



## North Shore News Column.

### Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

## Forum helps seniors at risk

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News December 4, 2011

POPULATION aging, as the World Health Organization reminds us, is a success story.

Many older adults in the Metro Vancouver Region are active, healthy and leading independent lives. Others are not so lucky. Last month at the Seniors Forum, in Burnaby, the United Way presented the latest findings from their Seniors Vulnerability Report. Titled Aging with Dignity - Making it Happen for Everyone, the report identifies vulnerable seniors in acute need throughout Metro Vancouver.

It came as no surprise to the nearly 300 people attending the Forum that vulnerabilities in our seniors population are concentrated in certain groups of 65+ individuals.

The most vulnerable seniors are the “oldest old” women (85+); unattached single income seniors; visible minority seniors; aboriginal seniors; recent immigrant seniors; seniors without a certificate degree or diploma and seniors with mobility limitations and or chronic illnesses.

The Seniors Vulnerability Report reads like a manual on risk assessment for vulnerable populations. As we age, our health generally declines and healthy living becomes a priority. Almost half of all seniors in B.C. have a disability, with rates being higher for women than men.

We are living longer lives than ever before. In Metro Vancouver, overall life expectancy ranges from 79 to 85 years.

Surprises? There were a few. The number of seniors living on the streets or staying in emergency shelters is on the rise. We are now seeing the presence of frail older seniors (80+) in the shelter system for the first time.

I assumed that socially isolated adults in B.C. would be heavier users of health services in B.C. but according to the research they are not. Recent research on older immigrant women in the Lower Mainland indicates that living with family members in multigenerational households does not necessarily result in better emotional well being than living alone for this group.

More than half of all Metro Vancouver’s seniors immigrated to Canada. The twist - three quarters of them have been here for more than 20 years.

I’m not surprised that 75 per cent of B.C. seniors regularly take one or more prescribed medications but learning that almost half take three to six medications and 12 per cent take 11 or more was a bit of an eye opener.

What about statistics specific to seniors on the North Shore? We know from previous studies that going forward our share of the region’s seniors population is projected to go down, not up.

Greater suburbanization of the older population means that by 2027 all three municipalities on the North Shore

and Bowen Island are likely to see a decline in their share of the 65+ population in the region.

Seniors in West Vancouver, on average, as a group are older, healthier, and wealthier and live longer than their counterparts in other parts of Metro Vancouver. In the City of North Vancouver the research suggests that we need to be concerned about the high percentage of low income seniors, mostly women, living alone.

Here is a bit of a surprise - the highest proportion of older adults in the region who perceive themselves as having a lot of stress live in the more affluent areas of West and North Vancouver and not in the city of Vancouver, where many socially isolated low income older adults reside.

The Seniors Vulnerability Report does a good job in identifying and analyzing the issues that affect older adults who are at risk in various ways. There are some easy fixes here - almost 300,000 seniors in Canada who are eligible for income assistance have not applied for benefits - a call to service Canada could fix that.

The report contains a series of well thought out recommendations for research, service and policy directions that can lead the way for a better future for all.

The implications of an aging society are felt by all of us. When seniors have the opportunity to live well and contribute to the community we all benefit. At the end of the day I don't think anyone left the Forum thinking we are ready to meet the challenges and the opportunities of the region's aging population.

But now more than ever everyone needs to be committed to working together to prepare for an aging society.

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