

1992

VOICES FROM WITHIN

•••A Report from the Multi-Provincial Conference of Inner City Seniors•••

Seniors living in the inner city face more obstacles and hardships than seniors living outside the core. Some are termed hard-to-house due to alcoholism or mental health problems. Others are victims of neighborhood crime or violence. They have no organized lobby group, unlike seniors in general and they are often in a lower income bracket. Until June 3, 1992 many felt isolated and alone in their struggle. The Voices From Within conference held in Edmonton June 3-5 gave a real sense of hope and enthusiasm to over 100 senior citizens coming from inner city neighborhoods in six provinces. The conference was designed for seniors to share information, learn about serving agencies and to meet other inner city seniors.

The following report provides a summary of the presentations from the conference and the discussion and recommendations which followed. It is the hope of the conference planning committee that this report will be utilized by legislators, service agencies and municipal planners in their efforts to improve living conditions in core area neighborhoods, and by inner city seniors as they work to create change. **New Horizons provided funding for the conference and this report.**

What is an Inner City Senior?

Throughout the planning stages of the conference, people asked for a definition of an inner city senior. This caused some problems as there is no clear definition. In Edmonton, geographical boundaries are used to determine the inner city, and seniors include anyone aged 55 and over.

In some cities, however, older neighborhoods have been renovated and become pricey areas for the rich, resulting in pockets of people spread over a wider region and interspersed among different types of communities. A number of characteristics are used to identify inner city seniors in these cases:

- they generally live in older homes/ neighborhoods
- they are likely to be economically deprived
- they often suffer from chronic health problems including:
 - multiple dependencies
 - history of mental health problems
- they are likely to be found in neighborhoods with high rates of street violence, crime, prostitution, etc.

Regardless of which city a person lives in, these characteristics result in a number of com-



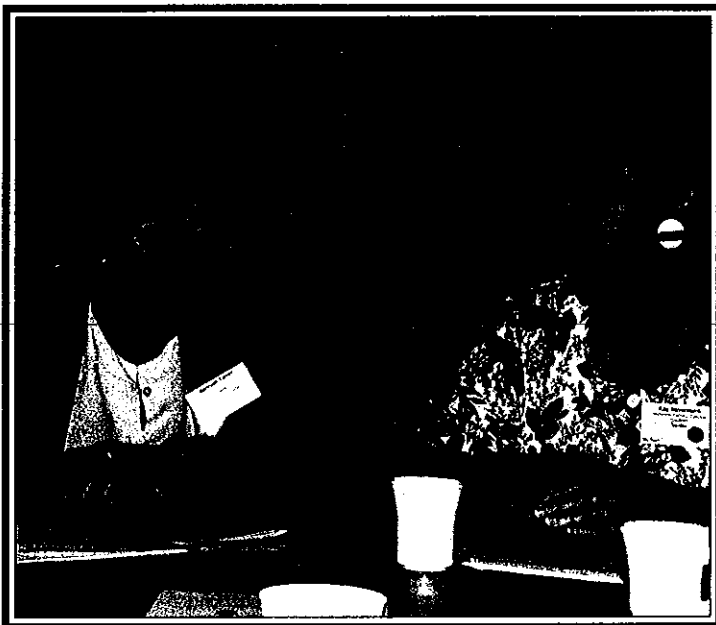
Emery Barnes, keynote speaker, visits with Bernice Fisher.

mon problems: Inner city seniors are concerned about safety, housing, health care, financial security and services to help them maintain their independence.

A Brief History

In June, 1991, the Avenue Senior Action Group (Operation Friendship, Edmonton) sponsored a one day workshop involving 58 people from Edmonton and Calgary, which was funded by the New Horizons Program (Health & Welfare Canada). The workshop gave inner city seniors a chance to meet others and share coping strategies, skills and knowledge.

It was a first step. Seniors felt the day was



Kay Haverstock and Gertrude Turner participated in one of the many 'Break-out' groups for discussion.

great for airing their mutual concerns and for developing strategies for change based on personal experience. They wanted more regional workshops and a national conference.

A planning committee was established, including ten seniors from Calgary, Edmonton and Red Deer, with support from Operation Friendship staff (Edmonton) and The Golden Circle (Red Deer). The Edmonton Social Planning

Council was approached to provide co-ordination for the project, and once again New Horizons was asked to provide funds.

The Conference

Opening Plenary

The morning got off to a rousing start as Emery Barnes, Deputy Speaker of the B.C. Legislature, gave the keynote address. He challenged all the participants to take action and to work together to create positive change. He spoke of his experiences in Vancouver's inner city and the type of impact citizen action can have. He was emphatic, hopeful and encouraging. Comments by seniors following the presentation included, "He was a catalyst for the conference" and "He encouraged seniors to do more for themselves and other inner city seniors."

Special Needs Panel

Substance Abuse in the Elderly (Dr. Hubert Kammerer - Boyle McCauley Health Centre)

The problems of alcohol abuse and inappropriate drug use in the elderly are closely related. Of the two, alcohol abuse is more publicized but not necessarily more prevalent. Admitted drug abuse is a rare phenomenon in the older adult, yet 25 per cent of prescription and over-the-counter drugs consumed in the country are consumed by those 65 years and older. The combination of alcohol and prescription drugs can cause many serious illnesses including: debilitating mental health and physical problems, disorientation resulting in burns or falls, some serious enough to lead to death.

In Edmonton's inner-city the abuse of non-beverage alcohol (NBA), such as Lysol, Chinese

cooking wine, ginseng brandy, hair spray, stomach bitter, etc., is also a significant problem. The medical consequences of drinking NBAs are more severe than drinking conventional alcohol.

Mental Health (*Christine Wing - Alberta Mental Health Services*)

Practising psychiatry in the inner city is entirely different from working in a hospital. First of all, even if the person agrees to see a mental health worker, he or she must be convinced to see a psychiatrist in order to get a prescription for the right medication. Then questions arise as to whether the person can afford to buy the pills or will take them. If the person has a problem with alcohol, treatment is even more difficult.

The mental illnesses in the inner city are the same as elsewhere: of those affected, one third of the people are depressed; one third suffer from dementia or brain damage; and the other third are schizophrenic, manic-depressive and paranoid. Furthermore, these problems are complicated by poverty, inadequate housing and alcohol/drug abuse.

Housing for Inner City Seniors in a Time of Restraint (*Jonathan Murphy - Edmonton Social Planning Council*)

Homelessness is a fact of life for many inner city seniors. Decent housing is the first building

block in creating a healthy lifestyle, and frequently, inner city housing is terrible. 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 get first pick in the new building, leaving the grubby people, the collectors, and the alcoholics in a miserable flop house with all the other social misfits.

We need to look at financial restraint as an opportunity: a chance to find out which housing circumstances work right now, and what supports are in place which make them work. We should not assume seniors need or want to be uprooted to a totally different environment; or that what they need is a totalitarian network of services to keep

them safe; or even that their situation is exclusively one of wants and needs. A few fairly simple suggestions follow: older rental housing should be retained with a federal or provincial program offering incentives for renovations. Agencies could lobby for more stringent minimum security standards and a specialized inner city Home Care service should be developed. Stair and bath rails should be placed in all accom-



Edmonton's inner city is home to all ages, many being seniors.

modations for seniors through a co-ordinated plan between government, agencies and landlords and seniors' needs should be included in the Boyle/McCauley plan where zoning should include rooming houses and prevent neighborhoods from becoming trendy new locations for the wealthy.

Inner City Seniors (Syd Grimsley - Calgary Senior)

The basic problem of the elderly population is economics: receiving a fixed income in a situation where the price of essential goods such as shelter, food, clothing and medication are rising. Pensions are viewed by all levels of government as a safety net. Many seniors, through circumstances beyond their control, have no property, funds, or family support.

Independent living can be better supported through the development of small self-contained units appropriately designed for people likely to be suffering from arthritis or other age-related problems. Also, food packaged in small quantities with large print would be beneficial.

Clothing design can also be a problem for seniors. Design and fit are frequently inappropriate, resulting in a need to alter garments. This is very difficult for people with poor eyesight or arthritis to do, but few can afford to go to a seamstress. Footwear also needs to be designed more appropriately for seniors with gnarled feet.

With an adequate pension and appropriate planning, we could eliminate the conditions resulting in seniors living in squalid, cramped housing until the end of their days. This is necessary in order to restore a sense of independence and dignity to the elderly.

Wellness Panel

Seniors' Drop-In Centres in Edmonton's Inner City (Natalia Onyschuk - Avenue Seniors' Drop-In)

The seniors' drop-in centres function as the heart of Operation Friendship. They are visible in the neighborhood and provide a safe, comfortable and casual setting where a senior can reach services with the assistance of an outreach worker or directly through the services provided (foot care,

a visiting nurse, annual flu vaccinations, etc.).

However, the drop-ins are much more than centres for services. For the seniors they are a place for socializing with activities like dances, bingos, card games, and pool. Friendships are made and seniors find others with whom they can share their problems and feelings. No one is alone on the holidays. The seniors share in festivities and develop an extended family.

Meal preparation and nutrition have be-



Dale Mathews plays bingo at the Operation Friendship Drop-In.

come the most important activities in the drop-in. The seniors participate in cooking, serving, and cleaning, and for most of them these "chores" have become jobs. They have found a purpose after their retirement which instills a sense of self-esteem.

Some seniors suffer from isolation, poverty, and lack of nutrition which can lead to physical and mental illness. When people do not eat regularly they begin to feel weaker and depressed and can stop going out and socializing. This predicament can be solved by attending the drop-ins and having meals.

Independence/Support Networks (Mary Jane Smith - Outreach Project for Eastern Core Seniors)

As an individual grows older, his or her support network may be one of the most critical factors in the ability to maintain independence. For many seniors, the primary support system will be their family, while others take an active part in their local seniors' drop-in centre. Others, due to circumstances or lifestyle, become isolated or alienated.

During the 1970s, studies of the elderly living in Calgary's Eastern Core identified such problems as low income, poor housing and a high rate of alcoholism. The seniors were at a high risk for loss of independence and institutionalization because they were not availing themselves of the community resources, often because they did not know about them or how to access them. The Outreach Project for Eastern Core Seniors (O.P.E.C.S.) was started in 1979 to: keep seniors informed about services; help them develop a network; provide psychological and moral support; and offer assistance where help was not available elsewhere. The aim was to help the older person maintain his or her independence for as long as possible and to prevent early or unnecessary institutionalization.

The Calgary Drop-In Centre (Roy Woodbridge - Calgary)

Every city has lonely, homeless, unemployed and alienated people. They are persons who live on skid row, bag ladies, transients, people with physical or mental health problems, senior citizens, and others with limited incomes. We at the Calgary Drop-In Centre are attempting to meet the basic human needs of these people by making available a centre in their own environment where they can receive shelter, food, clothing, items of

personal hygiene, ad hoc counselling, etc. Showers and laundry facilities are also available. All services are provided at no cost to the client in a friendly, unpressured, helpful, non-judgemental atmosphere.

Inner city residents do form a large population group that could have a lot of strength if they work together. Agencies such as the Drop-In Centre provide support, but the residents themselves need to band together for political action, work with the police to make the area safer, and provide more support to each other so the inner city will be a better place to live.



Maxwell Robson and Florence Giroux were part of a round table group discussing the issues.

Fully Alive (Gerry Beauchamp - Red Deer Senior)

Our aging population is placing an ever increasing strain on the over strapped health-care budget of this province. Most seniors treasure their independence above everything else; they do not want to be institutionalized nor do they want professional health care personnel to do for

them what they can do for themselves.

"Fully Alive" is a ten session program which helps seniors to achieve a balance between caring for self and caring for others; improve self-esteem and cope with change; improve physical vitality; express feelings; use the mind to enrich life; deal with stress, grief and depression; build relationships; and plan for the future. Peer support programs such as "Fully Alive" must be promoted by the community.



Claudia Card and Cecil Gordon were two of the Lethbridge delegates.

The result will be happier, longer lives for our seniors and the saving of millions of dollars of tax payer money. This "empowerment" of seniors by the community is a "win-win" situation for both seniors and government.

Selected Issues Panel

The Needs and Concerns of Immigrant Seniors (Anna DeLuca - Edmonton Immigrant Services Association)

Immigrants who move to Canada from another country at an elderly age face even more obstacles than those immigrants who come at a younger age. For the elderly there is virtually no opportunity to integrate, to interact with others, and to be involved in a significant way in their society. When seniors move to a new country they undergo tremendous losses which can result

in an extremely isolating and restrictive lifestyle of dependency and loneliness.

Language training is the single most important need common to this group. That need can vary from basic survival to more sophisticated conversational and writingskills. Senior immigrants need to know English to achieve a level of independence; to lead satisfying lives; to make friends; to overcome fears such as those of leaving the house; to join a

group; or participate in an exercise or crafts class. There is a great need for English language programs which are appropriate for seniors as well as programs in senior centres which address multiculturalism.

Safety Concerns (Constable John Ellens - Edmonton Police Service)

The seniors' perception of crime differs somewhat from the reality of them as victims of crime. People who are shut in, disabled or lonely tend to think about crime and negative aspects of society in general. They are inundated on a daily basis by the media on crime which is "running rampant" (i.e. the war on drugs). High profile crimes such as shootings and homicides are given a lot of press coverage. All these factors affect our perception of crime. However, statistics indicate that seniors are less likely to be the victim of a crime compared to the general population. When a crime has been committed against a senior, the

Edmonton Police Service does have a victim assistance unit.

There are things that seniors can do to improve their personal safety, for example, ensure doors and windows have adequate locks; when going out, ask a friend to go along; be aware of the con games that are used against seniors. It is also helpful for seniors to get involved with their communities.

The Vancouver Picture (*Madge Sasvari, 411 Seniors' Centre Society*)

Vancouver is a port city. It is also at the end of the highway. The city has a history of accommodating the drifters and the lonely. The inner city is similar to that elsewhere, with a high percentage of people aged 55 and over, a very high immigrant population and a majority of seniors having a low fixed income. Isolation/loneliness, lack of suitable housing, poverty, culture shock, poor health, poor nutrition, language problems and safety concerns are some of the problems seniors here experience.

The inner city of Vancouver is poor and there is crime, but it is not neglected. There are many social and health services and there is good community policing. Also, well maintained social housing and opportunities for socializing are available. The inner city is a strong community in a city that has proven it cares.

* The Conference Planning Committee would like to give special thanks to Dorothy Betz and Florence Giroux who kindly stepped in to provide information on their programs for Native seniors. The scheduled speaker had to cancel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the conference there were opportunities for the participants to discuss the issues and develop recommendations for action to improve the circumstances of inner city seniors.

Some of the recommendations relate to the specific issues raised by the speakers while others are of a more general nature.

Substance Abuse

1. Some seniors are uncomfortable discussing their life histories and personal problems with young professionals.

It is recommended that organizations providing services to elderly substance abusers employ older recovered alcoholics/drug abusers to provide peer support.



Lilly Bolton and Sara Jean MacDonald share a laugh at the conference.

2. Elderly substance abusers fall primarily into two categories: those who have had a long history of substance abuse and those who began drinking or using drugs as a means of coping with changes associated with aging, e.g. retirement, death of a spouse, loss of children, etc. For people who fall into the second category, prevention programs may be a more appropriate response.

It is recommended that alcohol/drug abuse prevention programs be developed specifically for seniors and take into consideration the lifestyle changes that are common to an aging population.

Mental Health

1. There is a general feeling of concern about seniors with mental health problems living in the inner city without appropriate support systems. The only alternative at present would be to keep such people in institutions.

It is recommended that some half way houses be established for seniors with mental health problems to help them function in the community.



Many issues were covered in the three-day conference as participants met in small informal groups.

Housing

1. Apartments designed for seniors are often built in poor neighborhoods, by railroad tracks or in commercial areas. Units are usually very small and garden plots, where they exist, are tiny.

It is recommended that planning for new seniors' complexes take into consideration the lifestyle and special needs of seniors.

2. Seniors living in rental accommodations in inner city areas often feel abused or intimidated by landlords. Some have been evicted from their apartments after complaining about the condition of their units.

It is recommended that awareness programs be developed to educate seniors about their

rights in housing. Housing complaint boards should be established including representation from the seniors living in the community.

3. Many of the units currently available to inner city residents are sub-standard, with broken locks, insufficient heating, faulty wiring, and other problems resulting from the age and lack of upkeep on the units.

It is recommended that standards for housing be upgraded and enforced.

It is recommended that incentives be provided to encourage landlords to improve the condition of rental accommodations.

4. Native seniors in some urban communities have difficulty finding housing.

It is recommended that housing be developed for Native seniors.

5. "Hard-to-house" seniors are not accepted in most seniors' housing complexes.

It is recommended that some units in subsidized housing be set aside for "hard-to-house" seniors.

Health Care

1. There are a lot of concerns among seniors, particularly those with limited income, about the current cutbacks in health care. Even with subsidies, the cost of medication, dental care, needles for diabetics and other items results in less money for food and shelter.

It is recommended that the government review the impact of health care costs on seniors.

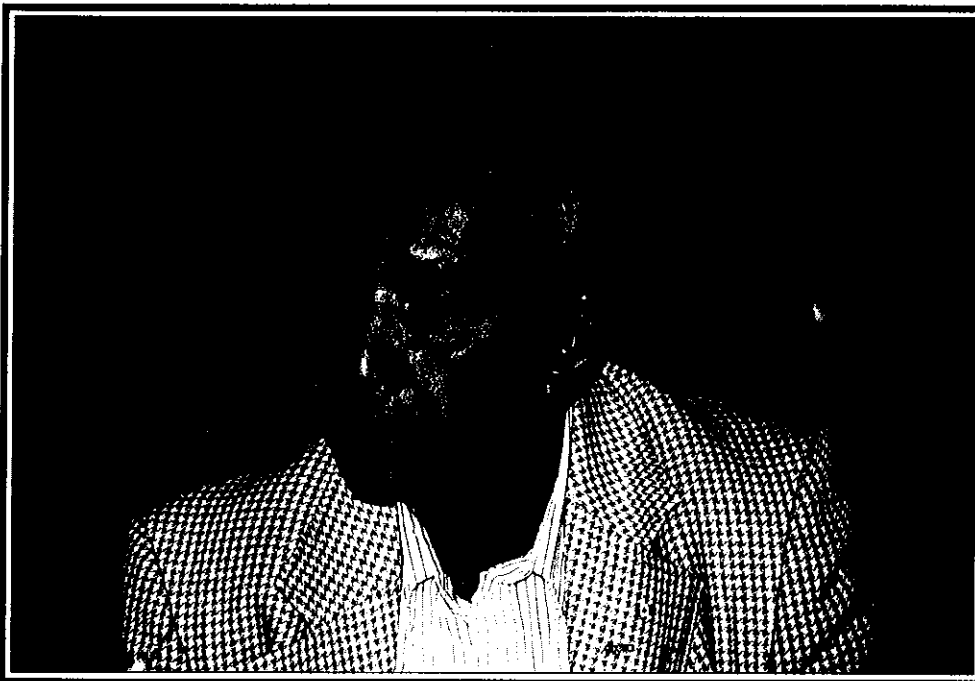
2. A number of seniors' drop-ins and apartment complexes provide the services of a visiting nurse. This measure is considered to be extremely worthwhile, and it helps to reduce medical costs as seniors who have this access are less likely to go to a doctor's office or hospital with minor concerns. However, in many locations this service is only available one or two days per week.

It is recommended that the availability of community health nurses through seniors' drop-ins and residence complexes be increased.

3. It has been noted that some workers in home care programs are afraid or unwilling to work in inner city locations. As a result, inner city seniors are not receiving the level of care they should be entitled to.

It is recommended that home care programs take appropriate measures to ensure that all clients receive appropriate levels of care.

Isolation



Peter DeSouza ponders an issue. He served as a Calgary rep on the conference planning committee.

1. Even though the population in inner city areas is quite dense, many of the individuals living there are isolated from family and friends. People working in the inner city have found that those who most need assistance are often the most difficult to reach. This relates somewhat to society's attitudes which stress independence while labelling seniors dependant: it strips people of their dignity and destroys self esteem.

It is recommended that programs be developed specifically to address the needs of emotionally isolated seniors.

Immigrant Seniors

1. People who move to Canada in their later years have special needs, particularly if they do not speak English.

It is recommended that English as a Second Language programs be developed specifically for seniors.

2. Minority groups often feel excluded from the established seniors' organizations.

It is recommended that outreach programs be developed to work with and assess the needs of immigrant seniors.



Winfred Ham and Norma Cody enjoy a moment amidst the busy conference.

Safety

1. Inner city neighborhoods often have higher crime rates and incidence of violence than other areas. Seniors living in the inner city fear youth gangs, drug addicts, Johns looking for a pick-up and others involved with the street life. Seniors become further isolated as they are afraid to leave their homes.

It is recommended that police work closely with seniors and other community members enabling them to organize to help themselves.

It is recommended that measures to eliminate substance abuse and prostitution be improved.

2. Most seniors living in the inner city rely on walking to get around their neighborhood. Sidewalk maintenance and appropriate planning by traffic engineers are vital to these people.

It is recommended that ice removal and sidewalk repair in the inner city be priorities for municipal engineering departments.

It is recommended that time intervals for walk lights be increased in inner city neighborhoods.

It is recommended that traffic law enforcement be enhanced in inner city neighborhoods.

Income Issues

1. The current definitions used by the O.A.S. and C.P.P. programs result in some seniors being ineligible for financial support. Of particular concern are single and divorced women aged

Policy/Program Issues

55 and over and men who have been forced into early retirement. There are few employment opportunities available for older workers.

It is recommended that government pension programs examine their eligibility criteria taking into consideration the current unemployment rate and the number of people aged 55 and over with no employment based income.

2. Some seniors are being abused by guardians and trustees.

It is recommended that the screening process for people applying to be trustees or guardians be improved.

3. The introduction of low-priced mega stores in suburban areas has led to the closure of many downtown grocery stores. Seniors on limited incomes have been forced to shop at smaller, high priced neighborhood stores or to use cabs or buses to do grocery shopping.

It is recommended that alternatives for affordable shopping be explored for inner city seniors.

1. There is a need for seniors to become active in the political process to ensure that appropriate programs and services are identified and funded.

It is recommended that political awareness programs be developed to assist seniors in learning about how they can become involved in

political processes.

It is recommended that senior representatives be included at all levels of government on a permanent basis.



Bill Daly and Walter Lambert got to the heart of the matter during a 'Break-out' group.

VOICES FROM WITHIN

A group of people working in the Inner City, helping the lower class seniors through a new way of life.

Working for a national Inner City group to participate in.

To make life for the seniors more enjoyable.

To try and improve their way of living.

So good luck for all of us working in this group in helping the underprivileged seniors.

by Walter Lambert,
a resident of Edmonton's inner city.

Network set up for seniors

Since the conclusion of the conference, staff at the Edmonton Social Planning Council have begun activities to develop a national network of seniors living in inner city neighborhoods as well as the agencies who serve them. The primary goal of the network will be to share information, and enable people to learn from the experiences of others.

There are many well developed programs in Canada which could be utilized by others to address common concerns, but there have been few

opportunities for information exchange. If you would like to be included in the network, please contact:



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Phone (403)423-2031 or
FAX (403)425-6244.

Left:

*Dorothy Betz (Winnipeg),
Cathy Barry (Regina), James
Kidney and Kay Haverstock
(Edmonton) are helping to
develop the national network.*

What the seniors said:

"Seniors Canada-wide must be united before we can effectively approach the government for change."

"Seniors are human beings first and banded together they can and will do anything they want."

"I was amazed at the number of really caring people that are doing more than talk about the sad conditions in our inner city core."

"Contact with others from this conference was enlightening to us. There is always someone worse off than one thinks they are."

"It's essential that basic human rights are restored."

"Now that we have identified the issues, we need to prioritize and act on our own initiative."



Edmonton's conference contingent board the bus back to Operation Friendship.