

BACKGROUND

AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING FOR VULNERABLE SENIORS

1. ISSUE DEFINITION

Most seniors would prefer to age in place in a home of their own, with assistance as their age and/or health vulnerabilities increase.¹

Per the 2016 census, almost 1.5 million seniors or 25% of all seniors live in housing that does not meet the CMHC standards for “core housing needs”. For over a million of these, the reason was ‘affordability’.³

Affordable housing is defined as that which costs less than 30% of before-tax income. Most low-income seniors do not have the financial resources to find and pay for rental housing at that level, and are often forced to choose among housing, food or medicine.

To enable vulnerable seniors to find their own accommodation, specifically designed social housing is needed to fill the gap. That housing would be affordable for those living on a low, fixed income; provide opportunity for social interactions and provide access to daily living assistance, when required.

2. CANADIAN SENIORS - BY THE NUMBERS

Seniors (aged 65 year and over) are the fastest growing age group in Canada. In 2016, there were nearly six million seniors, representing 16.9% of the total Canadian population. This percentage is expected to increase to nearly 25% by 2036.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/core-community-supports.html#h2.08>

A survey (Mainstreet Research, March 2020) found that 34.6% of those over 65 who were polled said that the cost of Housing was their biggest cost pressure. A cost pressure that affected their ability to buy food.

25% of Canadian households are led by people over 65 years of age. 25% of them live in rental accommodation. These are households of senior couples without children, and single women. In 2016, 2.2 million Canadians lived in multigenerational housing. Nearly 350,000 of whom were aged 65 and over.

3. **WHAT IS AGING IN PLACE / AGING IN COMMUNITY?**

Aging in Place is defined as a person's ability to continue living independently at home and/or in their community through the provision of necessary supports and services. It is the first choice for most older adults as it can prevent the emotional and physical hardships associated with leaving home to live in institutional setting. Older adults aging in place are more able to be active, engage in social participation and maintain their social networks, thereby supporting their mental health and maintaining their personal identify. With appropriate supports, older adults can stay in their own homes, even with complex medical conditions.²

In order to meet their care needs, older adults often rely on home and community care programs and services provided by governments and service organizations.

These services not only allow older Canadians to age in place, but also save governments money, as they are less expensive than providing institutional care in long term care facilities. These services that facilitate older adults' independence and ability to remain at home – even in currently underserved rural/remote or smaller communities – are fiscally responsible programs that “...save taxpayer dollars” (Carver et al., 2018, p.11).

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/core-community-supports.html#h2.08>

4. **FPT GOVERNMENTS - SENIOR HOUSING COMMITMENTS**

During a September 2017 meeting, Federal, Provincial and Territorial (FPT) Ministers Responsible for Seniors (FPT Seniors Forum) approved aging in community as a key priority.

However, as individuals age their needs and capabilities can change and they may experience difficulty: finding affordable housing; affording necessary adaptive changes to reduce limited access; challenges in acquiring mobility aids; and/or may also experience gaps in availability of appropriate supportive services such as home care.

This suite of needs is referred to as the “integrated housing needs” of seniors and when these needs are satisfied seniors can successfully “*age in community*”.

According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), a household is living in acceptable housing when it is:

- Adequate (does not need major repairs)
- Suitable (has enough bedrooms for the household); and
- Affordable (costs less than 30% of before-tax income)

A household is living below standards when one or more of the conditions listed above is not met.

A household is in core housing need when its housing is not acceptable and the household does not have enough income to meet expenses of an acceptable alternative.³

5. **AGING IN PLACE/AGING IN COMMUNITY – SPECIFIC NEEDS FOR SENIORS**

The percentage of senior households in Canada living in core housing has stayed steadily around 14%. In recent years, the sharp rise in housing costs in major urban areas has contributed to the rising need in core housing for seniors.

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/report-seniors-housing-needs.html#h2.3>

According to the 2016 Census, almost 25% of seniors lived below standards, regardless of their housing arrangement.

Affordability was the most common obstacle – nearly 20% - followed by adequacy issues and then suitability issues. The affordability issue (nearly 38%) was most common amongst seniors living alone.

Those living in core housing tend to have significantly lower average incomes. In 2016, nearly 58% of those who needed core housing were women living alone. Most seniors who need core housing lived in apartments and were renters.

Housing developments often lack practical environmental design (step ramps, railing, lighting, safety features, etc.). Housing built between the 1960s and 1990s is often unable to accommodate newer independence technologies like motorized scooters or electric wheelchairs that must be plugged in. As seniors age, they are more likely to face increased disability and need help. Without formal and informal support they are most likely to want or need to find alternative forms of housing.

Aging in community includes ensuring the environment – especially the home – is functional and meets the changing needs of seniors (HomeStars 2017). Modifications can enhance seniors' overall functioning and well-being (Boland et al., 2017). Those modifications can help seniors age at home and may prevent the need to move.

6. CANADIAN AGING IN PLACE/COMMUNITY - CORE HOUSING OPTIONS

Across Canada, both the profit and non-profit sectors, often in conjunction with local governments and incentives from other levels of government, have

developed a variety of housing options that try to capture the meaning of home and the spirit of Age Friendly Community (AFCs).⁴

Beyond building new housing, home modifications are an alternative for addressing some integrated housing needs. Research has shown though that two barriers to this option are: lack of knowledge among seniors to carry out home modifications, and, the lack of resources to get them done. Where governments in Canada and other jurisdictions have created funding mechanisms for home modifications, they have aided in aging in community.

7. MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF AFFORDABLE SENIOR RENTAL HOUSING

One of the impediments to finding affordable senior rental housing in Canada is that there is very little stock from which to choose. That is because Developers will only build if there is an adequate return on their investment (ROI). Non-profits can build or retrofit existing building through a special mortgage provided by Central Mortgage and Housing (CMHC) to organizations – composed of individuals, a faith-based group, a service organization or a community group. Non-profits are often best placed to understand the unique needs of their community demographics and driven by social need not by profit.

There are a number of flexible non-profit housing options for affordable senior rental housing. They include:

Co-housing: seniors pool their resources and share the cost of owning a building and/or co-living – where seniors rent a home with others, each

⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/report-seniors-housing-needs.html#h2.13>

having their own personal bedroom and bath and share the living spaces like family room, kitchen, and outdoor space.⁵

Co-living: accommodation for people who want to live at least part of their lives communally, whether out of choice or necessity. Seniors who need occasional support would benefit from sharing space with younger tenants, and the younger tenants would save on rent. Younger tenants for example, could do chores in return for a reasonable rent like walking the dog, going shopping, making a meal, doing the dishes, or light housekeeping. And be a companion in times of need.⁶

8. INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLES OF SENIORS CORE HOUSING

The need for alternative forms of housing for seniors is not unique to Canada. Across Europe and the United States, other jurisdictions have experimented with various forms of housing to address the needs of seniors.

Examples include:

- Lifetime Neighbourhoods (United Kingdom)
- United Homes (Finland)
- Apartments For Life (the Netherlands)
- Homeshare (France)

⁵<http://theconversation.com/co-housing-works-well-for-older-people-once-they-get-past-the-image-problem-79907><https://coaottawa.ca/committees/housing/>

⁶<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/housing-intergenerational-ottawa-seniors-carleton-university-students-1.5441726>

- Co-housing Communities (Denmark)
- Villages (United States)

9. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT – HOUSING & SENIOR HOUSING

In 2017, the Federal Government announced its National Housing Strategy – No Place Like Home.⁷ The strategy was lauded by housing advocates. Nick Falvo, Director Calgary Homeless Foundation said at the time, the “...strategy’s unveiling is arguably the most positive development in federal housing policy since the early 1970s...”

That announcement was followed in 2018 by the Federal Government Poverty Reduction Strategy,⁸ which also mentioned Housing. Both had several Senior Housing specific components:

- Affordability for low income seniors living in community housing will be protected through the community housing initiatives and funding to provinces and territories
- The National Housing Co-Investment Fund will also support the construction, repair and renewal of housing units for seniors – which is expected to relieve affordable housing demand among low income seniors
- The NHC approach will provide rental support through the Canada Housing Benefit of up to \$2,500 annually for low income senior
- The Fund will invest in affordable housing and will support partnership[s] with services to allow for seniors to age in place
- At least 12,000 new, affordable units will be created for Seniors (7,000 NHS + 5,000 in Budget 2016)
- Prioritize new investment in social infrastructure in affordable housing and seniors’ facilities
- Build new housing units and refurbish old ones

⁷ <https://www.placetocalhome.ca>

⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/reports/strategy.html>

- Give support to municipalities to maintain rent-geared to income subsidies in co-ops,
- Give communities the money they need for Housing First Initiatives that help homeless Canadians find stable housing

The NHS marked the federal government's reengagement with housing provision and affordability. This strategy was followed up with the National Housing Strategy Act in 2018⁹. The statute sets up a **human rights-based approach to housing**. Section 4 of the NHS ACT recognizes the right to adequate housing as a fundamental human right afforded in international law, central to human dignity, well-being and community.

10. CONCLUSION

There is a need to increase the supply of housing for seniors overall and various options that take into account the range of health needs and income status of seniors. Strategies must be found to encourage and fund community non-profit builders or property managers to increase the stock of appropriate, adequate and affordable Senior Rental Housing.

All levels of government must encourage and promote the inclusion of age friendly design in policy and planning in order to implement age-friendly communities. This cooperation is needed in order to provide a viable alternative to Long Term Care.

⁹ <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-97/third-reading#ID0EP1MO>