

OLDER and WISER: Housing issues not just for the young

Seniors also at risk of losing homes

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A recent presentation showed 215 North Shore seniors accessed services last year because they were homeless or in danger of losing their housing. photo Maria Spitale-Leisk, North Shore News

Homeless seniors on the North Shore? Never, it's unthinkable, right?

At a recent presentation at the Services to Seniors Coalition participants heard some alarming statistics about the issue.

We were told that Hollyburn Family Services Society served 215 clients last year who were homeless or in danger of losing their housing. The average age of these clients was 65 with an almost equal split between men and women, and 99 seniors were about to be evicted from their homes.

Seniors at Housing Risk was a participatory research project finalized in 2013, in a partnership with Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society and Hollyburn Family Services Society. A number of recommendations came out of that report and Hollyburn took these on with some success under the leadership of Leya Eguchi, a co-author of the report and presenter at the coalition meeting.

Included in the list was a recommendation to increase senior-specific outreach support, and Hollyburn has done that by adding four outreach support staff to their team. They have put into place a rent bank that subsidizes an average of 12 seniors a month. Hollyburn has also opened a Safe House for seniors in partnership with the District of North Vancouver.

The Safe House has been at nearly full capacity since it opened in 2015. More than half of the clients were referred by a medical professional and many had significant health issues such as cancer, post heart attack complications and diabetes. The Safe House gave them a chance to stabilize their health crisis.

At the presentation we learned that homelessness, or being at risk for homelessness, can be attributed to unexpected circumstances such as illness, loss of a job, death, system glitches, availability and affordability of housing, cost of food and other living expenses, lack of social support, and barriers to housing.

Some would argue that housing affordability is the number one factor.

In a Jan. 24 Vancouver Sun article by Sam Cook, it is reported that a 2017 Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey shows Vancouver is considered to have one of the third most expensive housing costs in the world behind Hong Kong and Sydney, Australia.

“There are serious consequences for residents,” the survey said. “The higher house prices reduce discretionary incomes, which reduces potential standards of living and raises relative poverty rates.”

On the North Shore, studies done by the City of North Vancouver and Districts of North and West Vancouver have shown it is increasingly more difficult to attain affordable housing for seniors who are at risk of homelessness or seniors who simply want to downsize but stay in their community.

The City of North Vancouver Housing report says that “Seniors are expected to experience the largest proportional growth amongst all age groups in the City of North Vancouver in coming decades. The aging population is already evident in the number of non-market housing units dedicated to independent and frail seniors and the growing wait list for seniors-oriented housing.”

People have been coming up with their own innovative solutions to cope with rising housing costs.

According to a Jan. 23 Toronto Star, article one solution is called Shared Housing. Think Golden Girls, the TV show in which four older women lived together and shared housing costs and expenses thus contributing to their overall well-being.

In Paris, in an arrangement called homeshare, two people, a student and a senior, share the senior’s home, one for assistance in daily living and one to be able to afford the rent. They were matched by an organization called Ensemble2Generations. A BBC news report said: “The concept is simple, yet it attempts to bridge an intergenerational divide that exists in many parts of the world.”

If we want to keep seniors safely housed then we will need groups like Hollyburn, groups who provide below-market rental housing such as Kiwanis, government-sponsored affordable housing strategies, and innovative solutions.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors’ Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 47 years and has worked for and with seniors for 20 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome by sending an email to lions_view@telus.net (mailto:lions_view@telus.net).

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