



Supportive housing for seniors: *Five principles to consider*

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The following article was adapted from a CMHC Research Report entitled Supportive Housing for Seniors.

For many aging Manitobans, the choice to remain independent is an important one. According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), “Seniors who are more likely to think about moving are generally those with a disability of some type, but even for these seniors, remaining independent is a top priority.” Despite the desire to remain independent, approximately half of Canada’s elderly say they have some difficulty in carrying out daily activities. Therefore, this article will outline supportive housing for seniors, an issue that will become more important for municipal governments as the senior population grows in the years ahead. Municipal governments have a strong role to play in providing for supportive housing, but also to ensuring housing is tailored to their own specific community needs. Keeping these principles in mind will not only allow seniors to remain

independent, but will highlight the importance of community-based housing solutions in Manitoba, enabling healthy, strong and vibrant communities that are responsive to the needs of citizens.

What is supportive housing?

According to CMHC, “Supportive housing is the type of housing that helps people in their daily living through the provision of a physical environment that is safe, secure, enabling and home-like by providing support services such as meals, housekeeping and social and recreational activities. It is also the type of housing that allows people to maximize their independence, privacy, decision-making and involvement, dignity and choices and preferences.” Supportive housing includes the following five components:

1. Residential character
2. Supportive physical environment
3. Access to necessary support services
4. Progressive management philosophy
5. Affordability and choice

1. Residential character

Seniors’ quality of life can be sustained or improved if they continue to live in familiar, welcoming and home-like environments. Supportive housing projects should be in good, safe and attractive neighbourhoods and a good location should be an important consideration. Projects should have easy, safe and convenient access to community-based services, including public transportation. Ideally, a supportive housing project should be located within a block or two of services such as a grocery or convenience store, bank, church, pharmacy, medical clinic and salon.

2. Supportive physical environment

Good design will produce a safe, secure and enabling physical environment that is accessible, flexible, adaptable, healthy, and encourages socializing and mutual support. Residents should feel safe and secure anywhere in the project and should be able to summon and obtain help when needed.

Although this article focuses on seniors housing projects, other community groups offer many services to seniors living in private dwellings. For example, the **Portage Service for Seniors Inc.** offers services such as congregate meals and friendly home visits to ensure the safety and security of seniors in the Portage area. As people grow older, they are more at risk for accidents and injuries. However, the majority of injuries are preventable if certain measures are taken. Some of these measures include:

In the bathroom: Support bars near the tub, toilet and sink; hand-held shower in the tub, non-slip surface in the tub/shower stalls; an entrance door wide enough to accommodate a walker or wheelchair; single lever faucets; shower seat; portable raised toilet seats; and a drain that is foot-activated.

In the kitchen: Pull-out shelves for easy access; upper cupboards should be low enough for easy reach; sliding pull-out lower shelves and task lighting over sink, stove, and work surfaces as well as in dimly lit pantries and cupboards.

In all rooms: Non-slip flooring (e.g., textured tiles); attractive and user-friendly handrails in hallways; overhead light fixtures with at least three bulbs in case one burns out; wide doorways; lever door handles that turn easily; a sufficient number of electrical outlets and other controls that are easy to reach.

Outdoors: Level entry ways are important; non-slip finish on walkways and plenty of outdoor lighting.

3. Accessibility to necessary supportive services

The third key component of supportive housing is access to the types of support services that will enhance safety, independence and well-being of residents. These include: meals, housekeeping, laundry, transportation, access to recreational and social activities, information, referral and counseling on issues that affect seniors, assistance with medication, help with dressing and bathing and good access to wellness clinics. These can be provided in a supportive housing complex, or by other community groups such as Community Resource Councils. Partnerships with established community groups can also make on-site services financially feasible and more cost-effective.

4. Progressive management philosophy

Community groups should hire managers who are 'people-focused,' involve residents in decisions that affect them, understand and communicate with family members and

friends, and establish realistic expectations about access and costs of support services.

5. Affordability and choice

Seniors have many different backgrounds and interests, and various levels of health, fitness, income and assets. Needs, preferences and circumstances also change as people grow older. These differences, combined with the expected high growth in the number of older seniors will most likely result in an increasing demand for a variety of supportive housing choices. In particular, seniors will likely be seeking options that will enable them to sustain or enhance their independence, options that can support the

lifestyle of their choice, and options that they can afford. There are many opportunities to respond to these demands if governments and the housing and support service industries are well informed and prepared to take the necessary action.

Although this article does not cover every detail of supportive housing, the five key principles outlined here will give community groups and municipal governments a good starting point from which to plan seniors housing in their communities. Keeping them in mind will enable seniors to age with dignity and independence, enhancing the overall well-being of the community and its residents. ●



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