

Waiting lists grow for seniors

Fixed and low incomes, rising rental costs among challenges

BY GORDON HOEKSTRA, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 18, 2013

The number of seniors and people with disabilities waiting to get into social housing in Metro Vancouver has jumped by nearly 50 per cent in three years.

There are now 4,549 households on the social housing waiting lists in Metro Vancouver, an increase of 1,408 - or 44.8 per cent - since 2009. That data is included in a new research report that presents a snapshot of socio-demographic and economic indicators for the region's seniors.

Compiled by the United Way and the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia, the report is intended to provide the basis for planning and program development for those aged 65 years and older.

Seniors in Vancouver accounted for nearly half of the waiting list, according to the data provided by the B.C. Housing Registry. Both Surrey and Burnaby had nearly 500 on the waiting list, while New Westminster and North Vancouver had more than 200 on the list.

Senior's incomes are being reduced by investments that have taken a hit because of lower interest rates, said United Way Lower Mainland president and CEO Michael McKnight.

Women in particular can also see their incomes drop when their spouse dies because survivor pension benefits are less than the full pension, noted McKnight.

"You combine that with an increase in costs of housing, you are going to get that kind of effect," he said, referring to the increasing waiting lists for social housing.

The report, released this month, shows that about three-quarters of seniors own their own homes in Metro Vancouver, while one-quarter rent.

Of seniors who own their homes, 22 per cent still have a mortgage.

Jean Swanson, with the Carnegie Community Action Project, said finding affordable housing is a struggle for people who only have access to fixed incomes such as the Old Age Security Pension.

Given that housing is supposed to account for 30 per cent of household income - a measure of affordability used by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. - a basic \$1,200 monthly pension would mean seniors should pay \$360 for rent, noted Swanson.

Even with B.C. rental subsidies, which some seniors are eligible for, that still only leaves \$700 for rent, she said. "There are not many apartments for \$700, so income is a huge issue," said Swanson.

The report shows that rents have continued to go up in the Metro Vancouver area: More than nine per cent for a one-bedroom apartment since 2006, to an average of \$982.

The highest average rents are charged in West Vancouver, at \$1,247, and Vancouver, at \$1,067. The lowest are in Maple Ridge, at \$709.

There were nine seniors living on the street in 2011, a decrease from 17 in 2005, according to the report. But the number of seniors in shelters increased to 49 in 2011 from 15 in 2005.

A new group called the Social Housing Coalition, of which Swanson's group is a member, has just launched a campaign calling for 10,000 more social housing units to be built each year in B.C. for the next decade. They have sought promises from both the BC Liberals and the NDP in the run-up to the May provincial election.

"While it sounds like the government is building a lot of housing, compared to the '80s it's not, so we are getting farther and farther behind," said Swanson.

McKnight agrees there is a social housing shortage, but said the City of Vancouver, and to a lesser extent the province, have taken steps to address the issue. For example, more than 100 low-rent units have been set aside at the former Olympic Village, and the city recently supported rezoning for a 17-storey mixed-use development that will include 22 rental units intended for seniors.

McKnight added the United Way has created a program called Better at Home that aims to keep seniors in their current residences, which normally is much less expensive than private assisted care for seniors. The program, a \$15-million partnership with the B.C. government, helps seniors with areas such as meals and housekeeping.

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