

Briefing Note on Seniors Housing Westside Seniors Hub

Issue

Senior tenants are being negatively impacted by developments in the Vancouver housing market. Action and support are needed for this vulnerable population.

Background

For months, Westside Seniors Hub Partners¹ have reported encountering Westside senior tenants who are in unstable, precarious housing situations, often for the first time in their lives. Planned densification in areas where purpose-built rental housing and strata ownership predominate is resulting in evictions and anxiety when affordable rental housing availability is almost nil. The focus is on the Broadway Plan² area but a pattern of displacement is not unique to ‘Central Broadway.’

Seniors facing homelessness are particularly vulnerable. Several recent Canadian Medical Association Journal articles provide data³ confirming that “a lack of affordable housing and appropriate community supports to help people age in place leaves older adults more vulnerable to becoming unhoused, with consequences for the health care sector.”⁴ Impacts cited³ include more chronic health conditions, higher risk of premature death, prolonged hospital stays, less resilience to effects of homelessness, and increased adverse events.

Adding to difficulties created by the scarcity of housing, many seniors do not know how to navigate complex housing systems that have online applications and long waitlists. They cannot secure appropriate short- or long-term housing that meets their needs without navigation support. Existing shelters are seldom equipped to support seniors who fear shelter populations with mental health and addiction issues. Daytime respite is needed to maintain health.

To comply with new provincial legislation, the City of Vancouver issued *Tenant Relocation and Protection Policy - Process and Requirements Bulletin* applicable in the Central Broadway Plan area on February 16 and June 30, 2024⁵. Landlords are mandated to submit names of tenants being displaced from non-market social and market housing to a database. This allows City officials to check that landlords are providing relocation planning and assistance before development permits are approved. There is little evidence from low-income senior tenants’ eviction stories that they are receiving appropriate landlord supports to relocate into transitional or affordable housing anywhere, and certainly not in their neighbourhoods. There is no publicly available information to confirm that there is compliance with this policy.

Current Status

Westside Seniors Hub (WSH) is a coalition of senior-serving non-profits and municipal and provincial organizations coordinated by a Council of senior volunteers. Following a January 2024 survey of Hub Partners about what they are seeing, hearing and doing about housing issues among their members,

¹ <https://www.westsideseniorshub.org/hub-partners>

² Broadway Plan, City of Vancouver, June 22, 2022, <https://www.shapeyourcity.ca/broadway-plan/widgets/58582/documents>. Accessed 08-18-2024.

³ Allston, J. et al 2024 *CMAJ* 2024 May 21;196:E662-5. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.231493

⁴ Boozary, A. 2024 *CMAJ* 2024 May 21;196:E666-7. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.240649

⁵ City of Vancouver, Director of Planning, June 30, 2024 *Tenant Relocation and Protection Policy - Process and Requirements Bulletin*. <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/protecting-tenants.aspx>. Accessed 08-18-2024.

Partners held two consecutive 2024 quarterly Partners' meetings; first to hear from housing experts and then to explore various ways WSH could help address the impact of the current housing crisis on seniors.

Two themes emerged where immediate action will make a difference:

1. There is a need for seniors' **shelters** for overnight occupancy with daytime respite. Alternatives to cafés and public spaces are needed where seniors can go to rest during the day, receive support for housing navigation and healthcare referrals, get help with digital literacy education and online research. The Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT)⁶ used by BC Housing (BCH) to prioritize shelter clients for coordinated services rarely rates functional seniors with high enough vulnerability scores to access the limited housing and support services available.
2. Seniors age better in neighbourhoods they know. Both **short-term transitional and permanent housing** that is close to their familiar neighbourhood amenities, need to be available to displaced senior tenants to help them age more successfully in place.

Some WSH Partners have been offering support through volunteer information and referral services and have SHINE-trained⁷ volunteer housing navigators. However, the need to support seniors to find appropriate and affordable housing is growing rapidly and exceeding non-profits' capacity. Even for those tenants who might possibly afford rent increases upon eviction, there is limited availability of short- or long-term housing in or near their current neighbourhoods and healthcare. Partners are hearing heart-wrenching stories about tenants at risk of or losing their long-time homes and support networks.

WSH is actively supporting the work of the City's Older Persons & Elders Advisory Committee (OPEAC). A meeting with BCH Supportive Housing explored availability of Westside transitional housing. Additional volunteers have been recruited to be trained by SHINE⁷ as housing navigators. A Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) meeting is planned for late August for wider intersectoral discussions.

Recommended Actions for Intersectoral Consideration:

1. Designate shelter and short-term transitional seniors' housing space in BCH & non-profit redevelopment projects in neighbourhoods from which senior tenants are displaced.
2. Monitor the City's Relocation and Protection policy for compliance at key stages in the development permitting process. Monitoring reports should be publicly available to hold landlords and the City accountable for obligatory tenant support while respecting tenant confidentiality.
3. Designate senior tenants who are homeless or experiencing housing precarity as an equity-deserving group so they have higher priority on BC Housing Registry waitlist. This will minimize their health risks related to housing insecurity and displacement from their neighbourhoods.
4. Provide funding to community-based organizations for staff to coordinate the work of volunteer housing navigators.

⁶ Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. (2016). Vulnerability Assessment Tool for Determining Eligibility and Allocating Services and Housing for Adults Experiencing Homelessness. <https://www2.bchousing.org/research-centre/library/transition-homelessness/vulnerability-assessment-tool-vat-full-evaluation>. Accessed 08-18-2024

⁷ Seniors Services Society BC, Seniors Housing information and Navigation Ease (SHINE), <https://www.seniorsservicesociety.ca/shinebc/>. Accessed 08-18-2024