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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Empire Club Address: May 30, 2016

Taking Action Against Ageism

By Thomas G. Wellner, President and CEO, Revera

Thank you, Paul and Stephen, for that generous introduction. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us today. Today, I'd like to talk to you about aging, and the opportunity we all have to make very real change in the lives of Canadian seniors, with actions we can take right now.

When I became CEO of Revera two years ago, the board made my mandate clear: to transform the company into a major owner, operator and investor in senior living across Canada, the US and the UK. What I didn't know was that I was also signing on to a social movement to combat ageism. But I was. And this is the movement that is central to my talk today. Because creating that social change is vital to all of us. We are all getting older, every minute, even as we sit in this room.

Today, our society tends to view aging as a slow period of decline. In reality, it is another stage of our lives that can be rich with learning, opportunity and tremendous happiness. To bring this perspective to life, I'll talk about a new report we've just published that speaks to the challenges faced by Canada's fastest-growing group of people – people over the age of 65. I'll also touch on some of the ways organizations can serve, transform and invest in this, our richest cohort of consumers.

Finally, I want to issue a call to action – to all of us individually, to organizations whose work touches seniors, and to governments and regulators. Our attitudes, our policies, and our actions must all change to meet the needs of what is now six million Canadians and by 2024, will grow to nearly eight million.

Let me put a finer point on it: the real opportunity is to dramatically improve life for older adults. For some of you in this room, 65 may seem somewhat distant. And for many of you, your 80s and 90s may feel like light years away. But I can assure you that the changes we make today will not only benefit your parents -- they will make a real and tangible difference to you in the not too distant future.

The overwhelming barrier to improving the lives of seniors is ageism– stereotyping or discriminating against a person or group because of their age. Now, if I asked you to raise your hand if you've ever discriminated against people because they're gay, or women, or Jewish, or Black, you would be outraged.

But, raise your hands if you think you've ever practiced ageism. Have you ever said to a friend when you forgot a colleague's name: "I'm having a senior's moment?" I know I have. Do you believe you "can't teach an old dog new tricks?" When you see someone walking slowly, do you believe their thinking has slowed too? Do you speak to them more slowly, or more loudly, or in a tone more suited to a child?

If you've done this, you're practicing ageism. You may not even know it, and that 'not knowing' is likely why ageism is by far the most tolerated form of social prejudice in Canada, way ahead of racism and sexism. Racism and sexism are rightly called out -- swiftly and widely. Ageism...not so much. But it needs to be, and it needs to happen right now.

That's just one of the conclusions from The Revera Report on Ageism conducted by Revera and the Sheridan Centre for Elder Research. It found that one in four Canadians admits to treating someone differently because of their age.

The Report's subtitle — "Independence and Choice As We Age" — speaks to why ageism is both so widespread and so difficult to root out. Some of it is driven by pride and the word "still." Dad's 85 and can "still" drive on his own. Mom's 90 and she's "still" as sharp as a tack. Older people have standing in our society only to the degree that they can do what younger people can do. And what happens if they can't? Do they disappear?

Some of ageism is fuelled by us simply trying to be helpful, trying to do the right thing. But unfortunately, by taking away seniors' independence and reducing their choice, we end up doing exactly the wrong thing. Our Report revealed that more than half of Canadians over the age of 77, say that younger people assume they can't do things for themselves. Worse, more than a quarter of older adults say that because of their age, younger people make choices for them without asking their preference.

We use words like "helpful" and "responsible" to describe how we feel when we make decisions on behalf of seniors. But we need to listen to adults 77 and older who say they feel "controlled" and "annoyed" when choices are made for them.

Ultimately, ageism robs seniors of independence and choice. But the good thing about ageism is that, unlike most other 'isms', it isn't engrained with bitterness or hatred. Rather, it's covered with a thin gloss of ignorance, which can often be scrubbed clean by a quick application of awareness.

At Revera, we're taking a leading role in tackling ageism. Today's Revera Report marks the second time we have issued such a call to action. The first was four years ago when we partnered with the International Federation of Ageing on the first study of Canadians' attitudes towards aging. From that report, we launched a campaign called *Age is More* to shed light on ageism as a significant social issue that prevents older people from living life to the fullest. Age is More also celebrates the ageless spirit of older people.

Revera has more than 500 senior living communities and serves 50,000 residents and their families, through millions of human interactions each and every day. In my role as CEO, I have the honour and privilege of being able to spend time with older adults. Most of our residents are in their 80s and 90s – senior seniors, or “super seniors” as we like to call them. What I learn from them is that this period of their lives can be tremendously rich and rewarding.

I’m not claiming growing old is a picnic. As Bette Davis said: “Growing old isn’t for sissies.” However, we need to stop viewing this period of our lives as a time of decay and decline. I recently visited our Donway Place community in Toronto where I met a resident, Mary Anna Higgins, who teaches other residents how to play the piano. Mary Anna is here with us today. So I play the piano a bit too. And Mary Anna was good enough to entertain a duet with me. We had a great talk about how happy she feels sharing her skills with her friends and giving them the power of connection through music that she enjoys.

After all, study after study reveals that the older you get, the happier and more optimistic you become – again, disproving another building block of ageism, that our 70s, 80s and even 90s are spent marking time waiting for the end.

So what is to be done? How can we change the attitudes that feed ageism and starve the promise that growing old can hold for all of us? Let me touch on some of the key recommendations in the Revera Report. I’ll start with a few that apply to us all, whether as individuals or organizations.

For one, we can avoid making assumptions about what older adults want or can do. No surprise, when we feel more independent and in control, we not only live longer -- we recover faster from health challenges, and our days are happier. In our business, that means reminding our personal support workers that if Gail Carnegie -- who is here today from our Claremont residence -- would like a glass a wine, don’t assume that she wants you to get it for her, unless she asks for help. Remember, Gail has enjoyed many years doing things for herself, her own way.

For this to work, we need to get to know each resident on a personal level, and understand what's important specifically to them. We can also recognize our own stereotypes and prejudices.

Our Chief Elder Officer, Hazel McCallion, called out a memorable example of stereotyping on a now-famous television commercial where she questioned our former Prime Minister in last fall's election for presuming that senior citizens are, by nature, easily frightened. She looked into the camera and asked: "Do I look scared to you, Stephen?" Hurricane Hazel sets an example for all older adults, to directly challenge the stereotypes that limit them.

We can also bring together younger people with older people. The simple act of spending time with someone from a different generation is a powerful way to keep prejudice from forming especially when you're young, which is exactly when most of our prejudices do get formed.

In fact, we're doing this through another initiative called the Revera and Reel Youth Age is More Film Project. Reel Youth is a Vancouver non-profit which helps young Canadians tell stories on film. Through this program, we've paired students with seniors in our retirement communities and produced 80 – yes, 80 – short films that celebrate older Canadians and bring together what used to be the two solitudes of young and old.

Looking to our policy makers, I'm confident they will understand that the Report's recommendations are part of a larger movement to urge governments to inject more choice and independence into our systems of health and long-term care, not just to provide better care, but to make better use of our limited resources.

To make that a reality, we are calling for older Canadians to always be at the table when discussing policies that affect them – not just the 65 year olds, but those in their 70s, 80s, 90s and beyond.

Canadians 50 and older are our most affluent group of citizens. And while there are no reliable statistics for the spending power of Canadians 80 and older, we know they – and their adult children – are spending a lot on their health and wellness. When you don't market to one of the richest segments of society, you don't tend to invest in it either. And you certainly don't focus on innovation. But those generations of neglect are starting to change. There's never been a greater opportunity for businesses to help older Canadians remain independent as long as possible. The potential upside is tremendous and companies should do more to explore this expanding market.

At Revera, we believe passionately in both the social potential and the market potential of innovation in the senior sector. And we're not just advocating for innovation, we are driving innovation.

I'm pleased to announce today the launch of the *Revera Innovators in Aging* program. Each year, we'll select up to 20 innovators that fit our criteria of helping residents, families and staff in our communities. Those innovators will come into our communities to pilot their latest products and services, on a much larger scale – and in a 'real world' environment -- than they have had access to before.

We're testing everything from a wearable sensor that helps identify seniors at risk of falls, to a device that improves blood flow to help wounds heal faster, to a mobile app that helps seniors stay connected to their loved ones and caregivers.

We have earmarked 20 million dollars to invest over the next five years in some of the innovative companies that we believe can become commercially successful. Our investees won't just have great ideas; they'll also have customers – with the potential to be introduced across our network and beyond.

As John Ruffolo, co-founder of the Council of Canadian Innovators, said about innovation: “Canada doesn’t have a starting-up problem; we have a finishing up problem.”

So we’re going to help entrepreneurs in our sector *finish up*. In many cases, Revera can become their biggest customer. We can also make our own business more efficient and offer higher quality service and a better experience to our customers.

Here’s an example of what I mean...

We’re piloting a meal service platform called ‘Continyou Care’ at a number of our communities. It’s an app that allows for greater personalization of service during meal times. So when the staff takes a food order from a resident, they’ll automatically know what their dietary restrictions and preferences are. Even better, by streamlining the ordering process, Continyou Care helps us provide faster food service, while our staff spend less time taking orders, and more time delivering great customer service.

I’d like to acknowledge the talented innovators here with us in the room today: Sameer, of Sensasure; Thavis and Kolden of Continyou Care; and Geoff of Perfuse Medtec, who will all be important partners within our Revera Innovators in Aging program. I’d also like to recognize Bill Jarvis, one of our residents at Northridge long term care home – who is with us today -- for recently taking on the role of “Resident Innovation Ambassador” at Revera. Bill will help us make sure that we’re focusing our efforts on innovations that are important to our residents and families.

I cannot believe that technology has not yet truly caught up to this older demographic, and in my mind this presents huge opportunity -- not just for Revera, but for many of you and your organizations here today. The senior living sector will be swept with change within five years, and twenty years from now, people will look back on the world of senior living the way we look back today on life before iPhones and Facebook.

What none of us should tolerate any more is the one thing that has prevented us from reaching our potential. And that is a word I introduced earlier in my remarks today: Ageism. If ageism didn't exist, much of the fear and ignorance that characterizes many interactions with the elderly would change for the better.

The change starts here. So to our policy makers and businesses I say this: we stand on the cusp of tremendous social change, and this change presents significant opportunity to look at seniors differently, to invest in seniors differently, and to work with seniors differently.

And to all of us here today as individuals, I say this: the next time you interact with a senior person, ask yourself if you are being ageist. Check your language, and check your assumptions. No more "I'm having a senior's moment". No more being "over the hill". No more thinking "you can't teach old dogs new tricks".

We must respect older adults, and include them in all the decisions that affect them, never making assumptions about what they can and cannot do. If we can do this now, when we are all 80 or 90 or 100, we will be treated with the same respect we are today and will enjoy the same independence and choice we enjoy today. Ending ageism will benefit all of us, for years to come.

Thank you very much.