Area but the wait lists are long. Last year, wait lists for clients



Mike Barrett/Metroland

CBAO Centre in Vaughan program assistant manager Viviana Lionti (right) works with client Rosa Mancuso, as recreational aide Faustina Gyebi looks on. CBAO is launching a new day program for Italian residents with early stages of Alzheimer's or dementia and their families and caregivers.

in the Vaughan area were approaching one year."

The centre looks like a light industrial workplace rather than a nursing home or community centre.

"Many individuals with dementia are afraid that the usual day programs in nursing home settings are a preparatory step to get them ready for (a) nursing home," Marotta said.

"(At CBAO), it is just the opposite. We also know that many of our elders with dementia were blue collar

workers who had little time for hobbies. The program tries to invite them into a return to a work environment, which is a familiar setting for them. They are more receptive to the physical, mental and social exercises inherent in the program structure."

Maintaining intellectual and functional abilities allows people with dementia to hold on to their independence and avoid nursing home care for longer, Marotta said.



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