



North Shore News Column.

Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

New snapshot report a wake-up call for action

Comprehensive strategy needed to address aging population

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News May 12, 2013

IN the 1950s TV drama *Dragnet*, Sgt. Joe Friday frequently implored female informants to provide "Just the facts, ma'am."

I was reminded of this as I thumbed through the latest report from the United Way of the Lower Mainland and the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia. The report analyzes and maps recent facts and trends that are relevant to planning for the well-being of seniors living in the Lower Mainland. There is no attempt to interpret or explain the data and the report does not include recommendations. It's just a consolidation of key facts about seniors in the Lower Mainland.

Sgt. Friday would have been pleased.

Metro Vancouver was home to 312,895 seniors in 2011, up 60 per cent from 2001. The seniors population in Metro Vancouver is expected to double between 2011 and 2031.

On the North Shore we have one of the highest concentrations of seniors in the region but our population is not particularly diverse in terms of mobility, migration or ethnicity. We are well housed but we don't have the diversity of housing choices afforded to seniors living in other areas of the Metro Vancouver region.

The North Shore had the dubious distinction of having the largest percentage increase in average rents (2006 to 2012) and the highest average one bedroom apartment unit rents (2012) in the entire Metro Vancouver region.

When it comes to health care, the overall health of seniors on the North Shore is second only to those living in the Richmond Health area.

And, North Shore seniors recorded one of the highest rates of a sense of community belonging in the entire region.

Across Metro Vancouver (in the years 2000 to 2010), the percentage of seniors with government benefits increased while the percentage of seniors with investment income and income from an RRSP declined. The number of seniors still in the workforce has grown to 85,000, which is double the figure from a decade ago.

The increase in the number of seniors taking on a mortgage (2001-2006) isn't as dramatic - it went up by approximately five per cent - but it is still a troubling statistic.

For me two things stand out in this report.

First, we have more diversity in the face of our seniors population. There is a broad cultural shift among the senior demographic in the Lower Mainland. In 2011 about half (51 per cent) of Metro Vancouver seniors listed English as their most common mother tongue and 15 per cent could not speak English. Do we have a strategy that will respond to the needs of a growing and diverse population of seniors in the region? If we do, I'm not aware of it.

Second we must address the economic status of senior women in our communities. As of 2011, 55 per cent of all Metro Vancouver seniors were female. In Metro Vancouver three out of five women live on a total income of less than \$25,000 a year. We know from previous studies that almost half of single, widowed or divorced woman over the age of 65 are poor. And both the poverty rate and the number of senior women living alone is twice that of single men.

Do we have a targeted strategy to increase the income levels of senior women? Again, if we do I'm not aware of it.

Reports like this one are intended to influence planning and program development for an aging population.

If this snapshot report isn't a wake-up call to develop a comprehensive coordinated strategy to deal with our aging population, I don't know what is.

Seniors in the Lower Mainland: A Snapshot of Facts and Trends - March 2013, is available online at uwlm.ca.

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