

## SEARCHABLE DATABASE OF SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR SENIORS IN CANADA

### INTRODUCTION

This study was funded by Health Canada and conducted in collaboration with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC).

### OBJECTIVE

The objective was to identify and survey supportive housing projects for seniors (age 65+) across Canada and to create a test, unpublished database with information on each of these projects. The published report for this study<sup>1</sup> discusses the range of projects surveyed and describes selected examples of innovative projects. It also identifies issues related to the supply and quality of supportive housing for seniors, including benefits, limitations, barriers and gaps, and describes current public policies and guidelines applicable to supportive housing.

### TERMINOLOGY

Supportive housing is a term used to describe a range of housing options designed to accommodate the needs of seniors through design features, housing management, and access to support services. At one end of the range,

supportive housing refers to congregate housing with supportive features and services such as monitoring and emergency response, meals, housekeeping, laundry and recreational activities. At the other end of the range (referred to in most North American jurisdictions as assisted living) personal care services are also provided for frailer seniors with more significant support needs. Professional services may be provided on a home-care basis in a supportive housing setting as they would be if the resident were living in a different kind of (non-supportive) residential setting. Supportive housing may be provided by either the public or the private sector, for-profit or not for-profit. In some cases, one provider will be responsible for delivering the whole supportive housing package (services plus housing). In other cases services and housing components will be delivered separately, by different sectors. Supportive housing can be rented, purchased as a condominium in fee simple, or obtained through a life lease.<sup>2</sup>

Terminology varies significantly from province to province and internationally. For simplicity and to facilitate comparison, the term supportive housing is used here to refer to housing with services for seniors regardless of government involvement and independent of any specific government program referring to supportive housing in its title or description

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<sup>1</sup> Searchable Database of Supportive Housing for Seniors in Canada. Available from Health Canada by calling (613) 954-8616

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from CMHC's research report: *A Legal Framework for Supportive Housing for Seniors: Options for Canadian Policy Makers*, prepared by Margaret Isabel Hall, Canadian Centre for Elder Law Studies, Vancouver, B.C.

## METHODOLOGY

This study began with a literature review to help identify issues related to supply and quality of supportive housing in Canada. The search for information was focused on Canadian articles and research reports (published and unpublished) written since 1994.

Following the literature review, key informant interviews were conducted with experts in gerontology, provincial and territorial government representatives knowledgeable about housing policies and programs related to seniors, and practitioners and representatives of seniors organizations knowledgeable about seniors housing issues in their jurisdictions. These interviews were helpful in identifying innovative supportive housing projects across the country.

A survey of projects was conducted to collect a wide range of information about each project, including the type of project, sponsor, date of construction or adaptation, number and type of dwelling units, tenure type, support service arrangements, type of physical structure, location, profile of residents, and management and staffing. The survey was conducted by telephone, fax and online methods.

The test, unpublished electronic database was developed using Microsoft Access. To be included in the database, projects had to have been:

- built as, or adapted in the last 15 years to, supportive housing for seniors;
- identified as innovative by key informants, reports or publications;
- funded in whole or in part by the non-profit or public sector; and
- able to respond to the survey within the study time frame<sup>3</sup>.

## FINDINGS

The survey identified 244 supportive, seniors housing projects across Canada, with most in Quebec, Alberta, Ontario and B.C. About half opened in the last 10 years. About one-third of the operators defined their projects as assisted living. The survey identified projects from all sectors: public, private non-profit and private for-profit. They range in size from as small as a few residential units to as large as 400 units. One-bedroom suites appear to be the most prevalent, although many projects offer more than one size of unit.

Almost all (99 per cent) projects offer some services on site through their own organization. The majority of projects offer:

- 24-hour security;
- unit repairs/maintenance;
- meals served in a common dining room;
- recreational activities;
- hospitality services, such as personal laundry and housekeeping;
- help with medications; and
- assistance with activities of daily living.

Some projects also offer:

- transportation assistance (such as a facility-dedicated van);
- escorts to appointments;
- doctor visits;
- social services (such as counselling and referrals);
- mental health services;
- Meals on Wheels or wheels to meals; and
- palliative care.

The age range of residents living in the projects surveyed was 63 to 93. Most were women, and almost all are living alone. Residents of supportive housing come from many different cultural backgrounds, and some projects are sponsored by a particular ethnic or religious organization.

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<sup>3</sup> The study was conducted in a three-month period, from January to March of 2005.

About 70 per cent of projects in the database report they have been designed to support aging-in-place. As a result some residents are quite frail and need help with most activities of daily living. However, on average, about half the residents require little or no assistance and function quite independently. Most supportive housing projects have some residents with dementia; however, very few have been purposely designed to serve the needs of persons with dementia.

The majority of projects surveyed have an on-site service coordinator who helps residents to access services. Most involve residents in management decisions that affect them. About half the projects have on-site staff. In some projects residents and front-line staff are asked to sit on advisory boards or are involved in some other capacity related to management.

Experts generally agree that supportive housing can improve the overall well-being and quality of life for seniors who need assistance with activities of daily living. Daily benefits, such as the provision of nutritious meals, opportunities to socialize and participate in physical activities, and access to health services in the community when needed, make it possible for seniors to maintain their independence and supports the aging process with dignity.

## ISSUES

The report also discusses some issues debated among experts. One of the themes that arose from the interviews and the literature centered on the issue of where supportive housing fits in the continuum of housing and care for seniors with greater health needs. For persons who do not require 24-hour nursing care, experts agree that most forms of supportive housing make it possible for residents to safely age in place. However, for seniors with severe dementia or other chronic diseases that result in significant loss of abilities over time, some forms of supportive housing may not be able to sustain these individuals over the longer term. Although most projects reported that they have features that support aging-in-place, only 16 per cent indicated that they have been designed to serve the needs of persons with dementia. As well, 54 per cent restrict tenure for persons with mental health-related issues such as dementia.

Much discussion in the literature centers on standards of care (or lack of standards) and how this relates to the quality of life for residents in supportive housing. To help maintain a high level of quality of life in supportive housing, some key informants held the view that clear provincial policy guidelines related to standards and quality of services are needed. However, at the same time, concern was expressed about setting standards that are too restrictive. For example, at the time of the study, B.C. was the only province with any legislation in place related to supportive housing. Current legislation in B.C. restricts assisted-living facilities to providing mainly hospitality type services and only one or two of the prescribed higher forms of more intensive care.<sup>4</sup> To be eligible for assisted living in B.C., all persons must be assessed by the health authority as having the requisite level of care needs. The B.C. legislation specifically excludes people “who are unable to make decisions on their own behalf from private and public assisted living unless they reside with a spouse who is able to make those decisions for them.”<sup>5</sup>

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4 Spencer, Charmaine, « Assisted Living in British Columbia's 'New Era.' », Seniors Housing Update, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2004.

5 Ibid.

Key informants in the study cited the lack of national standards for supportive housing and differing access criteria for home support services across the country as barriers to the development of good quality supportive housing for seniors. CMHC's recently released report on a legal framework for supportive housing for seniors will help policy makers explore regulatory options. (See, *A Legal Framework for Supportive Housing For Seniors: Options for Canadian Policy Makers*, March 2005).

The study also found gaps in the supply and choice of supportive housing. There was consensus among key informants that demand for supportive housing may exceed supply in rural areas, and that there are insufficient affordable supportive housing options for low and modest-income seniors, homeless seniors, seniors with dementia, and seniors from diverse sub-populations such as Aboriginal communities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered seniors.

Key informants in the Atlantic region stressed the need for more supportive housing in their provinces. A new study has begun to address this. The study, *Projecting the Housing Needs of Atlantic Canadians*, will bring together seniors, academics, service providers, housing developers and government departments from all four Atlantic provinces to help determine how to meet the housing needs of the area's rapidly aging population.<sup>6</sup>

A review of provincial policies and guidelines found that most provinces and territories have an interest in supportive housing. For example, at the time of this study, B.C. had initiated many new housing developments under the Federal-Provincial Cost-Shared Affordable Housing Program. As well, a number of jurisdictions including Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Alberta have strategic plans or proposed research or pilot projects to address issues related to supportive housing. The research report provides a summary of these initiatives and the most current policies and guidelines related to supportive housing.

## THE TEST DATABASE

The test, unpublished database includes descriptions of innovative project features in four areas:

- barrier-free design;
- management approaches;
- partnerships; and
- support services (including the types of service packages offered directly and the types of services offered through linkages with community agencies).

The database is fully searchable by key words (based on the variables included in the database) or location of project (province, municipality, postal code).

To date, the database includes 244 completed records. It also includes contact information for other projects that did not complete the survey within the time frame or were ineligible according to the screening criteria.

Uses for the database include (but are not limited to):

- searching for projects in a certain region;
- examining the services offered by a specific (or multiple) project(s); and
- finding the contact information for projects.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about this study, contact Don Shiner, Ph.D., Principal Investigator, Nova Scotia Centre on Aging, Mount Saint Vincent University, Ph: (902) 457-6398; e-mail: donald.shiner@msvu.ca.

## CONCLUSIONS

The survey of supportive housing projects for seniors represents the most current state of information on supportive housing in Canada. The report outlines a number of conclusions, including the following:

- Supportive housing is defined quite broadly and encompasses many different models of housing and supports.
- Supportive housing offers a wide range of potential benefits to seniors, particularly in the areas of health and overall quality of life. In its most supportive form, assisted living, it has the potential to be a viable alternative to traditional long-term care or nursing home care.
- A wide range of supportive housing options is available for seniors across Canada. However, options for modest and low-income seniors are fewer than for those with higher income levels. There are also gaps in the supply of supportive housing for seniors in rural and remote areas and some regions of Canada.
- There appears to be almost a West (high) to East (low) ranking in terms of new development activity and range of supportive housing options being made available. This could be the result of demand, market conditions, or provincial government funding priorities.
- There are some barriers in supportive housing options for certain special needs populations such as the hard-to-house and homeless, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered seniors, and seniors with middle to later stages of dementia.
- Supportive housing continues to show promise as a housing option for seniors who wish to remain independent but require some support, and there is some optimism that recent changes in government policies that favour the renewed development of affordable housing in Canada will result in additional supportive housing for seniors, if support services can be matched to new affordable housing units.
- The test, unpublished database of supportive housing for seniors in Canada gives promise of being a first stage toward the development of a valuable tool for those wishing to share or obtain information about housing projects, existing government policies and the distribution of supportive housing across Canada. Health Canada and its collaborators in this study are considering further development and eventual publication of the database.

**Project Manager:** Catrina Hendrickx  
Home and Continuing Care Unit  
Health Policy Branch, Health Canada

**Members of the Study Advisory Committee:**  
Ian Clark  
Division of Aging and Seniors  
Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC)

Luis Rodriguez  
Policy and Research Division  
Canada Mortgage and Housing  
Corporation (CMHC)

**Research Report:** Searchable Database of Supportive  
Housing for Seniors in Canada  
Available from Health Canada by calling  
(613) 954-8616

**Research Consultants:**  
Social Data Research, in partnership  
with Pollara

## Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

This fact sheet is one of a series intended to inform you of the nature and scope of CMHC's research.

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or contact:

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation  
700 Montreal Road  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0P7

Phone: | 800 668-2642

Fax: | 800 245-9274

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