

**EDMONTON SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL**

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**HOUSING FOR INNER CITY SENIORS  
IN A TIME OF RESTRAINT**

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## INNER CITY SENIORS' HOUSING IN THE ERA OF RESTRAINT

There are little housekeeping rooms in almost every nook and cranny of the inner city. Above Chinese restaurants and skid road taverns, in rambling old houses divided with sheets of Gyproc, and in the rooming houses which dot the area. Wherever there's space for a bed, a dresser, and a hotplate, live elderly men and women. They try to maintain their dignity, jammed in between wild kids who party the nights away, next to the mentally ill who moan themselves to sleep.

As years go by, body and mind begin to fail these independent people. Ultimately, many are sent to lodges and nursing homes. Gone is the fear of being robbed and beaten, the humiliation of incontinence where the washroom is shared by twenty others. But they're replaced by something that's often worse; the loss of pride.

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Inner city elders are a diverse lot, but hard work is the factor which ties them together. Most of the people I met were pioneers, often from southern and eastern Europe, who came out West without much money or education. What they had was their bodies.

Some made a decent living, so they built little houses where they raised their families. Many who have stayed are widows. Even though they're crippled up with arthritis and their eyesight isn't so good these days, they still produce more flowers

and vegetables from their little gardens than most get out of suburban plots three times the size.

Then there are the guys. The hell raisers who won't slow down, even though most every drunk ends in being rolled or a head cracked on the sidewalk. Maybe because I'm a man, I always felt a bond with them. They are the ones who cleared the forests, sunk the wells, and laid the pipes which pour out the money. Money to build those golden office towers in Calgary and Toronto, but never any money to give their broken bodies a soft bed in a warm place.

It wasn't until I worked at Operation Friendship that I realized what injustice to our elders was all about. On skid road, it happens every day.

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- ◆ A senior is insulted, humiliated, and evicted from a mainstream lodge. Just because his buddies snuck in a mickey of rye and they all went round the back of the building to shoot the breeze.
  - ◆ Homecare won't come to a rooming house because it is "too dangerous". What a travesty. Too dangerous for the helpers, but fine for an old, blind woman.
  - ◆ Most of all I remember Paul. He was nearly eighty, and in the last few years both his legs had been amputated. He was bitter and he drank too much,

although who can really blame a guy with no legs for being upset? I guess he kicked up such a fuss at the hospital that they threw him out in his wheelchair. Paul had nowhere to live. A young man with a can of Lysol took pity on him and pushed him over to Operation Friendship. I phoned his doctor and asked him what to do with Paul. "Push him into the middle of the road and leave him", was the response. We couldn't get a guy in a wheelchair up the stairs so he just sat outside under a tree, day and night, for three days. Eventually the police took him back to emergency. He died there, of a stroke, without ever being re-admitted.

Homelessness is a fact of life for many inner city seniors. In the past, the agencies have lobbied for more housing to be built in the area. The government didn't listen to us for a long time, but in the past few years quite a bit of money has gone into Edmonton's inner city, to build new "social housing". Some of that has been earmarked for seniors. Soon there will be maybe one hundred units.

Everyone needs somewhere to live. Decent housing is the first building block in creating a healthy lifestyle. And frequently, inner city housing is terrible. But new and better housing often doesn't work out as planned. Even the best intentioned agencies are possessive about their new housing. The "nice" clients are the ones who get first pick in the new building. But where does that leave the grubby people, the collectors, those who drink too much? Their old place is torn down and

they don't have anywhere else to go. Frequently, they end their days, not in some nice lodge or nursing home, but in a miserable flop house where they're shoved in with every other social misfit.

Even if new housing is truly inclusive, it only scratches the surface of the need. Given the province's huge deficit, there's not much hope for any more housing in the near future, no matter what government is elected or how hard we lobby.

Instead, we need to look at restraint as an opportunity. A chance to start building on the capacities of people, find out what housing circumstances work right now, and what supports are in place which make them work. The inner city senior is an incredibly resourceful and successful person, someone who's made it through sixty or more years of tough sledding.

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Don't assume they need or want to be uprooted to a totally different environment, that what they need is a totalitarian network of services to keep them safe, that their situation is exclusively one of want and needs. As John McKnight puts it; "policies, programs, and resources predicated upon deficiencies are the cornerstones of dependency, consumption, and clienthood".

It's hard for us, the professionals, to listen to people who aren't quite like us. Operation Friendship found that out when we built our first rooming house.

Without looking enough at how traditional rooming houses work, we assumed that the seniors would want to congregate together in a lounge. The television we put there disappeared right away, of course, but more important, no-one ever used the lounges. The seniors did socialize, a lot, but they preferred to have people in their space, in their room, just like they had all those years in camp and when they lived in regular rooming houses.

The Forgotten Pioneers research revealed important elements of successful housing, much the same as inner city outreach workers have been telling us for years. Many of the suggestions could be implemented at little or no cost, and would have a major impact.

- Inadequate maintenance is a continual problem. Walks and stairs aren't repaired, and snow lies uncleared in the winter. Housekeeping room doors are kicked in, and no-one fixes them, smashed windows are left broken over the winter, and the broken furnace isn't repaired for weeks at a time. Hotplates, other appliances, and wiring are frequently dangerous.
- *A few years ago, there was a federal program to help fix up rental accommodation, but it was cancelled, and now the only incentive is the negative one, the risk of being closed down by the Board of Health. Perhaps it's time to insist on a new federal or provincial program to retain older rental housing.*

*should be introduced. Controls should be put in place to prevent gentrification of the inner city neighbourhoods.*