



RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Socio-economic Series

Issue 56

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING FOR SENIORS

Introduction

As more and more Canadians live longer and healthier lives, a large and growing market for housing geared specifically to older seniors (75+) is emerging. To help the housing and support service industries develop an appropriate range of housing options for this unique segment of the population, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has researched and produced a new publication named *Supportive Housing for Seniors*.

Supportive Housing for Seniors describes the concept of supportive housing, discusses how it works, who can benefit from it, what types of supportive housing options can be made available and how these can be developed. It also presents 10 examples of supportive housing projects from across Canada. The following is a summary of the publication.

How information was obtained

Supportive Housing for Seniors was developed under the guidance of an advisory committee made up of representatives from a variety of agencies responsible for housing and health services for seniors from across Canada. It reflects the input received from the committee members and many other contributors.

To develop *Supportive Housing for Seniors*, the project team reviewed the most recent literature on the subject matter and consulted with the advisory committee members and a variety of experts and housing and support service providers. Members of the committee and other experts helped identify 44 examples of

supportive housing projects from across Canada that might be included in the research. Ten of these were selected to carry out case studies. Information gathered through telephone interviews and completed questionnaires provided details about the day-to-day experiences of residents, managers, support service providers and sponsors of these projects.

The need for supportive housing

By 2031, the number of seniors over age 75 will grow by 277 per cent to about four million from 1.5 million in 1995. The number of seniors in the 85-plus age group will more than triple to over one million from 352,000 in 1995. The growth in the number of older seniors suggests that there will be a need to develop a wide range of housing options and solutions which can enable this unique segment of the population to exercise choices that reflect their own circumstances and preferences and to sustain or enhance their independence for as long as possible.



HOME TO CANADIANS
Canada

Demographic Trends in Canada, 1961 -2031			
Year	Total Population	Total 65+	Per Cent 65+
1961	18,230,245	1,391,154	7.6
1996	28,846,760	3,527,840	12.2
2031	41,216,100	8,936,500	21.7

Source: Statistics Canada 1961 and 1996 Census, Nation Series, CD-ROM. Estimated population for 2031 according to Statistics Canada Population Projection Model, using a medium growth scenario.

Other social and health trends also suggest that a combination of housing and support services will be in demand.

- Gains in life expectancy have added to the number of years older seniors will live with health problems and activity limitations. Over half of seniors aged 74-84 have difficulty with one or more of the activities of daily living, as do three-quarters of the over 85 age group.
- The majority of Canadian women are now in the labour force, making it more difficult for them to take on the intensive care of their aging parents.
- Families are now smaller and there is considerable geographic mobility among adult children who move to seek job opportunities. This means fewer adult children living near their aging parents and able to offer even occasional help.
- The number of persons living alone is growing. By 2001, about one third of seniors over age 75 will be living alone. It is often the risk of living alone that forces seniors with disabilities to move unnecessarily to a long-term care institution.

The lifestyle preferences of seniors will be an important influence on choices they make about their housing. In 1996, 40 per cent of seniors over age 65 and 35 per cent of those over age 85 were still living alone in single detached dwellings — their family home. Today's seniors can better afford housing choices than in the past, although average income decreases with age and for those living alone. Furthermore, most older people are

more active than previous generations and want to maintain independent lifestyle for as long as possible. They prefer to live in a residential setting of their own choice rather than move unnecessarily to a long-term care facility. These preferences indicate that, to appeal to seniors, supportive housing should maximize residential character and independent living.

What is supportive housing?

Supportive housing helps seniors in their daily living by combining a physical environment that is specifically designed to be safe, secure, enabling and home-like with support services such as meals, housekeeping and social and recreational activities. This allows residents to maximize their independence, privacy, dignity and decision-making abilities. Supportive housing can be developed in many forms depending on the types and level of services to be provided, the project size desired, the types of accommodation preferred, the types of tenure wanted and the types of sponsorship available. Services can be provided through a combination of on-site and off-site arrangements and can be made available to both residents and other older people living in the surrounding neighbourhood. Highly service-enriched supportive housing, such as assisted living, can be an alternative to unnecessarily accommodating people in a nursing home.

Supportive housing can be developed by the for-profit, the not-for-profit, or the public sector — or by partnerships between these sectors. It can be made available in a range of tenure types, such as rentals, leaseholds, condominiums and life leases. It is also possible to combine different tenure types in individual projects. Several provinces have developed their own definitions of supportive housing that is eligible for public funding. Many of the examples shown in *Supportive Housing for Seniors* have been developed under these programs.

Who can benefit from supportive housing?

Supportive housing can be most beneficial to seniors over 75 years of age; those who need help to carry out activities of daily living; those who are frail or have disabilities and those who are living alone. It can also benefit seniors who prefer to live with their peers in an environment where they can enjoy companionship and the freedom to pursue individual interests and lifestyles.

The five key components of supportive housing

1. Residential character

The research carried out during the development of *Supportive Housing for Seniors* indicates that seniors want a welcoming, home-like environment and that supportive housing projects should be located in safe, attractive residential neighbourhoods and blend in with the surrounding architecture. Regardless of the size and type of project, residents want to have control over their private living spaces. These should be manageable, safe, and secure and allow seniors to personalize them with their own furniture and possessions. Access to private outdoor spaces such as a balcony or patio is also important.

2. Supportive physical environment

The research also indicated that the physical environment of a supportive housing project should be carefully designed to be accessible, flexible, and safe — both indoors and out.

- The building layout should encourage socialization and mutual support through the provision of attractive common areas where residents can work on hobbies, carry out conversations, eat meals, exercise or entertain visitors in groups.
- Common and private spaces should be flexible enough to meet the changing needs of seniors without major renovations.
- Design features which can prevent accidents should be included, such as bathroom grab bars, non-slip flooring, wider doorways, easily reached electrical

outlets, hot water temperature controls, coloured safety stripping on stairs and handrails in hallways.

- Wide, level, snow-free pathways, as well as automatic doors, covered entrances and good lighting will increase safety around the outside of the building.
- Assistive devices, such as shower seats and raised toilet seats, will increase safety and comfort, as will benches in common spaces such as elevator waiting areas.
- “Parking” spaces for walkers will be needed in dining and lounge areas.

3. Access to necessary support services

From the research, it is very apparent that a successful development plan needs to include seniors’ needs and preferences for support services, both current and anticipated, and how much prospective residents can afford to pay for these services. There should be a “menu” of services that can be flexible as residents’ needs change over time. Typical support services include meals, housekeeping, laundry, transportation, assistance with medication, help with dressing and bathing, wellness clinics, information and referral and social and recreational activities. Services can be delivered in different ways.

- A minimum on-site service package could be offered as part of the residents’ monthly accommodation fee. Other services would be available as “add-ons” according to needs and preferences.
- Residents could receive services from government-funded off-site community agencies such as Home Care or Meals on Wheels. Residents may need assistance in accessing these services, as many are not aware of what is available.
- Services could be available on a pay-as-you-go basis, and delivered either by on-site staff or contracted out to local agencies.

Recreational activities are very important to older seniors, whether these are private hobbies or group programs. On-site programs can be also offered to other seniors living in the surrounding neighbourhood to encourage integration and improve cost efficiency.

Transportation can be arranged for outings and programs in the community. Partnerships with local community organizations can provide valuable benefits for all involved. Examples include:

- leasing space in the building to volunteer senior-serving organizations
- arranging visits from school children or single mothers with babies to foster intergenerational relationships
- taking student placements from universities or colleges
- setting up a central kitchen to provide communal or delivered meals for other seniors in the neighbourhood
- renting space to small businesses, such as hair salons or senior-oriented travel agencies.

4. Progressive management philosophy

The results of the research indicate that managers of supportive housing for seniors must have a genuine love of people. They must be good listeners, and responsive to the needs and preferences of residents. At the same time, they must be able to balance the expectations of residents with the resources that are available. Some of the most important attributes of progressive supportive housing management identified in the research include:

- involving residents in decisions that affect them
- communicating regularly with residents through meetings or newsletters
- knowing residents' family and friends
- establishing realistic expectations about what can be provided
- having guidelines for resident selection
- supporting front-line staff in their work
- establishing policies on residents' rights.

5. Affordability and choice

Because seniors come from different backgrounds there is a need for lifestyle choices in supportive housing. Market surveys indicate that seniors looking for new housing tend to prefer medium-sized projects containing 30-50 dwelling units rather than larger projects. Although small projects are more intimate, on-site support service packages may require a minimum size project for economic feasibility. Individual dwelling unit types can range from fully self-contained apartments, through suites with their own bathrooms and kitchens, to rooms with private bathrooms and kitchenettes. Market demand suggests that a number of two-bedroom units should be included in any project. There should also be choices in terms of project size and accommodation cost for each upper, medium and lower-income seniors.

Success tips for supportive housing developers

Current supportive housing providers advise those planning new projects to:

- conduct a community needs assessment survey in advance
- involve potential residents in the design phase of planning
- inform neighbours early and invite them to participate in project planning
- inform local health agencies and neighbourhood doctors to increase referrals
- remember that ensuite kitchens and balconies are psychologically important to potential residents, even if not well used
- use continuous advertising and marketing
- embrace the five key components of supportive housing.

Other useful publications from CMHC

- Planning Housing and Support Services for Seniors, NHA 2014
- SENIORS: A computer program designed to help plan housing and support services for older Canadians, NHA 6843
- Housing for Older Canadians, NHA 2184
- Housing Options for People with Dementia, NHA 2214
- FlexHousing: Homes that Adapt to Life's Changes, NHA 2020

Project Manager: Luis Rodriguez

Research Report: *Supportive Housing for Seniors*

Research Consultant: Social Data Research Ltd.

A full report on this project is available from the Canadian Housing Information Centre at the address below.

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.

The **Research Highlights** fact sheet is one of a wide variety of housing related publications produced by CMHC.

For a complete list of **Research Highlights**, or for more information on CMHC housing research and information, please contact:

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