

## Senior Housing in Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism (SSM) is an umbrella organization that brings together groups of older adults for the purpose of improving the well-being of seniors in our province. SSM does this by allowing seniors to share in their accomplishments, by celebrating their contribution to the community and by speaking on their behalf when need arises.

The well-being of seniors is a multi-faceted reality. One of the facets that we have identified as requiring study and possible action is **housing**.

SSM's basic premise is that housing for seniors has to be seen on a continuum of change. The changing circumstances which go along with aging call for access to different types of housing to suit the different care needs (physical, mental, spiritual) of seniors. The healthy, autonomous senior, living independently today in his/her own home/apartment might soon require added support and care in order to remain in the home and at one point, require being in a care facility of some sort.

In order to learn more about the present reality, SSM first conducted a survey of individual seniors with the aim of finding out their current housing situation and how they saw their changing needs being met down the road. In a second phase, another survey was addressed to communities, basically asking them what they had to offer these seniors now and in the future.

The individual survey: It was circulated within the context of the SSM magazine *Gray Matters*. 233 seniors, residing in 65 different communities, responded. The vast majority (76%) resided in a rural community and nearly 2/3 of them were 75 years and older. 61% claimed to own their house or condo while 12% were renting a house or apartment. 22% lived in government-subsidized rental units. Although 84% of the respondents said they were quite happy with their present housing condition, the majority expressed serious concern when considering their next housing move. While 73% considered it very important to be able to remain in their community, only 51% said that they would be able to move within the community where they now reside. Less than half thought that the new housing would be affordable. 79% of the respondents considered it very important to be able to move to different levels of care within the same facility.

We were not surprised at the survey results. Even if this survey is not considered scientific, and even if the number of responses is limited, it nevertheless reveals current housing conditions. Responding seniors, by and large, seem to be reasonably happy with their current housing condition but when they look at their next move, they express the concern of not being able to find the needed accommodation within their community (where they prefer to remain) and at an affordable cost.

The community survey: It was addressed to municipalities, band offices, towns, villages and cities. 45 communities, 44 rural and one urban, responded to the 2<sup>nd</sup> survey which focused on existing housing stock, vacancies and plans for the future.

Of the 45 communities, 36 reported having *Government-subsidized rental units*. 62% said that the vacancy rate is 0; and 30 of them admitted that the existing stock was insufficient.

5 communities reported having *Privately-run assisted/retirement living complexes*. None had vacancies.

6 communities reported having *Personal Care Homes*. None had vacancies.

14 communities reported having *Special Care Homes/Long Term Care Facilities*. All but 2 reported no vacancies.

While the vast majority of the communities admitted that the existing housing stock was insufficient, of the 42 communities commenting on this aspect, only 2 admitted having plans to address the problem.

Again, without necessarily being very scientific nor very representative, especially because of the fact that only 1 urban community responded, the survey nevertheless is quite revealing.

The 0 vacancy rate in most facilities seems to confirm the worry expressed by individual seniors when more than half say that they probably won't find their next needed accommodation within their community. Even in a large urban centre such as Regina we find extensive waiting lists. The vast majority of communities responding admit that their existing housing stock is insufficient and yet only 2 of them say that they have plans in the works to address the issue. That is the worrying aspect in the results.

In light of these findings, and also in light of the fact that the Saskatchewan population of seniors is growing at a rapid pace, it would appear that the senior housing file requires some immediate attention and that further action needs to be undertaken soon by the powers that be.

The SSM commends the Provincial Government for having launched in August 2011, the Saskatchewan **Housing Strategy**. The Principles upon which the strategy rests appear to be the right ones as well as the Directions it proposes: increase the housing supply; improve housing affordability; support individuals and families in greatest need; enhance strategic planning for housing; collaborate, communicate and educate. SSM also wishes to commend the Saskatchewan Party for its announcement during the recent election campaign of the **Seniors Personal Care Home Benefit**. We only hope that it will quickly become government policy and implemented without delay.

Besides wanting to share the survey results, SSM takes this opportunity to invite the Provincial Government, when it reviews its social policies as they pertain to seniors, to keep the focus on a system of continuing/community/integrated care which includes health care, home care and respite care, affordable housing, supportive housing/assisted living, long-term care.

Seniors have contributed immensely to building the community where they live. That is where they are happy and healthy amongst family and friends. The continuing care strategy should allow them to remain in this environment as long as physically possible and feasible, through a variety of support mechanisms: if they own their residence (support for home adaptations, renovations and maintenance, home and personal care); if they are in a rental situation (ensure the affordability of rent). And when the time comes when they can no longer realistically live alone, the community should be able to offer a variety of care facilities capable of meeting their differing care needs. Ideally, such facilities should have been planned to offer the possibility to age in place, i.e. offering different levels of care all under one roof, or at least in the same community.

The development and implementation of a continuing/community/integrated care strategy demands input from both recipients and providers of services. These inputs should involve continued consultation and communication as well as participation. The SSM acknowledges the provision of these important elements in the Provincial Housing Strategy through the setting up of a variety of *action teams*. SSM would be delighted to be invited to be part of one or many of these action groups.