

SHELTERING HOMELESS SENIORS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGN, OPERATIONS & STAFFING

GREATER VANCOUVER SHELTER STRATEGY

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy Society gratefully acknowledges the United Way of the Lower Mainland and Real Estate Foundation of BC financial contributions to this Community of Practice initiative.



Acknowledgements

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy Society (GVSS) recognizes that the success of Homeless Seniors Community of Practice is a direct result of the generous community support and partnership in its delivery.

The United Way of the Lower Mainland and the Real Estate Foundation of BC have supported this project for multiple years through funding grants.

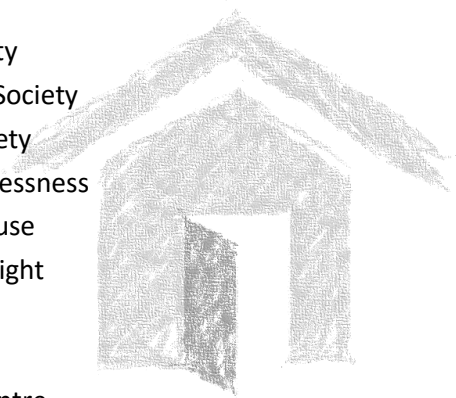
The interviews, transcription and analysis were completed by two students, Justine Jarvis and Dana Low-Merri, as their internship project. GVSS is also grateful to the UBC School of Social Work for their willingness to partner with us in addressing social justice considerations at a systems level.

Five shelters within Metro Vancouver made themselves available to complete the interviews associated with this report. They made staff available and also facilitated introductions to seniors who were residing at the shelters. Many thanks to:

Scott Small and the staff at Catholic Charity Men's Hostel
Peter Fedos and the staff at Hyland House, Options Community Services Society
Caro Lander and the staff at The Salvation Army Belkin House
Kevin Hawken and the staff at The Salvation Army Harbour Light
Linda Fox and the staff at Yukon Shelter, Lookout Emergency Aid Society

GVSS is grateful for the time and contributions of the Community of Practice Steering Committee:

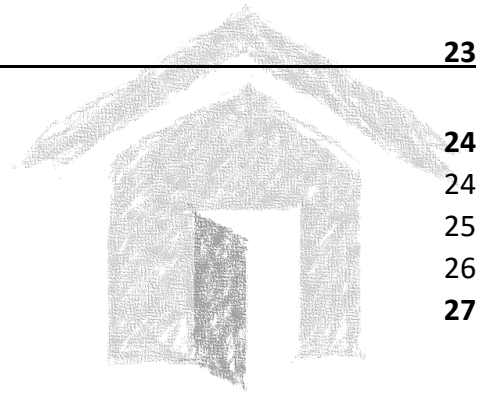
Junie Desil	Downtown Eastside Women's Centre
Kim Irving	Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver
Jennifer Hales	City of Vancouver
Ana Maria Bustamante	Community member
Bailey Mumford	Lookout Emergency Aid Society
Kamla Bayracharya	Options Community Services Society
Duncan Higgon	PHS Community Services Society
Norman Oldham	Burnaby Task Force on Homelessness
Caro Lander	The Salvation Army Belkin House
Verna Benson	The Salvation Army Harbour Light
Brian Dodd	Senior Services Society
Nora Gibson	Service Canada
Mei Lan Fang	SFU Gerontology Research Centre
Jonquil Hallgate	Surrey Urban Mission Society
Susan Tatoosh	Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Society
Sandra Titus	Vi Fineday Society



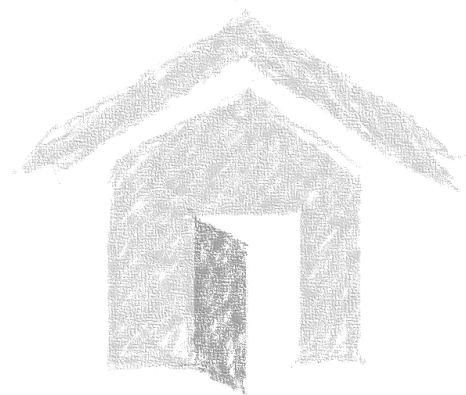
GVSS also remains grateful to BC Housing, Lookout Emergency Aid Society and Surrey Urban Mission and the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre for their provision of catering and facilities for meetings of the steering committee and dialogue sessions of the Community of Practice.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	8
BACKGROUND	8
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	8
INCREASING SENIORS HOMELESSNESS	10
AN IMPORTANT ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	12
DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS	13
ACCESSIBILITY	14
DOORS & ELEVATORS	14
WASHROOMS	15
BEDS	15
LOCATION	16
PERSONALIZED SUPPORT	17
GENDER CONSIDERATIONS	17
SMOKING AREAS	18
PETS	18
CONTROL OF SPACE	19
BEDROOMS	19
LOCKERS	20
QUIET SPACES	20
SOCIALIZATION PREFERENCES	21
SENIORS INVOLVED IN DESIGN PROCESS	22
OPERATIONS CONSIDERATIONS	23
ACCESSIBILITY	24
ACCESS TO SHELTER	24
LENGTH OF STAY	25
DIGNITY	26
CARE FOR BASIC NEEDS	27



FOOD	27
LINENS	27
CLOTHING	28
CLEANLINESS	28
HEALTH SUPPORTS	29
INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACH	29
MEDICATIONS	30
HEALTH SUPPORTS	30
HOSPITAL REFERRALS	31
INCONTINENCE	32
PROVISION OF SERVICES	33
INCOME	33
IDENTIFICATION	31
ACCESSING RESOURCES	31
ACTIVITIES	32
 STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS	 33
APPROACHABLE	33
CONSISTENT	34
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	34
NOT COERCIVE	34
PATIENT & PERSISTENT	35
POLITE	35
SENIOR-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE	35
TRAUMA-INFORMED ENGAGEMENT	36
 WHAT ABOUT SENIORS SHELTERS?	 36





The continued increase in seniors accessing shelters has necessitated the development of resources that assist shelters in effectively supporting seniors who are accessing their services. This report provides recommendations from existing shelter operations that support seniors and seniors accessing these shelters. Each recommendation is based in existing practices, enhancing the likelihood that these recommendations can be implemented by other shelters in Metro Vancouver.

It is hoped that these recommendations will be discussed at shelters by all staff and partners so that they understand how their role supports a senior in their journey to exit homelessness. When considering these recommendations, it is important to understand not just the 'what' or 'how' things are done but 'why' they are done. As staff experience greater understanding of how they contribute to the bigger picture that it is hoped that they will be more committed to implementing recommendations to improve service to seniors. It is also hoped that shelters will also take the time to examine daily practice to ensure they know which recommendations are implemented rather assuming that written policies confirm existing practices.

When reviewing the recommendations provided in this report, it is expected that the question, "How are these recommendations exclusive to seniors?" may arise. It is acknowledged that while some of the recommendations provided do capture concerns that are specific to seniors, in many cases, these recommendations could easily be applied to the general shelter population. If a shelter agrees that it is able to implement a specific recommendation for seniors, they are encouraged to consider the possibility of implementing the recommendation across their operations, assuming that benefits for seniors are likely applicable to others accessing the shelter.

Recommendations for shelters serving seniors fall into three categories: design, operations and staffing considerations. In each case, recommendations are informed by the provision of choice, self-determination and the experience of safety and support in moving forward. An underlying question that may be asked when reviewing these recommendations is, "How does the way that we deliver shelter services impact the ability for seniors to achieve their goals for health and housing?"

Design Considerations

Key Question: How does this design enhance or detract from a senior's ability to pursue and achieve their goals?

Area	Design Consideration
Doors	Door weight is such that people in scooters and walkers can independently open them
	Automatic door opening at all doors that a senior would access
Elevators	Elevators provide access to all floors that seniors need to travel
	It is preferred that seniors are able to independently access the elevators, rather than requiring staff support
Washrooms	Washrooms are wheelchair and walker accessible
	Showers and tubs are fitted with grab bars and bath stools
	Seniors are able to access individual washrooms
	Seniors are sheltered in rooms close to washrooms
Beds	Use of single beds for seniors are preferred
	Develop shelter policies/practices that always allow seniors to sleep in the lower bunk (if required to use bunk beds)
Location	Shelters are located near community supports regularly accessed by seniors
	Shelters are easily accessible by public transport
Gender Considerations	Provide gender specific spaces, e.g. sleeping, recreational
	Sleeping arrangements can accommodate couples
	Arrangement of gender specific spaces accommodates trans* and non-binary persons
	Seniors can choose to be accommodated in mixed gender areas
Smoking Areas	Provide smoking areas that are easily accessible to the shelter, preferably private
	Smoking areas are protected from the weather
Pets	Provide some shelters that are able to accommodate pets
Bedrooms	Provide individual rooms
	Prioritize seniors to smaller rooms
	Designate shelter rooms as 'seniors only'
	Individuals rooms have locks on doors
Lockers	Provide individual lockers
Quiet Spaces	Create common spaces that facilitate quiet activity that are away from substantial noise
Mutual Support	Create common spaces that encourage engagement between residents through room design and furniture arrangement

Effective design also ensures that seniors are included in the design process. The format of this engagement may be different than that which would occur with more technically-focused stakeholders but their involvement ensures that design fully considers their needs rather than discovering missing elements after the fact.

Operations Considerations

Key Question: What does this operational practice tell us about our assumptions about how seniors achieve success?

Area	Operations Consideration
Intake	Prioritize seniors on a waitlist so that they are the first to access a bed when one is available
	Implement a 'no turn away' policy for seniors and create temporary beds to accommodate them
Shelter Floor	Allow seniors to access the shelter before others or leave later
	Have senior specific access times
Beds	Limit barriers to seniors accessing beds during the day
Length of Stay	Allow seniors time to rest and recover on arrival without expectation to engage in 'goal setting' or 'case work'
	Avoid partnering shelter stays with adherence to certain behavioural expectations; consider no time limit on stays for seniors
Provide Dignity	Limit the situations in which seniors need staff support/ permission while using the shelter
	Provide as much choice as possible in the daily events of residing in a shelter
	Honour seniors as elders within the shelter
	Ensure that seniors can access service with dignity, by name and privately if desired
Food	Ensure that meal planning supports seniors' nutritional & cultural needs
	Implement practices that make it easy for seniors to identify dietary restrictions such as request forms or asking close to intake
	Provide flexibility in accessing meals such as longer meal times, saved meals or 'to go' meals
Linens	Allow seniors to request additional blankets for warmth or towels and pillows for comfort
Clothing	Provide free clothing to allow seniors to replenish their wardrobe
Cleanliness	Implement high quality cleaning practices and respond to seniors concerns about lack of cleanliness
	Consider sharing shelter chores with seniors while not micro-managing
Individualized Approach	Support a holistic approach to seniors accessing health supports
	Facilitate independent decision making about health without coercion, such as tying health decisions to shelter stay
Pharmacy relationship	Develop relationships with local pharmacies to assist in the re-filling of prescriptions
Medications management	If possible, provide seniors with the option of whether store medications with staff or self-manage
	If staff must control all medications, take the time to help seniors understand the rationale behind this decision

Operations Considerations (cont.)

Area	Operations Consideration
Health Supports	Develop relationships with local hospitals and community mental health teams to assist in identifying and supporting seniors with health issues
Hospital Referrals	Develop a protocol with the local hospital to prevent referrals that lead to 'bounce backs'
Incontinence	Provide readily available supplies of incontinence products Develop a non-shaming, compassionate manner when discussing incontinence
Income	Develop internal knowledge to access income supports or connect with external referrals Develop relationships with MSDSI to provide shelter visits
Identification	Help seniors access forms and navigate the process for obtaining identification
Accessing Resources	Be available to assist seniors in navigating the internet and making phone calls Build connections with outreach teams or volunteer groups to assist with accompaniment
Activities	Provide times or refer to resources where seniors can participate in activities

Staffing Considerations

Quality	Description
Approachable	Take the time to communicate with seniors how concerns will be addressed to enhance the likelihood for engagement in case management
Consistent	Identify opportunities for consistent staff support through the housing journey and provide sufficient transition time if necessary
Interpersonal skills	Staff understand how their communication and practice preferences may differ from a senior's and are able to adapt
Not coercive	Support seniors' ability to make and learn from their decisions without pressuring seniors towards staff-preferred directions
Patient & persistent	Be comfortable providing seniors with the time they need to make changes and persistent in finding creative solutions to challenges
Senior-specific knowledge	Staff are knowledgeable about the processes and resources that are specific to seniors in supporting them to access housing and supports
Trauma-informed	Staff are trained in trauma-informed approaches and are able to use them to inform engagement with and support of seniors

Finally, this report addresses the question regarding the need for seniors-only shelters. It is recognized that shelter staff and seniors do identify benefits of seniors-only sheltering. Consideration of the development of a seniors-only shelter should ensure that the selected location increases seniors' ability to access appropriate housing and supports while recognizing that no single shelter will meet the needs of all seniors. However, it is also acknowledged that a shelter environment does not provide the optimal environment of care for seniors and investment in seniors-only shelter must be balanced with considerations of how to improve seniors access to housing.

Introduction

The Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy (GVSS) has delivered a Homeless Seniors Community of Practice (CoP) since 2012, in response to the increasing number of seniors that in shelters and outreach services across Metro Vancouver.

The CoP identifies seniors as those who are 50 years or older. This younger categorization recognizes that the experience of poverty and homelessness can substantially impact the experience of aging. Many homeless seniors experience the same health, mental health, job prospect and other challenges as those up to 15 years their senior.¹

Background

One of the recommendations arising from the CoP is the need for senior-specific services in emergency shelters and the enhancement of the capacity of existing shelters to serve seniors. An initial, pre-feasibility study found that both seniors and service providers agreed that there was need for shelters to better serve the needs of seniors. Seniors and staff also showed a preference for shelters that served seniors separately while recognizing that service could also be provided with specific supports and/or services within existing shelters.

To further understand the implications of serving seniors within shelters, the current research was undertaken.

Research Methodology

Previous research conducted by the CoP, contained in the Aging in Place report and the Literature Review², was consulted as well as input from the Older Adults Shelter Working Group and responses of seniors and staff of emergency shelters with regards to seniors sheltering. These resources informed the development of two surveys, one

Do you think shelters need to better meet the needs of older adults?

Service Providers



Seniors



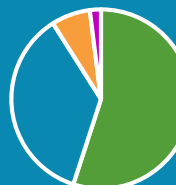
■ Yes ■ No ■ Unsure

Should the shelter be separate or combined within an existing shelter?

Service Providers



Seniors

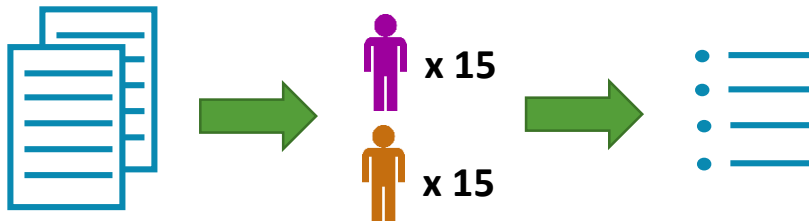


■ Separate ■ Combined ■ Both ■ Unsure

¹Bottomley, M. (2001). Health care and homeless older adults. Top Geriatric Rehabilitation Series. 17(1), 1–21.; Thomas, B. (2011). Homelessness: A silent killer. University of Sheffield.; Waldbrook, N. A. (2013). Homelessness, Stable Housing, and Opportunities for Healthy Aging: Exploring the Relationships. Queen's University.

² Both reports are accessible at <http://gvss.ca/Other-Docs.html>.

targeted for seniors and one targeted for shelter staff. In person interviews with 15 staff and 15 seniors were conducted in 5 shelters across Metro Vancouver. Participants were appropriately informed of their rights with regards to participation and confidentiality and seniors were provided with a small honorarium to recognize their contribution to the study.



All interviews were recorded and transcribed and then independently coded to identify themes found within the interviews. The results of the independent coding were collated to confirm theme identification amongst the coders. Final analysis categorized themes into broad headings of design, operation and transition to housing and these findings were compared to the original recommendations of the Housing Framework.

Seniors Survey

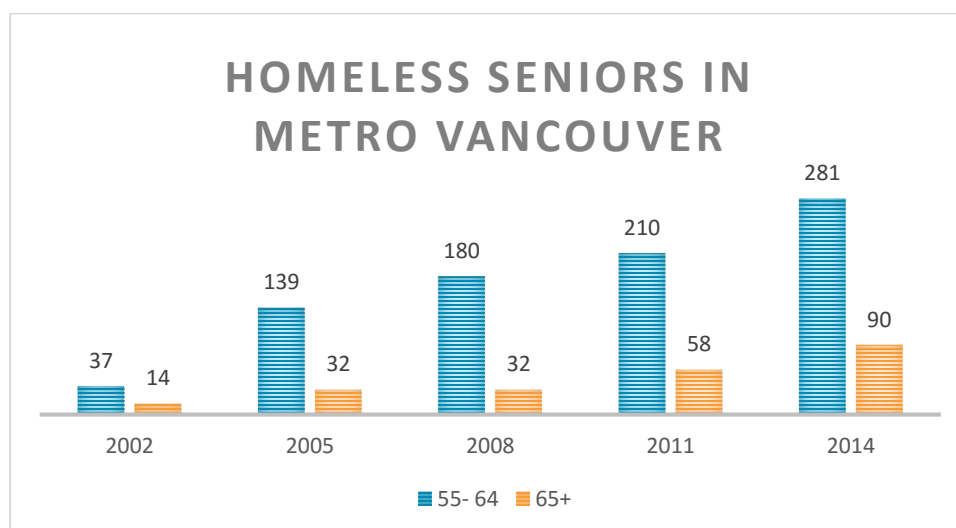
1. Why did you choose this shelter over others?
2. Can you think about other places you need to get to in your day? What are those places?
 - How easy is it for you to get to those places from here?
3. How easy is it to get around the shelter?
4. Do you have any health needs that the shelter is able to help you with and how do they do that?
5. Do you have any health needs that the shelter is unable to help you with?
 - What would you need to feel supported?
6. Do you feel that you have control or influence over when you are able to access the shelter and the place that you sleep?
 - If you do, how is the shelter doing this?
 - If they don't, what could they change?
7. Are you allowed to personalize the space in any way?
8. If you feel that your safety is threatened in the shelter do you feel you can ask for support?
 - If no, what does that
 - If yes, how did they support you?
9. When you're thinking about moving away from the shelter, are you ever concerned about being lonely or isolated?
 - What do you think you would need to not feel lonely or isolated?
10. When you think about the support that the staff provides to you
 - What works for you?
 - What doesn't?
11. Thinking about your experience here, what could have been done differently to make it better for you?
12. Is there anything you would like to add?

Staff Survey

1. Can you tell me about the demographics of the seniors using the shelter?
 - i. What specific needs do they have?
2. What changes in the shelter have been made to better accommodate older adults?
 - i. Has this impacted your workload?
 - ii. Have you noticed an impact on older adults?
3. How frequently are the services accessed?
4. Are there times when the needs of your clients are outside the capacity of the shelter?
 - i. What are the types of needs?
 - ii. Do you have any strategies to better support clients with these needs?
5. Are there differences in how you work with older adults compared to other shelter users? What are they?
6. Do you have any strategies for successfully transitioning older adults into housing while avoiding isolation?
7. Is there anything you would like to add?

Increasing Seniors Homelessness

Service providers report that homelessness for seniors has been on the rise in Metro Vancouver for many years. These reports are confirmed by both Point-In-Time homeless count information and shelter stay statistics.

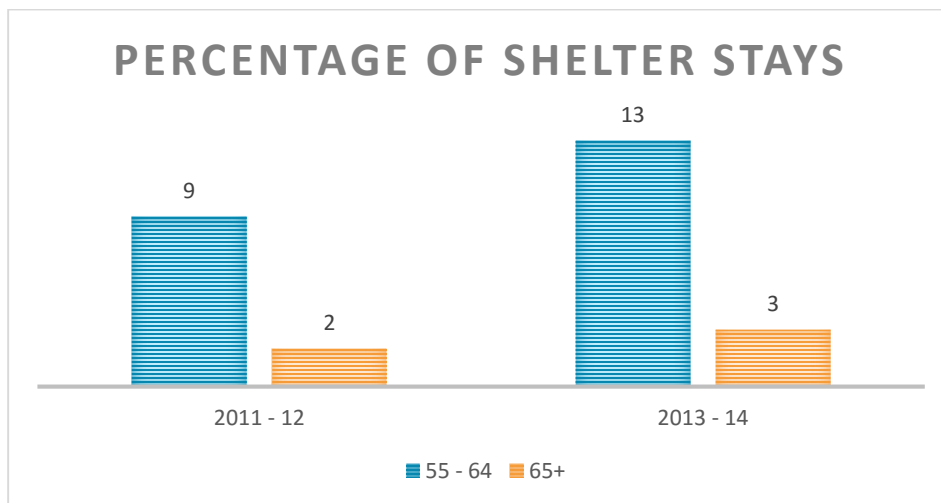


In 2002 a total of 1,121 individuals experiencing homelessness were identified within Metro Vancouver³. Of those who provided information about their age, 37 were 55 to 64 years of age (3%) and 14 were 65 years or older (1%). In 2014, out of a total of 2,777 individuals identified, these figures rose to 281 who were 55 to 64 years of age (14%) and 90 who were 65 or older (4%). These figures indicate that the numbers of seniors

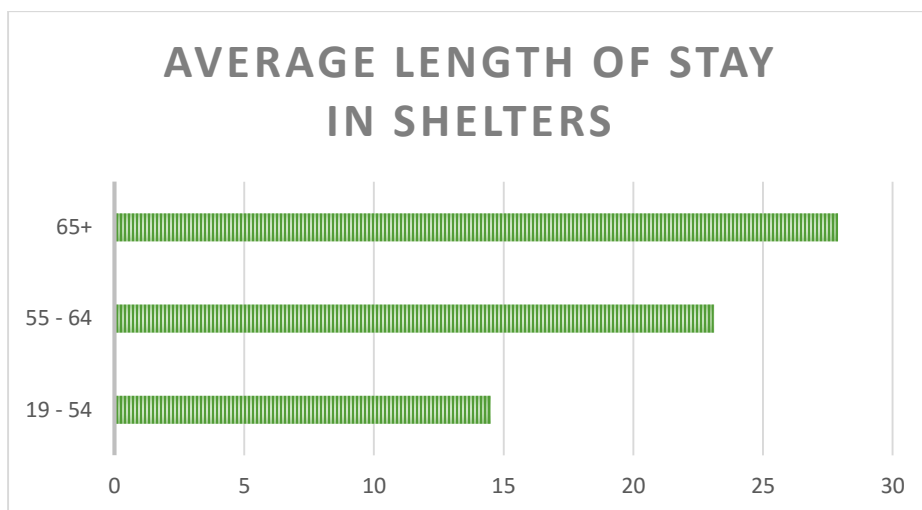
³ Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness. (2014). Results of the 2014 Homeless Count in the Metro Vancouver Region. <http://stophomelessness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Results-of-the-2014-Metro-Vancouver-Homeless-Count.pdf>.

experiencing homelessness in Metro Vancouver is increasing at a rate faster than that found within the wider homelessness population.

Shelter stay data in Metro Vancouver also indicate an increase in seniors' homelessness⁴. The percentage of stays of those 55 and older increased from 11% in 2011-12 to 16% in 2013-14.



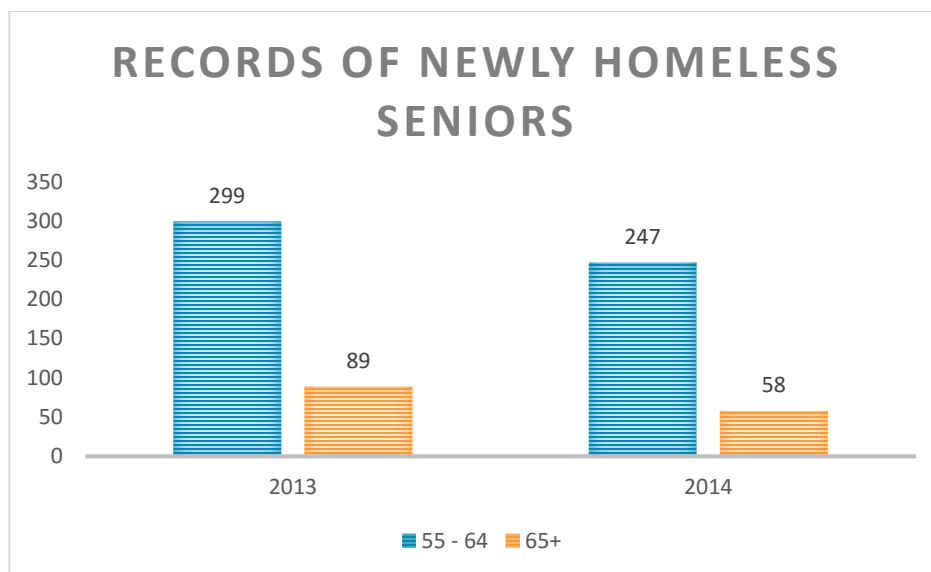
When seniors stay in shelters, they also typically stay longer than younger shelter users. These figures suggest that shelters experience greater challenges in housing seniors.⁶



Shelters also indicate concerning numbers of what are often called 'newly homeless' seniors. These are seniors who have become homeless after being housed. Some of these seniors have raised families, worked and owned or rented their homes prior to becoming homeless.

Records of new client records in shelters (the same person may be counted more than once if they stay in more than one shelter) show concerning numbers of newly homeless seniors (homeless for 6 months or less when entering the shelter) within Metro Vancouver shelters⁶. Unfortunately, only two years of reliable data is available for this statistic, preventing any discussion of trends.

⁴ Source: BC Housing, Homelessness Services System, Webfocus HSSCLN001, January 2015 snapshot
Greater Vancouver Shelter Strategy Seniors Shelter Recommendations



These figures combine to present a strong case for the need for effective supports for seniors when considering available housing and transition to housing. Increasing numbers of homeless seniors indicate a need for additional housing and greater lengths of stay in shelters suggest the need for housing that is suited to the needs of seniors to support quick transitions out of homelessness when this occurs.

An Important Acknowledgement

Before moving forward with the body of recommendations it is important to acknowledge that while this report provides many examples of how shelters may improve in their service delivery to seniors, many of those who were residing in the shelters expressed their gratitude for the services and the staff. They were quick to discuss what was working well, the help that they are received and the excellent work that was being done, even in difficult circumstances.

It is important to acknowledge that even if it is possible to improve, it is clear that shelters and staff care about the seniors that they work with and strive on a daily basis to support those they work with and help them improve their lives. As described by one senior shelter resident,

“I feel safe! You know, I’ve put on 20 pounds, the food’s so good. I get to sleep when I want, I get to rest and my mind’s not spinning. I’ve never had two months of my life, that I can think of, that I could lay in bed and get up, somebody’s cooked me meals, never! I’ve thought about that, you know, and I’m not in touch with my family; it’s been 15, 20 years since even my own kids talked to me, and my mom, or anybody, so I don’t have a single family member. I burnt my bridges a long time ago. So Christmas is tough – pretty depressing, it’s hard, it makes my cry just sitting and talking about it. But this Christmas, was just incredible, you know – I was happy.”



Design Considerations

When providing these design considerations, it is recognized that almost all shelters have limitations in their design that they are not currently able to alter. Shelters are encouraged to consider what might be feasible in their situation. Where possible, attempts have been made to provide alternatives to cater to different shelter situations. Design for new shelters should always seek to provide the highest standards of care in design considerations.

Based on the feedback received by seniors and shelter staff the recommendations for shelter design fall into four categories: accessibility, safety, personal space and control and socialization preferences.

Accessibility	Personalized Support	Control of Space	Socialization Preferences
Doors	Gender	Bedrooms	Mutual support
Elevators	Smoking areas	Lockers	Personal space
Washrooms		Quiet spaces	
Beds			
Location			

In each of these categories, the underlying question is, “How does this design enhance or detract from a senior’s ability to pursue and achieve their goals?” At times, this may be at conflict with other considerations such as cost, safety or operational limitations. While these conflicts must be managed, it is important to ensure that shelter design facilitates the achievement of its ultimate purpose. In the case of shelters, it is possible to suggest that the purpose of the shelter is simply to provide as many spaces as possible to move people off the streets. However, others see the purpose of the shelter as supporting individuals to effectively exit homelessness in a manner that meets their needs. Each position on the purpose of homelessness will then inform design considerations for the shelter. The remainder of this report takes the position that shelters are designed to support individuals in exiting homelessness.

Key Design Question

How does this design enhance or detract from a senior’s ability to pursue and achieve their goals?



Issues related to accessibility impact how comfortable a senior feels in a shelter and how confident they are navigating it independently. The ability to feel safe assists a senior in starting the restoration process necessary for them to move forward in their life. Independent navigation allows seniors to have choice and control over when they want to complete tasks in their day.

Doors & Elevators

Both doors and elevators can inhibit or facilitate access for seniors throughout the shelter. When a senior struggles to navigate their way around the shelter they can be less inclined to make appointments or do other tasks they need to complete. The following can assist seniors to feel confident in navigating the shelter:

“Real tough. I used to fly up those (stairs). That’s how much energy I had and in previous shape but I struggle up stairs now and that’s pushing it and it’s kind of depressing because you think, ‘Oh no, it’s not over, come on, give me what I had back.’ ”

	Design Consideration	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Doors	Door weight is such that people in scooters and walkers can independently open them	No fear of being trapped when exiting and entering the shelter	Do not need to take time away from other duties to help seniors with access
	Automatic door opening at all doors that a senior would access	Increased independence	
Elevators	Elevators provide access to all floors that seniors need to travel	Maintains dignity	A wider variety of seniors can access the shelter
	It is preferred that seniors are able to independently access the elevators, rather than requiring staff support		

Washrooms

Two issues that seniors regularly experience in accessing washrooms are incontinence and challenge in navigating bathtubs and showers. Providing private access to close washrooms can allow seniors to independently access washrooms with personal dignity. One challenge in effectively catering for the needs of seniors is that some welcome the opportunity to soak in a tub, while others find difficulty in getting in and out of a bathtub.

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Washrooms	Washrooms are wheelchair and walker accessible	All seniors are able to access the washroom independently	May need to take time/ develop protocols that prioritize seniors in rooms near washrooms
	Showers and tubs are fitted with grab bars and bath stools		
	Seniors are able to access individual washrooms	Seniors can change and navigate the washroom with privacy	Staff time in managing hygiene issues for seniors is reduced
	Seniors are sheltered in rooms close to washrooms	Seniors find it easier to manage incontinence	

Beds

The ability to access individual beds for seniors has a number of impacts. Seniors can regularly experience mobility issues and so access to a bed on the floor allows them safer movement in and out. This can also assist them in managing any incontinence issues. If single beds are not available, access to the lower bunk can also provide this consideration. Shelters need to consider how they will manage this accommodation. For example, if a senior arrives late in the night and a younger person is accessing the lower bunk, how will staff manage a process that ensures the senior can access the lower bunk. One possibility may be reserving certain lower bunks for seniors unless the shelter is at maximum capacity.

“So the top bunk; you are quite aware that on the top bunk you’re going to annoy the guy below you. The guy above me goes to the bathroom a couple times a night so I have to wake up a couple of times a night. It’s not his fault. But, ugh.”

What is perhaps less obvious when considering the impacts of bunk beds is the potential effect on seniors’ sleep. If the resident above moves a lot in their sleep, needs to get in and out of their bed regularly or snores, all of these are more likely to impact another resident if they share the same bunk bed. It is incredibly important to recognize that loss of sleep will likely impact a senior’s capacity to be active and at full capacity during the day, hindering their ability to pursue and achieve their personal goals.

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Beds	Use of single beds for seniors are preferred	Seniors sleep is less disturbed due to the movement of other or snoring	Less time required to manage room arrangements
	Develop shelter policies/practices that always allow seniors to sleep in the lower bunk (if required to use bunk beds)	Seniors feel safer moving in and out of bed Seniors ability to manage incontinence is increased due to shorter travel time	Will need to proactively communicate with residents about the use of beds

Location

Close proximity of the shelter to necessary services assists seniors in accessing community supports that they need. Seniors may have mobility issues or may struggle to utilize public transport. By locating the shelter near necessary supports, there is increased likelihood that seniors are able to independently access these supports. It is also important for the shelter to be easily accessible by public transport to assist seniors travelling to and from the shelter when needed. One senior described the challenges of being away from their community as follows,

“No, I stay put because to get to the North Shore, it’s a seven dollar round trip and if you haven’t got money you can’t get to there. Those things that I was enjoying, I now can’t get there, it’s literally been taken away. To be honest with you, a little while ago I said ‘Look, you’re punishing me.’ They said ‘No, it’s not punishment,’ and I said, ‘You take someone out of their area and they can’t afford to get back into the area and can’t be with the friends they want to be with, what do you call it? I call it punishment.’ ”

It is recognized that properties that are close to community supports and near public transit are typically higher in value. There is need to balance affordability of the building with meeting the needs of seniors.

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Location	Shelters are located near community supports regularly accessed by seniors	Seniors are more likely to be able to independently access the shelter and surrounding support	Less time spent managing travel arrangements for seniors
	Shelters are easily accessible by public transport		



Often when designing programs or accommodation for individuals there is a desire to identify the one strategy or model that will best suit all individuals. Seniors clearly identified that there is no ‘one size fits all’ model in developing sheltering for seniors. What meets the needs of one may directly contradict what is helpful for another. Ensuring that there is diversity within the system that supports seniors will ensure that all seniors are able to find an environment within which they feel safe and supported.

Gender Considerations

Seniors identify that separate areas for men and women is an element that could increase safety. While this is the case, there are also times when less clear lines between spaces for genders is helpful. If seniors are considering entering the shelter as a couple, lack of opportunity to reside together can be a deterrent to accessing the shelter. Even seniors who are not in a couple may benefit from interactions with others of a different gender. In addition, shelters must manage support for trans* and non-binary individuals. When spaces are highly segregated based on gender, these individuals may feel excluded or unsafe within the shelter. It is likely that it is not possible for any single shelter to cater to all of these considerations. As such, to effectively meet seniors needs in this area, there is need for a systemic approach with different options available at each shelter.

“For example, my friend is on the 5th floor, and he was trying to get in touch with me one night and he had to go downstairs to phone up to the 7th floor and I never got the message.”

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Gender Considerations	Provide gender specific spaces, e.g. sleeping, recreational	Provides enhanced safety especially when seniors are coming from a history of victimization	Needs to be possible within existing building design
	Sleeping arrangements can accommodate couples	Couples are more likely to enter the shelter when they can stay together	Requires the development of appropriate policies/ practices
	Arrangement of gender specific spaces accommodates trans* and non-binary persons	Trans* and non-binary seniors experience increased safety	
	Seniors can choose to be accommodated in mixed gender areas	Seniors are able to receive peer support of their choosing	

Smoking Areas

Particularly because of potential challenges with mobility, seniors benefit from easily accessible smoking areas attached to the shelter. Covers on smoking areas protect seniors from weather when they are outside. Both of these considerations can increase a senior's experience of confidence and safety in the shelter, reducing barriers to access.

"It's safer and I can go outside and have a cigarette and not get bothered. Or up here, there is the patio where we can have a cigarette."

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Smoking Areas	Provide smoking areas that are easily accessible to the shelter, preferably private	Seniors are able to independently navigate the shelter	Requires approval to manage bylaws around smoking, e.g. must smoke 6m away from doorways
	Smoking areas are protected from the weather	Seniors experience increased safety through reduced potential for victimization Seniors feel comfortable accessing the shelter	

Pets

It is not uncommon for a senior to be accompanied by a pet when they are looking to access a shelter. For those with pets, they would often prefer to remain outside of the shelter rather than be separated from their pet. However, others consider pets to be unsanitary or unsafe and would prefer to access shelter services that are pet free. These differences highlight the need for variety in service delivery; for all seniors to feel comfortable accessing shelters it is preferable that some shelters in an area are able to accommodate pets but some shelters do not accommodate pets.

"I have a Chihuahua and I needed a place that I could bring my pet... because there's very few that do take pets, there's probably only two in the whole of Vancouver... I was scared to death and they told me about this one [that] allowed pets. I slept outside the night before I came in here with my dog; I was that scared."

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Pets	Provide some shelters that are able to accommodate pets	Seniors with pets are more willing to access the shelter	Need to develop space and protocols for managing pets



The ability to make decisions about how a space is used and a feeling of safety about the security of personal belongings contributes to a feeling of security for seniors. While there may be concern that an environment that promotes comfortability may reduce seniors' motivation to leave the shelter, it is suggested that the potential benefits outweigh these costs. A senior who has control of their space has the ability to create an environment that is most conducive to recovery from trauma. They also start to regain some of the control over their life that they have lost in the experience of becoming homeless. An increased sense of agency also supports seniors to have confidence in taking control and making decisions in other areas of their life.

Bedrooms

Seniors regularly talked about the impact of single rooms on their ability to progress in the shelter. A single room increases the experience of safety for the senior – they do not worry about how their roommates might interact with them and they feel confident leaving belongings around their room without risk of them being stolen. Seniors also feel less worried that they might disturb their roommates. Again, snoring becomes a factor – individual rooms prevent seniors from disturbing each other while snoring.

When considering design for new shelters, cost pressures can influence designers towards increasing the number of beds in a room. This is a critical area in which the purpose of the shelter and the impact of design upon seniors' ability to achieve their goals must be evaluated.

"Some of the men here, ah, snore so loudly, it's incredible, that, ah, you, you sleep with ear plugs in and you can't, they still wake you up, you can't sleep... it's really tiring. And you're trying to job hunt and write cover letters and ah, resumes, and, you don't eat well."

"You can tell the older ones that have to put on the machoism for so long and can't wait to let their gut hang out and stop being so tough and can have a breather and what have you."

Some shelters have not been designed with single rooms as a viable option. When this is the case, other strategies include prioritizing seniors to smaller rooms or designating certain rooms to be senior specific. Shelters that provided seniors-specific rooms found that behaviour in these rooms was generally calmer and seniors were more relaxed and less concerned about needing to protect themselves. The behaviour of seniors who had resided in the room longer also seemed to have a positive effect on those new to the room.

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Bedrooms	Provide individual rooms	Fewer disturbances during the night Less concern about roommate interactions	Less time spent managing resident conflict
	Prioritize seniors to smaller rooms Designate shelter rooms as 'seniors only'	Seniors feel safer and more calm	
	Individuals rooms have locks on doors	Seniors feel comfortable leaving belongings out	Requires development of appropriate policies for room access

Lockers

In a similar fashion to lockable rooms, lockers provide seniors with a sense of security about their belongings. Security regarding belongings increases the likelihood that seniors will experience the shelter as a safe base from which they can move forward with their personal goals.

"You can do whatever you want but there isn't an awful lot of you want to do because somebody will do something to it or take it...so you try not to put anything of value out."

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Lockers	Provide individual lockers	Enhanced feeling of safety within the shelter	Less time spent managing issues of theft

Quiet Spaces

Seniors identified that spaces that are designated as 'quiet spaces' can contribute to their health and wellbeing in housing. While individual rooms do provide some opportunity for individuals to create a quiet space within their own apartments, the value of participating within the residential community suggests that common quiet spaces are also important.

Key considerations include space that is free from substantial noise while supporting participation in quiet activity. This particularly contrasts spaces that include televisions (that also have their place); constant noise in common areas can be disturbing to some residents. Activities that may be appropriate in a quiet space include reading, puzzles, quiet card games and crafts.

"Oh that garbage. And that [blank] football! The hockey I don't mind, but the football! I see another football, I'm going to throw the TV out! It gets so tiring after a while."

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Quiet Spaces	Create common spaces that facilitate quiet activity that are away from substantial noise	Provides a space to rest away from noise disturbances while being present in community	Less potential for noise complaints



Shelter design can be used to facilitate social engagements between residents that allows seniors to provide support to each other. This peer support is often valued by the senior and can be invaluable in helping them to learn how to navigate their own situation by borrowing from their peers' experiences. Simple changes in how rooms are constructed to promote conversation, or furniture arrangement, can enhance the likelihood that seniors will gather and chat with each other.

"They don't need to be with us; they're dealing with the group, because the group talks with each other."

In contrast, some seniors also expressed a preference for independence and less interest in engaging in the shelter community. Once again, it is demonstrated that diversity in services is necessary to support seniors well, and socialization should not be forced.

	Design Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Mutual Support	Create common spaces that encourage engagement between residents through room design and furniture arrangement	Gaining social/natural supports outside of shelter staff	Provides opportunities for staff to change their interactions with residents
		Seniors have control over who they share with and receive information from	Assists staff in encouraging supportive relationships between residents
		This form of support may feel less patronizing for seniors	



Seniors Involved in Design Process

Involving seniors in the design process of a new facility can assist organizations in ensuring that the facility meets the needs of seniors and does not unintentionally create more barriers for the senior. While this report has provided a number of recommendations regarding considerations that can be made to effectively deliver services to seniors, it does not presume to capture all considerations that may be helpful. To successfully identify these considerations, along with the unique circumstances of a particular building, it is necessary to engage around the specific details of an exact location. Conversations can be held with seniors about how they would use the building, what helps them feel safe, the amount of space that they need to navigate around the building and what particular features – blinds, door handles, colours on walls, size of windows, etc. – either help or hinder their progress within the shelter.

It is recognized that many of the processes associated with building design can be technical and formal and may not have a natural place in which seniors can be involved. Indeed, seniors may be uninterested in participating in these more formal discussions. However, in the same way that consultants who build websites and software engage with ‘end users’, asking them about patterns of use and providing them with opportunities to explore sample formats, it is suggested that it is possible to develop similar processes when creating buildings. It is also expected that the same types of benefits found in the computing world when undertaking this initial consultation could be found in building design. That is, software developers complete this type of consultation to ensure that what they are creating will meet the needs of users as users imagine them and the consultation process reduces the likelihood of finding unexpected problems once the product is complete. The consulting process takes the time to help users express even unidentified needs by asking key questions, suggesting possible solutions and bridging communication between users and technical developers. It is suggested that this approach could be modified to engage with seniors around shelter design considerations. If the goal of shelter design is to create a space that most helps seniors achieve their goals then the long-term benefits of this process may reap untold rewards for the seniors.

Operations Considerations

Sometimes certain practices remain part of our operation because they are things that we have ‘always done.’ As approaches to work with marginalized individuals change and develop, it can mean that we are implementing practices that don’t always align with our personal or organizational values. It is important to take the time on a regular basis to review how our practices impact staff and seniors and to evaluate whether these practices support the overall goals and ethics that we have for ourselves and others. These recommendations recognize the intrinsic benefit that choice and self-determination provide as an essential foundation as people endeavour to move forward in their lives.

Key Operations Question

What does this operational practice tell us about our assumptions about how seniors achieve success?

All the operations recommendations come directly from shelter staff and seniors and existing shelter operations. This is helpful because it means that each recommendation has been successfully implemented in at least one shelter in Metro Vancouver. While all recommendations came from exiting operations, no one shelter encompassed all of the recommendations. This means that each shelter should be able to identify some practices that they have already implemented and some that they might be able to develop. Sometimes it’s assumed recommendations are already implemented and yet, when daily operations are closely examined, it is discovered that some elements have been overlooked. Organizations should seek to provide the most flexible operating standards for seniors while still managing their own operational necessities and limitations.

Sometimes there is concern that if we make the shelter too comfortable that no one will want to move on. However, if we assume that most people do not see a shelter as their preferred place to stay, then the creation of a comfortable environment supports a senior to recover sufficiently from the physical and psychosocial trauma that they have experienced in being homeless. If we discover that shelter environments are more attractive to seniors than other available options, this may speak more to the need to improve the accommodation options for seniors rather than lessening the quality of care available in shelters.

Feedback for operations considerations for seniors-focused shelter service delivery was categorized into four categories: accessibility, care for basic needs, health supports and provision of services.

Accessibility	Care for Basic Needs	Health Supports	Provision of Services
Access to shelter	Food	Individualized approach	Income
Length of stay	Linens	Medication	Identification
Dignity	Clothing	Health supports	Accessing resources
	Cleanliness	Hospitals referrals	Activities
	Security	Incontinence	



While the ability to navigate within a shelter is a key component of accessibility, it also encompasses the ease with which residents can come and go within the facility. Choice on when and how long to access a shelter bed, room or stay allows the individual to determine their own care needs and provides them with sufficient time, space and dignity to heal and move forwards.

Access to Shelter

Seniors often experience greater levels of vulnerability when on the streets. They are less able to withstand the impacts of bad weather on their health or stand up to other individuals who may attempt to take advantage of them. Shelters can support seniors by providing them with priority access. This may include prioritizing the order in which seniors access the shelter by moving them to the top of a waitlist, if it exists; creating additional temporary shelter beds to ensure that no senior is turned away from the shelter; or allowing seniors prioritized access to the shelter during the day, or increased time to leave the floor, if there are times when others are typically unable to access the space. If access during the day is typically not possible, seniors can also be prioritized by establishing specific times that are exclusive to seniors when they can use the space or participate in activities without concern about younger residents.

“The doors close, they kick us out at 7:30 and we can’t come back ‘til 4 o’clock. So that’s why we’re hanging around the library and stuff. It’s just draining. It’s raining or it’s cold or whatever and you gotta go someplace.”

Seniors also experience greater challenges in managing their sleep. This can be due to nightly disturbances in their sleep or a need for more sleep during the day. Removing barriers to seniors accessing their beds during the day provides increased self-determination for the senior and also ensures that they are receiving sufficient sleep to maintain their health.

	Operations Consideration	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Intake	Prioritize seniors on a waitlist so that they are the first to access a bed when one is available	Seniors do not have to spend the night on the streets	Need to develop policies and practices to manage prioritized access
	Implement a ‘no turn away’ policy for seniors and create temporary beds to accommodate them		
Shelter Floor	Allow seniors to access the shelter before others or leave later	Seniors have reduced exposure to the elements & potential victimization	Need to plan operations to accommodate the additional access time to the shelter
	Have senior specific access times		
Beds	Limit barriers to seniors accessing beds during the day	Increased health & self-determination	

Length of Stay

If a shelter is funded by BC Housing, then there is no funder-imposed limit on the amount of time that an individual can reside in the shelter. However, remnants from practices of previous funders that limited stays to a maximum of 30 days before moving on still influence practices in some shelters. How we manage length of stay in shelters can give insight into how we view the reasons that people are motivated to change: do we need to provide external motivations to ‘force’ them to make necessary changes or are people motivated to change and happy to respond when we are able to create environments within which it is safe to change.

If seniors feel that uncertain about how long they are able to stay in the shelter, this can dominate their thinking and be an unnecessary burden as they attempt to recover and begin to move forward with their own plans. Managing lengths of stay in a manner that allows seniors time to rest and recover and then move forward at their own pace helps build trust and also eases the trauma experienced by a senior who has become homeless. Staff also identify this as beneficial as they have sufficient time to walk with a senior through the different areas of support rather than feeling rushed or as if they are constantly starting over as seniors are moved on to a new place. One staff member described the impact on both staff and seniors when trying to confirm to a limited time frame for shelter stays:

“It takes time and our 30 days or 1 month is just not enough time and a lot of them have issues being here that long in general and when they find out; it’s very scary for our older clients to have to know that they have to go again to another shelter and adjust again to a whole other system. It puts a lot of stress on them, I’ve noticed that. They come here, they’re already afraid. They’ve never had contact with the system before and they come here and they get established and then they have to move on and it’s very frightening for them. And a lot of them just don’t want to go, they don’t want to leave and we have to move them on.”

	Operations Consideration	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Length of Stay	Allow seniors time to rest and recover on arrival without expectation to engage in ‘goal setting’ or ‘case work’	Seniors have the opportunity to begin recovery from trauma	May need to manage personal expectations around time needed to rest
	Avoid partnering shelter stays with adherence to certain behavioural expectations; consider no time limit on stays for seniors	Seniors have sufficient time to move forward at their own pace & are not manipulated	May feel the burden of a full shelter & turn-aways but able to fully help those in front of them

Dignity

Seniors are responsive to how shelter operations do or do not show them dignity. The situation of homelessness and the events leading up to this are often associated with a loss of dignity for seniors. Shelters can support seniors by examining their practices to provide as much dignity as possible. This can include limiting the situations in which a senior has to ask staff for permission or support to do something or providing seniors with as much choice as possible about their living, eating, sleeping and other arrangements. Taking the time to provide dignity to seniors assists in creating a positive therapeutic environment which supports the senior to achieve their own goals. When a senior feels that they are valued and supported the shelter environment is also more accessible as seniors are more likely to access the shelter in the first place.

“We try and do special things to set them apart, even when other guys are here... what we also try is to hold them up to the young guys as elders and we use that language and certainly with First Nations guys in recognizing that culturally, this is somebody you need to respect – you don’t pick on the old people, you know, and going through that. So it’s more of treating them with more dignity and respect, slowing things down for them.”

Seniors also have the ability to contribute positively to the shelter environment. They can often be seen by fellow residents as a positive example or source of wisdom. Finding opportunities to recognize and value seniors contributions within the shelter environment can have positive effects for the senior, other residents and staff.

Finally, seniors identified practices that reduced their humanity, such as being referred to by bed numbers or having to single themselves out in front of their peers when asking to access a service. It is recognized that shelters are not intending to remove dignity from seniors and instead may have occurred because they seem more time effective. Shelters can assist in reducing these tendencies by finding ways to not list residents by room or bed number; for example, ordering lists by name and then referring to a number if needed. Shelters can also provide for more private means of accessing help such as meeting with a staff member to sign up for a service rather than signing up on a public list or putting up their hand in a group.

	Operations Consideration	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Provide Dignity	Limit the situations in which seniors need staff support/ permission while using the shelter	Seniors have more autonomy and self-management in the shelter	Need to balance with operational considerations & safety
	Provide as much choice as possible in the daily events of residing in a shelter		
	Honour seniors as elders within the shelter	Seniors have a meaningful contribution within the shelter and have improved safety	Can contribute to a safer more stable shelter environment
	Ensure that seniors can access service with dignity, by name and privately if desired		



Seniors expressed a sensitivity to the quality of care for their basic needs. They noticed the type of meals that were available to them, whether they could ask for additional pillows and blankets and how clean their room was each day.

Food

As recognized by Health BC, nutritional needs can change as we age⁵. It is important that shelters consider the needs of seniors in their meal planning, especially when they accommodate a large proportion of seniors. Seniors also expressed the desire for flexibility in the time that they could access meals as well as ease in catering to any dietary restrictions.

Q: Why did you choose this shelter over other shelters?

“They treat you a lot better, I think, and the food is quite good - better than most places.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Food	Ensure that meal planning supports seniors’ nutritional & cultural needs	Seniors have access to the food they need to sustain their health	Practices may need to be adjusted to assist communication and more time may be needed for some individualized meal planning
	Implement practices that make it easy for seniors to identify dietary restrictions such as request forms or asking close to intake		
	Provide flexibility in accessing meals such as longer meal times, saved meals or ‘to go’ meals	Seniors have more control over how they manage their life in the shelter	May have cost implications for managing kitchen staff

Linens

Seniors appreciated being able to ask for additional blankets, pillow, towels or other linens. Seniors saw this simple request as a way to personalize their space, increasing their sense of comfort. If seniors are able to feel sufficiently warm while sleeping and also have the sense of security of being able to care for their needs, they may also experience reduced sleep difficulties.

“You can get up in at 2 o’clock in the morning and say ‘I’m freezing can I have another blanket?’ and they give you one, or a towel, or whatever.”

⁵ Healthy Eating and Healthy Aging for Adults provides information and links to fact sheets and handbooks on nutrition while aging: <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile68j.stm>.

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Linens	Allow seniors to request additional blankets for warmth or towels and pillows for comfort	Reduced sleep difficulties, increased sense of comfort within the shelter	May require more linens and more time spent washing

Clothing

Loss of belongings can be one of the losses that seniors experience while homeless. Seniors spoke of having to throw out all of their belongings because of bed bugs and moving or losing belongings through left or not being able to transport belongings as they travelled. Shelters can provide dignity to seniors by providing clothing donations and assisting seniors to replenish and supplement their wardrobes.

“There’s a donation room for clothing, cos I came with one little bag, and now I’ve put on about 15 lbs, 20 lbs, in the two months I’ve been here and I’ve still been able to have lots of clothes.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Clothing	Provide free clothing to allow seniors to replenish their wardrobe	Increased dignity as they are able to dress to meet their needs	Requires time to manage receiving, washing & distributing donations

Cleanliness

Seniors noticed when the shelter was not clean and suggested that this impacted their own value of the shelter as well as their confidence in staying healthy. Some shelters support the cleaning of the shelter through the creation of ‘chores’ for residents. Residents expressed appreciation when they were trusted to complete these chores and weren’t over-supervised by staff.

“It was a life saver coming here and it was clean and there is food and there is no people cursing and swearing around you - they also had the flu bug out there.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Cleanliness	Implement high quality cleaning practices and respond to seniors concerns about lack of cleanliness	Increases sense of security and safety and willingness to access shelter	Develop communication strategies to ensure seniors feel heard when expressing concern
	Consider sharing shelter chores with seniors while not micro-managing	Increased sense of ownership and place in the shelter	Develop practice for distributing and supervising chores



Seniors' health needs were often identified by staff as a reason that they were unable to accommodate the senior. Unfortunately, shelter staff are not typically trained to provide support for significant mobility or hygiene issues. They also managing case work and shelter operations and it is not operationally feasible to provide substantial one-on-one support to multiple residents while still meeting the expectations of their other responsibilities.

"We could help them with that but the thing is if it's going to be an everyday thing, and it's a constant thing, then it's going to become a problem because we don't have enough staff to be helping them around the clock."

Shelters that founds greater success in supporting the needs of seniors relied on partnerships with community health resources, forged through relationships that had been built over time. Shelters also employed practices that continued to support the dignity and self-determination of seniors.

Individualized Approach

Seniors recognized the benefit of a holistic approach to wellness. They identified emotional, mental, physical and spiritual components as necessary parts of their journey of health and also indicated that their perception of a shelter's ability to meet these needs influenced their decision to stay at the shelter. Shelters are best able to support seniors in their journeys of health when they are able to provide assistance in all areas of health that are identified by the senior while also valuing the capacity of the senior to make their own decisions about their health care. At times, this may mean that the senior's decision is different than that which the staff member would make, but this decision is supported, without attempts to coerce a different decision, even if the actions are well meaning.

"[The shelter] assists you physically, mentally, and spiritually. So, the combination is there."

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Individualized Approach	Support a holistic approach to seniors accessing health supports	Seniors' health improves	Requires a broad knowledge of and connection with resources
	Facilitate independent decision making about health without coercion, such as tying health decisions to shelter stay	Seniors capacity for self-determination is supported and their independence is enhanced	Need skills in non-coercive support of decision making and learning, e.g. motivational interviewing

Medications

Seniors often take medications and identified this as an area where they can benefit from additional assistance. Seniors may need support to remember what medications they are taking and when. Shelters can also assist seniors in ordering new medications by developing relationships with local pharmacies that will receive prescriptions and potentially deliver medication. Seniors expressed mixed feelings about staff managing medications. Some appreciated the security they felt when medications were securely stored by staff, and appreciated that staff hold awareness of their medication needs, while others expressed frustration at needing to ask staff for any medication. Shelters need to manage their own assessment of safety risks but may be able to provide options to seniors on whether they choose to store their medications or manage for themselves. Shelters may be able to define conditions under which a senior is free to manage their own medications and when they must be managed by staff. In all cases, staff should be able to take the time to clearly explain to seniors the decisions related to medications management.

“I had to go to head office and request my medication. They said, ‘Well when you leave here we will give you your meds.’ I said, ‘No, I’m going to stay here and you’re going to give me my medication and that will be the end of it.’ ”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Pharmacy relationship	Develop relationships with local pharmacies to assist in the re-filling of prescriptions	Seniors are able to obtain their medication with limited challenges	Staff may spend more time managing the relationship with the pharmacy
Medications management	If possible, provide seniors with the option of whether store medications with staff or self-manage	Seniors can prioritize increased security or self-determination	Need to establish policies to inform decisions regarding medication management
	If staff must control all medications, take the time to help seniors understand the rationale behind this decision	Seniors are more informed regarding shelter safety considerations	

Health Supports

Staff identified that many of the older adults that they served had either diagnosed mental health issues, or displayed symptoms that suggested that they may have a diagnosable mental health issue. They also identified that seniors can be reluctant to talk with staff about their mental health issues. Staff identified the benefit of collaborative relationships with hospital social workers to assist in identifying mental health concerns and support strategies prior to seniors arriving at the shelter. Some shelters were also able to build relationships with community mental health services to aid in the support of seniors.

“I think there is a lot of shame around mental health, especially with the seniors and they don’t like to share that information.”

Staff also identified that seniors can have health concerns that they are not able to manage within the limitations of shelter services. If home care has been arranged for seniors prior to their arrival at the shelter, then this support improves the capacity of the shelter. However, shelters indicated that seniors who would benefit from home support often arrive at the shelter without this support and once there, the shelters can struggle to arrange for the care themselves. Shelters would benefit from closer connections with community health care support, including efforts to implement this support at a more systemic level.

“Even going through the hospital can sometimes take a couple of days. So they’ll set [home care] up if they’re transferring someone from there to here, three or four days before, perhaps a week before the person leaves the hospital. So that can make that connection, and that internal referral. But once somebody is here and that hasn’t happened, that can be cumbersome.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Health Supports	Develop relationships with local hospitals and community mental health teams to assist in identifying and supporting seniors with health issues	Seniors have improved health care	Staff have increased support when working with seniors with health issues

Hospital Referrals

If a senior is transferred from a hospital to a shelter and the information that was provided when referring the senior was unclear or incomplete, shelters can find themselves in a situation where they are not able to care for the senior. This can result in the senior being ‘bounced back’ to the hospital. Such a process is obviously disturbing for seniors and also places stresses on shelter staff. Currently some GVSS members are working with the local health authority to develop a referral form that assists in communication between hospitals and shelters in an effort to avoid these ‘bounce back’ situations.

“What we do from time to time if people come to stay we have to send them back, on to the hospital just because their needs are too high, [e.g.] mental health, but usually they’re just really sick. They have all kinds of medical needs that aren’t being taken care of and they’re getting sicker and we can’t help them.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Hospital Referrals	Develop a protocol with the local hospital to prevent referrals that lead to ‘bounce backs’	Less experience of rejection and care needs are met	Requires time to build relationships with less challenges in managing hospital referrals

Incontinence

Many shelter staff identified incontinence as an issue that needed to be managed. Successful management included making incontinence products such as 'Depends,' readily available to seniors. Staff also developed approaches that sought to minimize the embarrassment that a senior might feel, addressing the issue in a matter of fact manner that also helped them understand the support that was available, including referral for medical support. One staff member described it as follows,

“Incontinence is a big thing for the elderly, and that’s medically treated, but it’s an embarrassing thing to say if someone’s wetting their pants and stuff like that. As an adult you want me to say, ‘Let’s talk about the fact that you’re peeing your pants?’ So you have to approach that but you need to be able to approach it in a way that’s non-shaming, and still say ‘Look, 9 times out of 10 this stuff is actually treatable. It’s not like we’re trying to get rid of you but we need to get you treated so you can get this dealt with.’ ”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Incontinence	Provide readily available supplies of incontinence products	Less medical complications with untreated incontinence	Reduced need to attend to ‘accidents’ for seniors
	Develop a non-shaming, compassionate manner when discussing incontinence	Seniors maintain dignity and may feel more comfortable to address the issue	Staff need to practice and develop an approach that works for them



Seniors arrive at shelters with a diversity of needs. If a shelter is to effectively support a senior in moving forward with their goals, then it is necessary to build strong networks and knowledge of resources to ensure that all requests for support are accommodated.

Income

While connection to a regular source of income is essential for all individuals to maintain permanent housing, navigating seniors’ income and eligibility for supports can be more complicated. A recent report by the BC Seniors Advocate⁶ found that seniors were not always aware of the financial supports that were available, and that this was more often the case for seniors whose incomes were below \$30,000 per year. In addition, to receive these supports, seniors often must have filed income taxes and this may have been left undone for a number of years. To effectively support seniors, it is essential that shelters have either internal knowledge of all available financial supports and how to navigate them or that they have access to external supports that can provide these services. Some shelters identified that they had partnerships with the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation where Ministry staff were available at the shelter during the week.

“A lot of them don’t know about the resources out there because they haven’t been in the system; it’s their first time coming into contact with the system [for] the vast majority so we just have to [help]. A lot of them are surprised at how slowly things move.”

Programs for which seniors may be eligible are listed below. Shelters continue to acknowledge challenges in serving those whose experiencing of aging aligns with some who is chronologically older but they are ineligible for supports because they do not meet the age requirements.

- Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters
- Property Tax Deferrment
- Guaranteed Income Supplement
- Old Age Security
- Medical Services Plan premium assistance
- Fair Pharmacare

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Income	Develop internal knowledge to access income supports or connect with external referrals	Improved independence	Requires development of expertise
	Develop relationships with MSDSI to provide shelter visits	Less travel and time to access supports	Ease in supporting seniors

⁶ B.C. Seniors Survey: Bridging the Gaps <https://www.seniorsadvocatebc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/09/SurveyReport.pdf>

Identification

Identification is often required in order to access services outside of the shelter and obtain housing. Those who experience homelessness often require replacement their identification but do not know how to navigate the system. Shelters can support seniors by having lists of the typical forms of identification that require replacing and having knowledge of the most effective methods to ensure that identification is obtained in a timely fashion. Shelters can also support seniors in completing the forms and accompanying them to appointments if needed.

“I’m filling out my pension forms and [I need to] have a proof of citizenship and being that everything’s locked away, I came to my outreach worker... So she said, ‘You need proof that you are a citizen,’ cos I was born in Italy. I remembered that when I was getting my welfare checks they used to take my card. So yesterday they printed up some of my cards and a photocopy.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Identification	Help seniors access forms and navigate the process for obtaining identification	Improved access to services that require ID	Requires development of expertise & knowledge

Accessing Resources

Seniors can struggle to independently locate and travel to the resources they need. As more services and information are becoming web-based, seniors can experience more barriers in accessing this information if they do not feel comfortable using a computer or the internet. Staff need to have the time and knowledge to support seniors in finding the resources they need and accessing them. Seniors also often need assistance travelling to new resources or participating in interviews or meetings that will help them ensure their needs are met.

“With our other clients I give them the resources and they’re expected to go out and use them themselves but with a lot of the seniors I am making all of the calls for them. They don’t really know how to use computers so it’s doing a lot more of the footwork for the seniors than the other clients.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Accessing Resources	Be available to assist seniors in navigating the internet and making phone calls	Ease in accessing needed services	Requires time and knowledge to provide effective assistance
	Build connections with outreach teams or volunteer groups to assist with accompaniment	Reduced complication in travel and increased advocacy for their needs	Increased confidence that seniors will have successful outcomes at meetings

Activities

Because seniors are less likely to be working or looking for work compared to younger shelter residents, they are often in a situation where their days are less full. Seniors greatly appreciated the option of participating in activities and events that were held at the shelter. At times, shelter staff would deliver these events or activities themselves but shelters also partnered with outside groups who

would come in and volunteer with shelter. Activities that were identified included playing cards and board games, singing, special movie nights or other television events and educational or self-development classes. Some shelters also developed lists of local resources that provided activities that might interest seniors.

“The women that come in on Fridays, the first time they came we played this weird kind of Pictionary and we laughed and laughed. Oh my god, it was so funny. I love laughing.”

	Operations Considerations	Impact for Senior	Impact for Staff
Activities	Provide times or refer to resources where seniors can participate in activities	Seniors feel less ‘trapped’ or ‘bored’ in the shelter and engage in positive community	Need to invest time in building resource lists or developing activity times



Seniors identified a number of qualities about staff that were important factors in the overall satisfaction of their experience in the shelter or were beneficial in helping them achieve their goals. Staff also identified many of these qualities as necessary in creating a supportive therapeutic relationship with seniors. While the characteristics listed may not be exclusively beneficial for seniors, all were specifically identified by staff or seniors in the interviews.

Quality	Description
Approachable	Take time to communicate with seniors how concerns will be addressed to support engagement in case management
Consistent	Identify opportunities for consistent staff support throughout the housing journey and provide sufficient transition time if necessary
Interpersonal skills	Understand how staff communication and practice preferences may differ from a senior’s and be able to adapt
Not coercive	Support seniors’ ability to make and learn from their decisions without pressuring seniors towards staff-preferred directions
Patient & persistent	Be comfortable providing seniors with the time they need to make changes and persist in finding creative solutions to challenges
Senior-specific knowledge	Be knowledgeable about the processes and resources that are specific to seniors in supporting them to access housing and supports
Trauma-informed	Staff are trained in trauma-informed approaches and are able to use them to inform engagement with and support of seniors

These staffing characteristics compliment the efforts of shelter design and operation to create an environment that promotes respect and dignity for seniors and provides them an opportunity for choice and the ability to make changes in a safe environment.

Approachable

For seniors to feel comfortable working with shelter staff, it is important to them to feel heard. While seniors may be hesitant to bring concerns to staff, when they do it is important that staff take the time to carefully listen to the concerns that are voiced. Seniors are also particularly sensitive to the response given by staff to their concerns. If seniors perceive that nothing was done about their concerns they can feel frustrated and are less likely to approach staff about subsequent issues. At times, staff may not be able to provide specific details about their response to a concern, especially due to confidentiality considerations, but it is recommended that staff provide general descriptions of the response

“I’m comfortable enough that if I’m having trouble, I will tell them.”

that will be taken and whether the senior can expect to receive a follow up or update. Staff willingness to respond to concerns influences the trust seniors have for staff and can also impact their willingness to engage in areas of case management.

Consistent

As discussed previously, seniors can take longer to undertake changes in their lives. This includes changes in staff support as they navigate return to housing. Seniors are best supported when there is a single individual that can follow them from being homeless, to looking for housing, to maintaining that housing. This can be difficult; shelter may have limited opportunity to provide support away from the shelter, or the senior may not wish to remain in the local area. If this is the case, it is recommended that shelter staff identify other possibilities for consistent support early on in the relationship with the senior. This might include outreach teams, health providers, community centres or other supports that are relevant to the senior. If there are unavoidable transitions in staffing support, seniors are best served when there is sufficient 'hand over' time between staff members.

"They're not gonna open up to everybody all the time; you can't pass them on to somebody, say, 'This is your new worker.' They're gonna look at you like you've abandoned them."

Interpersonal Skills

Seniors' life stage, life experience and learning and ethnic or cultural backgrounds is often different from that of the staff supporting them. As staff, it is necessary to possess sufficient insight to identify when these differences may influence the relationship between the staff member and the senior. Staff should expect to change their preferred operating style and practices to accommodate the senior so that they feel safe and supported.

"I can change my diction, my vocabulary so it can suit what somebody needs, accordingly. So it just allows me to modify my behaviour in conjunction with whomever I'm working with, which hopefully makes them more comfortable."

Not Coercive

It is not common practice, if at all for staff to engage in coercive behaviours that would obviously negatively impact seniors. However, there are many times when well-meaning intentions will result in coercive actions by staff. For example, if a senior has an emergent health issue that they are hesitant to have addressed, staff may seek to influence this behaviour by tying other support to addressing the health issue, such as, "We need to address this health issue before we talk about any other areas where you want help." While addressing the health issue is in the best interests of the senior, depriving them of the choice to do so, is not. These types of coercive actions reduce a senior's ability to maintain independence by limiting opportunities for seniors to learn from and manage their decision making – a necessary skill if they are to live independently. After ensuring that their duty of care to health and safety is met, it is important that staff employ skills that support seniors to reflect on their choices and support them in decision making processes, even when these are not the choices that a staff would make. Seniors also respond positively to an

"Nobody's telling me I can't, you know. Everything I'm doing is because I want it."

environment where their choices are respected. They feel empowered to take steps on their own, rather than doing something because someone else has required it of them.

Patient & Persistent

In addition to needing more time to make decisions and changes in their lives, the process of finding housing and necessary supports can often be more challenging when working with seniors. Staff must be comfortable with this additional time and not rush seniors to move when they are not ready. Staff must also employ creative persistence to enhance their success in supporting seniors. Staff should expect to experience barriers or difficulties in finding the support that seniors need. They must be skilled in 'not taking no for an answer,' and willing to find the 'out of the box' solutions after experiencing multiple setbacks. Often these solutions are found by building one-on-one relationships with key staff in partner organizations.

"I think they're all very energetic. They like their job and they'll help you almost with anything. If they can do it, they'll do it. That's one thing I like about them."

This problem-solving attitude reduces the likelihood that seniors will wait extended periods of time while simply waiting for solutions to be found via the regular channels. Seniors are also more likely to experience actual choice in services options rather than being expected to conform to the status quo.

Polite

A number of seniors identified that perceptions of staff politeness influenced their satisfaction with the shelter. While many of these considerations are standard operation within shelters, seniors appreciated staff who knew them by name, where seen to be happy and smiling and did not swear. These small courtesies increased seniors experience of being respected.

"They're always happy, smiling, laughing, giggling, whatever. They don't seem to be ever - well I guess they get mad once in a while, they have to, you know; somebody pushes the wrong button and look out! But no, I think the staff is great."

Senior-Specific Knowledge

When working with seniors, it is important for staff to gain seniors-specific knowledge about resources in the community. Seniors-specific knowledge can include resources regarding income, health issues, travel and recreational supports as well as housing that caters to seniors' needs. Seniors do best when the services that they are using understand the impact that their life stage and development can have on their use of and need for services. In the same way that shelters plan to adapt service delivery to support seniors, the should plan to connect seniors with services that are willing to do the same. Often this will require the development of knowledge on a whole new set of resources as the best option for seniors may differ from one typically used for other adults experiencing homelessness.

"I had a good success rate with regards to housing non-seniors. But seniors, and getting people into specific care facilities for seniors, let's just say that my skills were undeveloped in that period. It was something that I was lacking as far information and process."

Trauma-Informed Engagement

Again, as previously discussed, seniors in shelters regularly deal with past and present trauma. Shelter staff will benefit from trauma-informed training to enhance their capacity to effectively support seniors in their facilities. A trauma-informed approach will provide sufficient time for healing and recovery while also recognizing that responses, decision-making and actions taken by the senior will be informed by experiences of trauma and should be taken into consideration when supporting the senior.

“Being homeless is not a fun event, right, it’s very traumatic. And for them it just keeps layering every time you keep getting re-traumatized while it’s going on.”

What About Seniors Shelters?

Throughout this report we have provided recommendations for sheltering seniors provided by seniors and staff from shelters that serve a range of ages, rather than shelters that solely accommodate seniors. It is important to acknowledge that in agreement with background research that informed this project, staff and seniors still identified potential benefits of shelters that only served seniors. It was felt that seniors would be safer and that it may be easier to cater to their specific needs rather than needing to balance their needs with the needs of other shelter users.

Perhaps the biggest consideration in deciding to implement a shelter specific for seniors is the impact of location on seniors’ desire to reside in such a shelter. It is not conceivable to think that each community would operate its own seniors-only shelter. As such, seniors would need to choose whether to access a shelter in their preferred community or to access a seniors-only shelter that may not be in their community. If a seniors’ shelter was to be built, it is recommended that the shelter be located in a community in which there are a wide variety of community supports targeted to seniors and where seniors would wish to live after moving from the shelter.

It is also noted that no single seniors’ shelter would be able to accommodate the needs of all seniors and that some may even prefer to access a shelter that has a variety of age groups. Therefore, it is suggested that even if efforts are undertaken to develop a seniors’ shelter it will remain necessary for existing shelters to employ practices that effectively serve seniors. This will ensure seniors retain choice regarding location, shelter environment and shelter resident composition.

Finally, while it is important that shelters are able to effectively support seniors who access their services, the need for seniors to access shelters remains a less desirable option than seniors being able to retain housing without becoming homeless or quickly returning to housing if they do become homeless. Any investments in seniors sheltering must be balanced with their impact on the ability to increase seniors’ access to housing.