innovating SENIORS housing

Cohousing bird metaphor

It is often said that there are two wings to the unusual and beautiful bird that is cohousing community development.

The grassroots, volunteer group that becomes the cohousing membership forms one wing.

The other wing is the team of professionals whom the group hires to bring expertise to the project.

The project itself is the body of the bird.

Both wings need to unfold and fly together for a project to get off the ground and soar.

Clear skies to fly in can come from forward-thinking policy-makers, developers, and community activists who help to create the environment needed for Seniors Cohousing to be successful in their community.
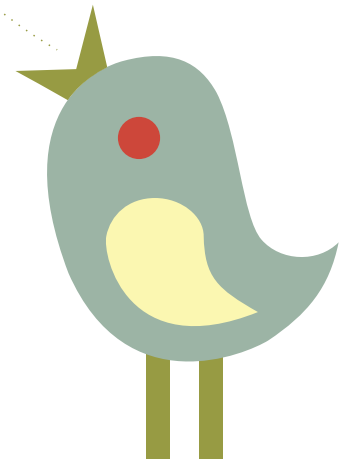
Harbourside members on move-in day, February, 2016

It Takes a Village to 'Age in Place'

There's an innovative movement happening in world of seniors' housing and care solutions, and the Capital Region is perfectly positioned to be leaders in this movement.

The Capital Region has one of the highest concentrations of retired community members in the country already. And it is set to increase.

By 2035 more than 10 million Canadians will be over 65 years old. They will comprise almost 25 per cent of the population. That means that almost 1 in 4 Canadians will need some level of assistance in their daily lives. The current care model of adult children and professionals providing that assistance is simply not sustainable. People have fewer – and busier – children than ever before. Fixed incomes and savings may not always provide seniors with the resources they need to hire out their growing care needs.

"HOW ARE WE as a COMMUNITY going to PROVIDE the kind of CARE that our aging populations REQUIRE?"

So how are we as a community going to provide the kind of care that our aging populations require?

We, and many others, believe that the solution can be found in co-caring within Cohousing communities. Simply, we purpose-build communities that can and will care for each other, sharing the resources and the work needed to ensure its members thrive right into their old age.

The Community Social Planning Council, along with the Canadian Senior Cohousing Society are asking community leaders, innovators, change-makers, and forward-thinking members of our community – of all ages – to come together to move our communities towards a new model of caring for each other as we age.

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Introduction

This primer sets out a range of innovative housing solutions for an unprecedented large aging population that hopes to 'age well in place' in Canada. To age well in place requires more than good, appropriate, adaptive housing. For this huge demographic to have the opportunity to live sustainably and happily for the rest of their days we need a continuum of care model that integrates social connections right into accessible and affordable housing solutions.

Housing and health become inextricably linked as we age.

Governments at all levels, plus friends and relatives, are keen to find solutions to what are becoming fast escalating seniors' needs that will extend over the next 20 plus years.

The Canadian Medical Association continues to advocate for more and better clinical and health care resources and its poorer but equally important cousin, Home Care, needs even greater resources and support.

Public and private housing authorities and corporation have an opportunity to support many of the innovations outlined in this primer through new policies, incentives and responses to community needs.

There is one group, however, that holds the key to making this work: seniors themselves. Providing good planning and community development resources can unlock this potential for extensive mutual support.

This same cohort of Baby Boomers, 50 years ago, completely changed what it meant to be young. This primer can act as a catalyst to start re-framing what it means to grow old. By working together and pooling resources all seniors in the region should be able to flourish not languish until the end of their days.

Quayside Village, North Vancouver, BC

The Background

Looking at the demographics

Sometime in the next few years, seniors will outnumber children for the first time in the history of the world. In Canada, the number of seniors 65 and older has already surpassed the number of children 14 and under, with seniors making up over 16 per cent of the population, according to Statistics Canada.

As baby boomers – those born from 1946 to 1965 – reach retirement age over the next two decades, they will raise the number of seniors in the population to an estimated 23.6 per cent by 2030, the year the youngest baby boomers turn 65. There will be approximately 10 million residents over the age of 65 in Canada by 2035, all requiring some degree of health and care services over several decades.

It's all too easy to negatively frame this demographic shift, reinforcing the idea that seniors are unusually needy. These negative societal attitudes threaten to contribute to the depression, loneliness, and high rate of suicide for this age group, in essence, creating the reality.

A more productive approach focuses on the assets and opportunities, rather than the negatives. As major consumers of products and services that help to keep them active, healthy, and engaged, seniors can be significant economic drivers and contributors to the community.

Let's break it down:

On reaching the age of 55, a person in Canada can expect, on average, to live another 30 years. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has identified four stages in the senior aging process:

- Pre-seniors   55 - 64
- Younger seniors 65 - 74
- Older seniors   75 - 84
- Elderly seniors   85 +

In the pre- and younger-seniors group individuals are generally at a point where they have acquired skills, experience, funds, and often fewer responsibilities. Their lifestyle and housing needs are naturally changing at this time as their nests empty and they shift their focus towards retirement. They have the ability, willingness and desire to engage, create and contribute to their community in a significant and meaningful way.

In many communities older and elder seniors live active, healthy, meaningful lives. They can provide some or even most of their own care in some cases, and even share in the care of others. They have time, experience, and in many cases dependable, albeit limited, income, and often access to capital.

In the right environment older and elder seniors will thrive and not just survive. This need not be a time of steady decline, but rather one of flourishing and self-actualization.

Seniors will outnumber children for the first time in the history of the world.
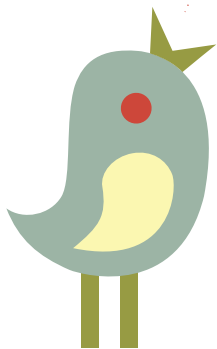
The Social Isolation Factor

It is now understood that social isolation has major health impacts.

A recent report by the National Seniors Council on Social Isolation of Seniors identifies a growing number of seniors' needs as the Baby Boomer cohort ages in Canada. Along with the risks of living with a chronic condition, disability, or mental health issues, the report identifies greater risks for seniors of elder abuse, social isolation, and loneliness.

Social isolation alone is now believed to trigger many emergency room visits from seniors who are simply lonely and failing to thrive.

Thirty per cent of Canadian seniors are at risk of social isolation, some of which results from families becoming smaller and geographically dispersed which has an impact on the size and accessibility of senior support networks.

The Homecare Model

For many centuries those growing old in society were able to rely on extended families to look after them right up to the time of their death. Most seniors do not now have that option. Having had fewer children than in the past, with many of those no longer living nearby, seniors growing old today need to look for other options.

Governments have identified that there is likely to be scarcity of resources from the public sector and is encouraging its seniors to age at home, believing that Homecare will be a less expensive means of care.

Homecare through the medical system often fails

to provide satisfying social contact for isolated seniors. The shortfalls of homecare include staff turnover – which means seeing someone different at your door each time making the forming of relationships difficult.

As well, there are limitations on what home care workers can offer. As a Community Health Worker explains, "If something isn't in the care plan, I can't do it, no matter how simple it is. I can't chat or socialize with clients at all, take out the garbage, make toast or a snack. Clients ask me to do little things, and they get frustrated when I can't do it – they are not in charge of the services."

With the increased costs of the physiological effects of social isolation, it's hard to believe that aging at home, alone, is of any financial benefit to the state, or anyone.

(Re-) Introducing Co-Caring &

"Co-care offers CONTROL BACK TO THE people who are AGING together"

What is Co-Caring?

Co-caring is the practice of neighbourly mutual support that extended families and villages have been providing for centuries; the innovation of senior cohousing is redefining and integrating co-care back into what can become 'traditional communities of the future'.

Co-care revolutionizes conventional approaches to aging. It encourages an emphasis on flourishing – active, positive, socially engaged, independent and interdependent aging – instead of focusing on the increasing needs of aging Canadians for health care and institutional support.

As revolutionary as it is, co-care is not new. It is as basic to human social structure as parenting, but it can be as invisible as the elderly often are in today's Canadian society. In the same way that parents look after children without expecting reciprocity, neighbours often informally turn to each other in times of need. If they know and respect each other, it doesn't take an emergency to bring out the desire to help one another. "I'll give you a ride," or "Can you water my plants while I'm away?" Such simple, neighbourly support is always helpful, but it can become crucial for an older person living alone.

The focus of co-care is social. Co-care can interface with, but does not replace, personal and medical assistance. Neighbourly mutual support is a timeless tradition, but formalizing it as "co-care" is relatively new.

Flourish: to grow well. TO BE HEALTHY

~ Merram-Webster Dictionary

Co-care is a cohousing community principle that can be adapted to other living arrangements. It is a grassroots model of voluntary, neighbourly mutual support that can help reduce social isolation and promote flourishing – positive, active aging – to the end of one's days. Co-care encourages independence through awareness that we are all interdependent.

People support each other through such simple activities as doing errands, driving, cooking, or going for a walk with a neighbour. As their connection with each other deepens over time and through shared experiences, they may find themselves doing things for each other that they would not have dreamed of when they began this journey.

Co-care supports independence through awareness that we are all interdependent. Co-care encourages members to look after themselves and to lead healthy lifestyles, but also to ask for what they need. "While volunteers help as much as needed during the illness, they encourage, stimulate and facilitate a way for the person to return to personal independence as much as possible and as soon as they are able," as an ElderSpirit community member explains. ElderSpirit was the second senior cohousing community in North America, in Abingdon, Virginia.

The values underlying co-care are to: develop an ability to ask for what you need; give only what you are willing; and receive assistance with grace.

Working together informally and in workshops so members accept these values is an integral part of introducing a practice of co-care in any community.
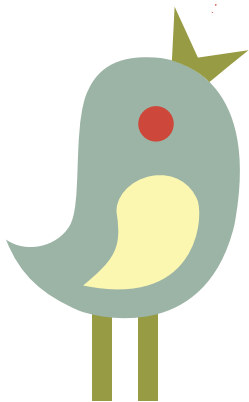
Cohousing

Cohousing is an intentional community design that emerged out of Denmark in the 1960s. This innovative neighbourhood design combines the independence of private homes with the advantages of common amenities and a village-style support system.

The design principles of cohousing support co-care by encouraging casual as well as intentional, social interaction and by providing opportunities for privacy as well as community.

These housing communities not only take into account safe physical surroundings but also focus on improving social, care, financial, and environmental consideration both in the short and long term to ensure resilient residents and sustainable senior communities.

In many European countries including Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, senior cohousing has supported aging in place for over thirty years, whilst addressing the problem of isolation posed by aging at home. There are now many fast growing projects in the United States too.

A movement is also starting in Canada with the first senior cohousing project completed in Saskatoon and a second which opened in 2016 in Sooke, BC.

The demand for this type of housing is demonstrated by the Sooke project selling all 31 units before construction started and having a substantial waiting list.

More senior cohousing groups are forming across Canada including on Vancouver Island and in the Capital Regional District.

It is important to be clear that co-care is not a substitute for assisted living.

Many seniors are able to live out their days in cohousing with just a little co-care from their neighbours. Being good neighbours who give and receive mutual support helps cohousing members age well in community and have fun doing it.

As co-care develops in a particular cohousing or other residential community, variations on the pattern of one-to-one support emerge.

senior COHOUSING is based on:

- Participatory process
- Privately owned dwellings
- Extensive common facilities
- Design that facilities community & ensures privacy
- Resident management with consensus orientation
- Sustainability – environmental, social, economic, cultural
- Community members ranging in age from 50+

Co-care can include some or all of the following, which a working group made up of residents might catalyze:

- Share the Care: When someone needs a lot of support, this model provides a template for organizing care and reducing caregiver fatigue. http://sharethecare.org

- Care administration: Co-ordinating care givers from government and private agencies so that they can be more efficient and see several people during a single visit to the residential community.

- Co-ordinating own on-site resident care givers.

- Advocating: Ensuring residents get best quality service and subsidies available

- Arranging adaptation retrofits – grab bars, ramps, flashing lights instead of bells for hard of hearing, etc.

- Starting Consumer or Worker Care Co-op for cohousing group and wider society.

- Creating group insurance plan to provide extended benefits for cohousing group and wider community.

Cohousing can be either purpose built new developments, or retrofitted existing ones such as condominiums, faith-based groups, neighbourhood villages, housing co-operatives and even trailer parks – anywhere where elderly people traditionally live and gather – using the principles of co-caring that senior cohousing is based on.

Aging Well in Community

Once a senior finds themselves slipping towards ever-increasing levels of care it is very difficult for them to find their way back.

Senior Cohousing and co-care aims to substantially slow this process down mostly through prevention. If Aging at Home can be integrated and supported by the principles of cohousing and co-care then a senior is less likely to become isolated and more able to put off the day they will need to move into an institution. They will also be less likely to need access to short term acute services.

Building supports into the physical and cultural aspects of senior housing can contribute positively to seniors' health and wellbeing. Including features such as falls and illness prevention, mutual care and health support, retrofitting existing buildings for safety and accessibility, animating existing communities, making living more affordable, and encouraging proximity to friends and neighbours not only helps address social isolation amongst seniors but helps them to thrive

Living in senior cohousing and co-caring-based communities enables members to investigate and develop the substantial assets of the group.

These assets include those beyond financial – such as time, energy, skills, and experiences – which can enrich the group, addressing social and care needs, as well as wider society.

In Conclusion

An unprecedented demographic shift is on Canada's horizon: an aging population means seniors will soon make up a large proportion of the nation's population – a change that will require many services and institutions to adapt and respond. Rather than seeing this shift as a burden to nervously anticipate, Canada's aging population can be viewed as an opportunity, and one that drives innovation.

A new senior housing movement has recently been brought to Canada: Senior Cohousing. Built on values around community and co-caring, cohousing offers promise to address some of the needs, housing and beyond, for an aging population.

More than simply a new design of housing, Senior Cohousing represents a conceptual shift in our cultural approach to aging and living in community.

Cohousing is an intentional community design, which combines the independence and autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of common amenities and a village-style support system.

The community is planned, managed, and often owned by the residents through participatory and collaborative decision-making processes. Cohousing is a housing innovation with plentiful benefits, including social, environmental, and economic.

Cohousing has been adapted into "Senior Cohousing" to meet the unique needs of residents in their later years, which may involve an emphasis on universal design, accessibility, and safety, co-caring and mutual support, or whatever else may emerge to meet the needs of residents.

This Primer, the Report and Guides are intended to support land use and real estate policy and practices by providing current research on successful and innovative models of housing developments that meet the continuum of need and demand for senior housing.

Harbourside, Sooke BC

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This primer is one of several publications
exploring the innovation of senior cohousing.

You can find more publications and information by visiting
www.communitycouncil.ca or www.canadianseniorcohousing.com

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