

Older and Wiser: Unaffordable housing puts seniors at risk of homelessness

Affordable housing is vital to ensure there is a healthy aging population on the North Shore, says Coates

Margaret Coates

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Margaret Coates, the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society, talks on the importance of affordable housing for seniors.

It is not news to most of us on the North Shore, and let's face it, across Canada, that the lack of affordable or adequate housing is a critical issue facing Canadians.

It is a problem for all, from first-time buyers who see no way to own a property themselves to seniors who are finding it harder to rent an affordable place on the North Shore. Sadly, some seniors are being forced to relocate after making the North Shore home for much of their lives and, more seriously, some may be at risk of homelessness.

All of us would agree that the availability of affordable, accessible, and suitable housing for current and future residents of the North Shore is essential for creating an inclusive community.

With the North Shore seniors' population growing larger demographically, affordable housing becomes one of the cornerstones supporting a healthy aging population.

Housing options can allow older adults to age in place and remain in their community their entire lives.

Housing that is close to amenities such as libraries, shops, recreation and seniors' centres, medical centres, parks, and good transportation can provide opportunities for social interaction and allow older adults to remain independent in their own homes and to be engaged with their community.

While most of the people who are working on solutions to the housing crisis concede the work involved in creating change is challenging and, at times, nearly impossible, that has not stopped them from stepping up to work on the issues in a variety of ways.

A group which has focused on affordable housing for several years is the Community Housing Action Committee (CHAC) sponsored by North Shore Community Resources Society.

This intrepid group is “an independent, non-partisan group of volunteers and experts who educate, undertake research and advocate to increase affordable housing options and policies in the community”.

Led by Don Peters, who recently and deservedly won the 2023 BC Community Award for his work on housing, CHAC has been working with municipalities and developers to increase the affordable housing stock on the North Shore.

An exciting project which began February 2023 is the North Shore Housing Solutions Lab.

Renewable Cities, which is a special initiative of the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University, and Hollyburn Community Services Society, are exploring housing opportunities for older adults living in primarily single-detached homes on the North Shore who express an interest in secondary suites and home sharing.

The solutions lab has been working with “older adult homeowners living in single detached homes to identify and address barriers that prevent them from considering options such as home sharing, secondary suites and accessory dwelling units”.

Sharing homes through renting space or building a secondary suite are good options for seniors who are finding it difficult to maintain their residence because of the work involved (garden maintenance, housework), and the rising cost of taxes, utilities, and repairs.

Sharing with someone provides support in meeting these challenges, whether it be a companion, or a person who shares chores and contributes to the senior’s income through rent. Over half of single detached homes in Canada have only one or two people living in them.

If just a fraction of homeowners on the North Shore takes up the option of sharing their space or creating an additional housing unit, it could create many new homes for residents.

Rebecca Parker, the Project and Engagement Coordinator of the NS Housing Lab says that “through our dialogue workshops we heard about the challenges of living with someone you don’t know – we want these program prototypes to be holistic and supportive from start to finish, both for renters and homeowners.”

She said that “participants in the dialogues also expressed optimism about the potential benefits – new relationship connections, extra income and added security of having someone else around”.

Homelessness or people at risk for homelessness on the North Shore is not, as many of us think, unrealistic, given the income levels. In fact, statistics have shown that this situation is a reality. To mitigate the issues for seniors around homelessness or the risk of it, as well as being a partner in the NS Housing Lab, Hollyburn Community Services Society works hard on behalf of these at-risk seniors.

The program called Seniors at Housing Risk Outreach Program aids seniors (over 50) by providing outreach workers to help find appropriate and affordable housing, fill out application forms, make connections to income supports, and provide referrals to mental health care or primary healthcare providers as needed. The program can be reached at their direct intake line: 604-968-3721, or at their website hollyburn-society.ca

The situation for housing solutions, though seemingly hopeless, is at least being worked on in a variety of ways. Hats off to these groups.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 52 years and has worked for and with seniors for twenty-seven of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net.

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