

This paper is intended to seed discussion among CRN members about the role for community members in tackling systemic issues that arise from a lack of affordable and appropriate housing for vulnerable adults. It begins with a review of the issues around capacity and housing that emerged from the Provincial Strategy Document on Vulnerability and Capability Issues in British Columbia, moves to some examples from local communities about their experiences in tackling these issues and finishes with a call for further discussion and action among the province's community response network members.

Issues Summary

The following summary supplements the foundational information provided by the Vanguard Project with additional research into abuse and neglect in care facilities which was provided by Charmaine Spencer from SFU's Centre for Gerontology. Charmaine was also the primary researcher for the Vanguard Project.

The Provincial Strategy looks at the topics around abuse and housing in a number of different ways:

- Private homes as a tool of abuse, especially for vulnerable older adults
- Victimisation in publicly funded (subsidised) and market housing
- Victimisation of homeless persons
- Capability and housing

Unlike the provincial strategy document, this paper focuses primarily on abuse and neglect issues that arise due to lack of availability of affordable, appropriate housing for vulnerable adults, particularly older adults. This requires us to extend the issues around home and housing to include residential care facilities. We begin the discussion with private family homes and move through other types of housing.

"Home and housing are pivotal to well-being. The home is much more than a roof over a person's head; it is the source of stability in the person's life and the centre of meaningful relationships." There are a number of ways in which the home can become a tool of abuse, especially for at risk older adults:

Around Private Family Homes

- Home as a material asset can be exploited by adult children or other persons – especially as the older person becomes more physically or mentally vulnerable or socially isolated
 - Hospital admission is often a transition point where financial abuse may escalate
- Home may become a tool for coercing older adults through threats (by an abusive spouse or family members), e.g. "If you leave, you will get nothing but the clothes on your back", "If you don't cooperate, I/we'll put you in a long term care facility"
- Transfer of title of home may be part of an informal agreement for provision of care by a family member/friend which may later be reneged on
- An adult may sell their home to go and live with an adult child precipitating a shift in power dynamics which may work to their disadvantage
- An adult child may come to live and depend on their parent(s) as a result of loss of housing, mental health, addiction or gambling problems
 - Substance abuse and mental health are a factor in 17-33% of the senior abuse cases
- Some abuse evolves through a gradual encroachment on the home, where adult offspring, a tenant or a pseudo tenant start by "helping" but end by taking over the person's life and home
- Persons whose mental capability is diminishing may be more susceptible to persuasion by exploitive friends, neighbours or family members and this may lead to relinquishing control over their home or other assets

Around Publicly Funded (Subsidized) and Market Housing

The increasing lack of affordable and appropriate housing for older adults (and for other vulnerable and marginalised adults), increases their exposure to a wide variety of harms as tenants. They may put up with unacceptable housing and social conditions because of a lack of alternatives:

- Landlords may manipulate and misuse tenancy law, intentionally neglect suite or building repairs; unlawfully evict occupants
- Landlords may also develop and enforce arbitrary and unreasonable house rules that violate tenants' rights or withhold information from tenants
- Abuse in rental housing may involve use of power and control, rationalisation and justification, or authoritarian approaches, as well as many of the divisive tactics commonly seen in family violence (divide and conquer)
- Landlords may also question a tenant's mental capacity to discredit the tenant in the event of an abuse claim

Lack of affordable/appropriate housing solutions creates other preconditions for abuse and neglect issues:

- In recent years, the traditional seniors housing has begun providing shelter for people with chronic mental health or substance use problems who have been homeless or had unstable housing
 - This mixed housing environment raises a variety of concerns ranging from suitability of screening processes, through lack of availability of sufficient or appropriate community supports for this particular population to an increase in safety risks to the other tenants
- Often housing designated as seniors housing has attracted community supports and sometimes a small suite of health supports. These naturally occurring supports mechanisms are geared to the general characteristics of the majority of residents and may discriminate against minorities or individuals whose support needs do not fit the common model.

Around Supportive and Assisted Living Options

Questions around mental capability and availability of suitable, affordable housing create complex, systemic issues that may lead to a variety of abuse and neglect risks:

- Persons living in long-standing abusive situations may be severely depressed and this may be mistaken as mental incapability thereby disqualifying them from certain types of housing and supports
- Lack of supportive housing for adults with mental health conditions may lead to a younger adult being placed in a residential facility populated by and with programming directed towards cognitively impaired, frail seniors

Finally there are special capability issues around housing with supports. A wide variety of housing models such as supportive housing and assisted living have developed in BC over the years to provide some level of support and assistance to adults and the criteria for admission and the conditions for residency may in themselves be discriminatory and abusive towards certain populations of vulnerable adults:

- Supportive housing falls under the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) and assisted living falls under the Community Care and Assisted Living Act (CCALA). The latter uses a functional approach to capability focusing on self care (dressing), safety and wandering. Capability for admission to subsidised units is through Continuing Care and the regional health authority. There may be differences in assessing capability from authority to authority, facility to facility and even unarticulated policies in individual institutions that discriminate against some vulnerable adults
- The CCALA provides a number of restrictions on which persons with reduced mental capability may be accepted into assisted living facilities and how long they can continue to live there

- Both types of housing may put in place conditions, programs and supports that predicate against individuals with certain types of mental health or concurrent disorders
- Staff in supportive living and assisted living facilities often do not have the skills training or the ability to deal with more complex conditions leading to premature placement of individuals into intermediate care facilities which is a form of systemic abuse

Around Systemic Issues in Care Facilities

The term “systemic” underscores that the institutional harm we’re referring to is much less likely to involve a deliberate harmful act by a staff person or resident. In many cases, abusive or neglectful staff members are not intending harm in a malicious sense – it is more likely that abuse and neglect issues arise due to ignorance, cultural differences, lack of guidelines, training, resources, stress and lack of support for transparency.

We have a number of tools and programs already in place to deal with individual cases of abuse and neglect. These incident-based issues have been the focus of criminal justice, guardianship legislation, designated responders, community response network members and a host of public awareness and training initiatives over the past 10 years and we are making headway in dealing with them.

Systemic abuse has remained largely unaddressed and requires different solutions. Our legal and justice systems are geared to dealing with individuals or a group of individuals who have caused a deliberate harm. What we’re dealing with here are large corporate structures, labour/management conflicts, cultural constructs and resource constraints that limit our capacity to understand, let alone address the abuses. Individual citizens feel powerless in the face of these large issues; yet it is individual citizens and groups of citizens who have the power and capacity to spark the changes that need to happen in these large systems.

Community Role in Emerging Solutions

What is the community role in ensuring that British Columbia has safe, appropriate and affordable housing for all of its citizens? In the final report for the Gathering Wheel project, April Struthers talks about a community development approach versus a community-based services approach to preventing and responding to abuse and neglect. This approach has the community seeing issues of abuse and neglect as community issues, with us all in it together, with both the roots and the solutions to issues of family and other violence against adults to be located within the community. It means we stop looking to designated agencies and large community agencies to define the problem for us and then to provide us with solutions for it.

What does this approach look like? Community groups like Community Response Networks initiate the discussion rather than simply participating in government, health or academic forums soliciting our input. When we do this, we have the opportunity to ask the questions and this leads to a very different discussion than one where we’re called on to respond to others’ priorities. The challenge becomes how can we as community members begin to seize the initiative. One of the keys to meeting this challenge is to recognise that voluntary participation is critical. This may speak to the make-up of our CRNs. It may not be possible for paid professionals (even those most passionate about preventing and intervening in abuse and neglect) to take the leadership role because it places them in conflict. A strong voluntary component to a CRN does make it possible for a local group to lead in this way. There are a variety of different types of

initiatives that may arise from a community-led discussion. Here are some samples of initiatives that are underway in communities in BC.

What is the Community Role in Safe and Supportive Care Facilities?

This is a project initiated in North and West Vancouver when Lionsview Seniors Planning, a local advocacy group, asked the North Shore CRN to facilitate a discussion about the spate of abuse and neglect issues in care facilities that were reported in the media in the fall of 2007. The NS Adults Support Network (NSASN) agreed to take it on. It has led to a series of initiatives.

The project began with two dialogues – March 12 and June 3, 2008 – that were organised, promoted and delivered by the volunteers of the North Shore Network with participation from a variety of individuals – social workers in both public and private systems and facilities, staff from public and private care agencies, staff and volunteers from community agencies.

The initial dialogue was preceded by a research phase which included discussions with and materials from Charmaine Spencer from a Canada-wide project called A Way Forward that was looking at abuse and neglect in institutions from a national perspective. It also included discussions with local care facility staff and residents about their perceptions of the issues and the solutions. There were 23 attendees at the initial dialogue and they came up with a series of recommendations in two broad areas:

1. The Community Role in Safe and Supportive Care Facilities
2. The Community Role in Systemic Advocacy

The first dialogue led to a second dialogue to focus more closely on the two topics. The follow-up dialogue had 35 attendees. It started with a research presentation by Charmaine Spencer which looked at the big picture (systemic issues) and then followed up with a panel discussion involving a resident of a group home, a family member whose parent lives in an intermediate care facility and a support worker who has worked in both a residential care setting and a home support setting.

Some of the follow-up projects that have grown out of the community conversations include:

1. Care Centre Project
 - This is a project that is bringing together a Director of Care from a North Shore care facility, a representative from the company that owns the facility, a representative from VCH's Older Adult Mental Health Team and the CRN Coordinator
 - The purpose is to create a proposal to safely house younger adults with mental and/or substance abuse issues in the larger footprint of an intermediate care facility.
2. Seniors Housing Project Team (Seniors in Communities Project)
 - This project arose from the dialogues and was further developed as a follow-up to the Seniors Mapping Project sponsored by the Seniors Coalition and largely completed in 2007/08 (there are still some mapping activities underway). Housing was one of several large areas of interest along with services, transportation, advocacy and ongoing research
 - The housing project team now operates under the umbrella of the Lionsview Seniors Planning Society and they are looking at creating a proposal for the District of North Vancouver for some amenity space options that will be a part of a building model for an affordable seniors housing development in one of the District's town sites
3. Home Support / Residential Care Facility Web-based Decision Model
 - This is another project which has involved data collection and focus groups to gather information about what citizens need to know when they reach the stage of having to acquire home support services or place their loved one in care
 - It is currently in the design stage

Projects from the Kootenay Region

1. Committee on Homelessness: (Nelson)

This is a group of people from across the community including community services workers, clergy, citizens, advocates, HIV/AIDS and Hep C support workers, municipal government personnel, food security workers, Youth Centre employees etc. They meet to discuss the many issues of homelessness in the community including, but not restricted to:

- People who are not counted as being homeless because they are “couch surfing”
- Access (or lack of access) to services when someone has no address
- Red tape interfering with initiatives that may actually address some of the problems
- Education of the general population regarding homelessness

This group worked to sponsor a research project on the issues of homelessness in Nelson, which will be completed in March of 2009.

- ### 2. In Salmo, there is only one housing option geared to seniors. This has historically meant that if someone did not meet the criteria of the facility, they would have to move away from their home community in order to get appropriate housing. CRN members were involved in discussions which led to changes being made to the facility’s policies, allowing a greater number of people to continue living in their community but with the safe and accessible housing they required.
- ### 3. In Kaslo, a large community forum, with guests from the Interior Health Authority, was sponsored by the local Housing Committee to have a community-wide discussion on housing issues. Kaslo had no care beds whatsoever and people would end up “living” at the local hospital if they or their family insisted that they remain in the community. As a result of the forum and the continuing work of the committee, part of the hospital was turned into a much more appropriate and usable living area and the guidelines and policies at the local seniors housing complex were changed to accommodate current realities.

Other Community Projects

The BC Association of Community Response Networks is collecting examples of community housing projects that are focused on supporting and protecting vulnerable adults. If you have a project in your community that may be of interest to other communities, please contact Jane Osborne at jane@nsrj.ca or Heather von Ilberg at heathervonilberg@shaw.ca. We will be pleased to add your projects to this discussion paper.